



Introduction: a revolution of our time

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The Russian Revolution in 1917 shook the world and opened up a new period in world history. The overthrow of capitalism became an immediate question in states across the world. But the context in which this revolutionary storm broke out was truly one of the 20th century's nightmares: the First World War.

Millions of young men were sent to their deaths as colonial powers vied for world domination; while tens of millions of civilians were caught in the crossfire. But what was perhaps most shameful about this tragedy was the support the imperialist powers secured from parties claiming to represent the working class - the parties of the millions-strong Second International. Reneging on their promise to utilise the economic and political crisis created by the war to rouse the masses and thereby to hasten the downfall of capitalist class rule? they supported the war enthusiastically. French and German 'socialists' became recruiting sergeants for their own national bourgeoisie: workers were sent off to kill one another with the blessing of the leaders of their own movement. Revolutionaries faithful to working class internationalism were reduced to a tiny handful.

But rising out of the ashes of the First World War, the Russian Revolution brought hope to millions that an end to the misery and suffering of the capitalist system was within reach.

The Russian Revolution

In the February Revolution the workers brought down the Tsar through a general strike and uprising of seismic proportions, only to install a provisional government packed with representatives of the Russian bourgeoisie, who were intent on continuing the war with Germany. These reprobates hoped that once they were freed from the shackles of the hated and unpopular Tsar, the losses Russia had suffered could be reversed and the Germans pushed back. For the Russian masses the war had created untold misery. The people were starving, while those fighting suffered horrendous losses - 1.8 million casualties on the front, 1.5 million civilians killed and nearly 5 million wounded.

In economically backward Russia the bourgeoisie and its parties were a weak force and the provisional government was propped up by the dominant parties of the Russian peasantry and the working class - the right wing of the peasant Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs) and the opportunist workers party, the Mensheviks (a faction of the Russian Social Democrat Labour Party). As the crisis of the war and economic hardship deepened throughout 1917 the government came under great pressure. For the Mensheviks and SRs this was made all the greater by the organisation of the Russian working class and soldiers into their own democratic delegate-based councils: the soviets.

The story of how the Bolsheviks (a separate faction of the Russian Social Democrat Labour party) - initially a small minority - won the leadership of Russia's workers and peasants is told in this pamphlet. It is a story of a party that was nothing like the monolithic and bureaucratic monstrosity that the followers of Stalin (and, equally, the reformists and the anarchists) all paint it as. Indeed, it was only a vigorous democratic debate over its fundamental goals (a debate which was pursued in earnest in April 1917 after Bolshevik leader Lenin returned from exile) that made the socialist outcome of the revolution in October 1917 possible at all.

Lenin won the party away from its initial position of giving critical support to the bourgeois provisional government. From then on the Bolsheviks were to argue that the Russian Revolution did not need to pause halfway or to rest content with a 'democratic' imperialist government, it needed a workers' government based on the soviets and the armed people. That this was the correct and necessary path, one rooted in a correct estimation of the real contradictions of Russian development and the inability of the 'democratic bourgeoisie' to secure the victory of the revolution, was

proved positively in October 1917, just as its opposite - the Menshevik and Stalinist theory of halting at the 'democratic stage' by participating in a cross-class government or 'people's front' - has been proved negatively countless times over the last 90 years: in the counter-revolutionary defeats in China 1925-27, Spain 1936-39, Indonesia 1965, Chile 1973, Portugal 1974, Iran 1979.

The revolutionary government of Soviet Russia was a threat to the whole world capitalist system and recognised as such by the great colonial powers. Winston Churchill's attitude was typical, when he raged, 'Bolshevism must be strangled at birth.' Sixteen nations declared war on the fledgling Soviet state and aided the White Army, as they plunged Russia into civil war. Led by Leon Trotsky, the Red Army eventually prevailed, but the Soviet state entered the 1920s isolated and exhausted by the war effort. Revolutionary upheavals in central Europe, which might have relieved the siege of the 'Land of the Soviets' went down to defeat. The shattered economy had to be rebuilt whilst making enormous concessions to the peasantry with a market economy in the countryside. By 1922 the dangers of counter-revolution appeared to have subsided but tragically they were replaced by a form of the counter-revolution Lenin and Trotsky had not expected.

Bureaucratic Degeneration

As the Soviet state batted down the hatches to resist foreign invasion and the White Army, it had developed a powerful bureaucracy who increasingly stood above the Russian masses. In the leadership of the Communist Party they found a voice for their interests in Joseph Stalin. The emergency measures to curtail workers' and party democracy during the civil war were made permanent. After Lenin's death, Trotsky was sidelined and a public campaign was launched against 'Trotskyism.' He tried to organise the healthy revolutionary fighters into the left opposition, which proposed political and economic policies to reinvigorate the revolution in Russia.

Stalin's rule was catastrophic for the Russian masses and the international working class. It was characterised by a series of wild zigzags in policy, with the only consistent element the desperate desire to maintain bureaucratic rule. At home, Stalin at first opposed Trotsky's call for voluntary collectivisation of agriculture, only later to impose a ruthless forced collectivisation that led to terrible famines. He resisted attempts to curtail the power of the richer peasants, only later to slaughter them by the millions and force them into the collective farms. The same policy was, in essence, applied in industry, with the adoption by Stalin of the left opposition's programme of planning and industrialisation, but implemented in a bureaucratic manner without the critical component of working class control over production. Whilst great strides forward in output were made, ultimately the bureaucratic plan could not match the needs of the workers as they were excluded from any meaningful input over what should be produced and how to improve labour productivity. From the 1950s the bureaucratic plan oversaw annual declines in output and stagnation of the productive forces.

The tyranny of Stalin's policy at home was matched by his disastrous impact on the strategy of the international communist parties. In the mid-1920s, desperate for international allies for his regime, Stalin instructed communist parties to tail uncritically bourgeois and reformist forces. But in 1928 the reformists were labelled 'social fascists' and all alliances for common action with these forces prohibited, most disastrously preventing the German Communists from extending their influence over the social democratic workers in 1931-33, by stopping them from proposing the straight forward necessity of a workers united front against the burgeoning forces of Nazism. Even the destruction of the German working class movement by Hitler did not lead to a rebellion against Stalin's disastrous policy, so utterly bureaucratic had the Communist international become. And yet, by 1936 it was all change again, as Stalin pursued the policy of the 'popular front' - where in direct contradistinction to the policy of the Bolsheviks in 1917 - the governments of 'democratic capital' were to be given the support of communist forces.

The result was a litany of devastating defeats for the working class movement; in China, France, Spain and Austria the working class went down to terrible defeats.

These defeats were to propel humanity headlong into a new world war. For Trotsky and his small band of followers the impending war and the betrayals of the Communist International signalled the urgency of building a new international. Consequently, in 1938 the Fourth International was founded - but unlike its predecessors it never organised a mass

vanguard of the working class under its banner. The defeats of the working class created disillusionment and disorientation among the masses, while Stalin was able to secure his position in the Soviet Union with ruthless terrible purges. When the Second World War came it was so terrible it gave the world a new and disturbing vocabulary; as terms like the holocaust and the atom bomb became familiar to millions.

Trotsky had predicted a post-war revolutionary upheaval and, sure enough, just such an upheaval came, as mass partisan movements in Europe erupted in France, Italy, Greece and Yugoslavia. While energetically supporting the defence of the USSR, Trotsky had anticipated that the Soviet Union and with it Stalinism would suffer major defeats which would open the road to a political revolution. And indeed, Stalin's pre-war destruction of huge swathes of the Soviet officer corps and high command, his illusions in the deal done with Hitler in 1939 (The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact) meant that Soviet forces were caught unprepared and nearly collapsed under the Nazi onslaught in 1941. But, from this point on, several factors were to combine to give the USSR final victory.

Firstly, there was the superiority of its planned industrial economy, producing vast supplies of first class weaponry. Secondly, the Soviet workers and peasants responded heroically to the barbaric action of the occupying Nazis. Thirdly we should not discount the huge tactical and strategic blunders by Hitler and the German High Command. All of these played their part in the Soviet victories. Add to this, the entry of the United States into the war and the economic aid it gave to Stalin's Russia.

Finally, in the Soviet Union the Great Purges of 1936-38 had quite literally annihilated any alternative revolutionary leadership inside the Soviet Union - and with it the prospect of a political revolution. Thus, the Soviet Union emerged victorious with its forces expanded into Eastern Europe with a tremendous prestige amongst the international working class. Thus, when the post-war revolutionary upheavals came, rejuvenated Stalinist parties invariably led them. In Eastern Europe capitalism was overturned not by the power of the working class, but in a bureaucratic social revolution. Like the Soviet Union, a planned economy was brought into being but the working class did not hold power; it was held fast in the grip of a bureaucratic caste, which extirpated every sign of independent working class organisation before moving against the capitalists.

In the 1930s Trotsky had developed the designation Degenerated Workers' State to describe the Soviet Union. He argued a political revolution was needed to smash the bureaucracy and its armed state machine and reopen the road to socialism. Such a revolution would not need to expropriate property, i.e. carry out a second social revolution, but take hold of the existing state owned industries and planning machinery and run it democratically. It was the planned economy, albeit heavily distorted by bureaucratisation, which made it necessary for communists to continue to defend the Soviet Union.

The collapse of ?communism?

The bureaucracy prevented the revolutionary spread of working class power internationally and blocked the creation of an ever more equal and democratic society internally, leaving it, Trotsky argued, as an agent of world capitalism within the workers state. Thus, he argued ?either the bureaucracy, becoming ever more the organ of the world bourgeoisie in the workers' state, will overthrow the new forms of property and plunge the country back to capitalism; or the working class will crush the bureaucracy and open the way to socialism.? (The Transitional Programme of the Fourth International, 1938)

The Soviet Union and its bureaucracy finally collapsed at the end of the tumultuous events of 1989 to 1991. But while Trotsky underestimated the longevity of the Soviet Union, his analysis of the role the bureaucracy would play in its collapse proved entirely correct. Major waves of political revolutions punctuated every decade after the war from East Germany (1953), Hungary (1956), Czechoslovakia (1968), Poland (1980-81) to China and Eastern Europe in the late 1980s. But tragically the crisis of leadership of the world workers' movement meant that there existed no powerful revolutionary alternative with a programme for defending the social gains of the working class and installing workers democracy through political revolution. Indeed, the Fourth International had capitulated to Stalinism following the Second World War when it argued Tito, the Stalinist leader of the Yugoslavian partisan movement, was an ?unconscious Trotskyist? and therefore no revolutionary party had to be built in Yugoslavia.

In the absence of a world party of social revolution ready to intervene and create revolutionary parties in the Stalinist states when they went into crisis, a counter-revolutionary outcome became inevitable. Trotsky's prediction was proved correct, but only negatively as the bureaucracy began the process of restoring capitalism.

In Russia and Eastern Europe political revolutions brought the old regimes down but, in the absence of revolutionary socialist leadership, forces intent on the restoration of capitalism (often bureaucrats posing as democrats) achieved the reintroduction of the market and the destruction of the planned economy. In China the bureaucracy maintained power by using force of arms to put down the political revolution in Tiananmen Square in 1989 and they oversaw the reintroduction of capitalism and the destruction of planning themselves in 1992.

The Revolutionary Programme

The lasting achievement of Trotsky is the revolutionary programme and method he developed. Drawing on the actual experience of the Russian Revolution and the struggles against Stalinism in its aftermath, he came to an understanding of the communist party, its programme and relationship to the working class, which is of huge importance for us today.

He answered questions such as: What is the relationship between the democratic revolution and the socialist revolution? How can the revolutionary party fight for leadership of the class, while avoiding both opportunism and sectarianism? How should revolutionaries apply the tactic of the united front to the masses, who remain under the leadership of non-revolutionary forces? What role does the workers militia and the insurrection play in the process of revolution? How can the working class unite with the peasants and link their demands to the socialist goal? It is these lessons we seek to draw out in *The Road to Red October*. Some ninety years after the revolution there could not be a more urgent need to learn these lessons and re-elaborate a revolutionary communist programme for today.

The right wing intelligentsia today present the Russian Revolution as a hopelessly naïve and disastrous attempt at radical social change. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union these people declared ideological victory; capitalism, or so the story goes, had roundly defeated its communist foe. It was apparently reactionary and utopian to even attempt to transcend capitalism. Postmodernists asserted that all 'utopias', all 'grand narratives' led to disaster, to Stalin or Hitler, Mao or Pol Pot. Better to leave capitalism alone and enjoy it if you could. Even those who wished to 'change the world' insisted that the most dangerous thing possible was to 'take power' as the Bolsheviks had done in 1917. Even ostensibly Trotskyist forces in the Fourth International concluded 'the epoch of October was over.'

History has not been kind to this prognosis. As we enter the 21st century, the struggle for socialist revolution appears as immediate and relevant as ever. World leaders claimed with the collapse of the Soviet Union a new period of peace was emerging, but the very policies they pursued have created social and political crisis, war and resistance, pre-revolutionary crises and outright revolutionary upsurges. Governments across the globe, following the prescriptions of the United States and the global financial institutions, have given capital free reign, privatised public services, made us work longer and harder, and locked poor states into global markets rigged against them. Meanwhile, those that openly dare to challenge US imperial power find themselves threatened with military confrontation, invasion and occupation.

In most regions of the world mass rebellions have challenged the USA superpower and its local agents. From the Iraqi, Afghan and Palestinian resistance to the occupation of their lands, to the mass revolts against neoliberalism across Latin America; from the struggles for democracy and resistance to neoliberalism in South Asia to the fight to defend workers social gains across Europe; the 21st century appears already rich in revolutionary potential and opportunity.

A few great crises of the last period are worth a specific mention. In Argentina between 2001 and 2002 an extended and powerful revolutionary situation developed with general strikes, popular uprisings, factory occupations, and embryonic soviets and elements of dual power. The relevance of the October revolution, the need to learn from it and apply its lessons, could not have been more dramatically illustrated.

Likewise, in Venezuela after the failed coup against Hugo Chavez, a prolonged revolutionary process, again with popular assemblies, arming of militias, factory occupations and workers control has developed. Chavez himself has even spoken of socialist revolution - but his government and the armed forces of the state continue to refuse to break

with the bourgeoisie and systematically expropriate the bourgeois class, despite the pressure from below. Here again the lessons of 1917 - of the months from February to October - are critically important.

Bolivia also deserves a special mention. Between 2002 and 2005 huge mass revolutionary upheavals drove two presidents from power and created embryonic soviets. The result was the election of Evo Morales, who like Chavez both embodies the hopes of the masses for revolutionary change and holds them back within the framework of capitalism. In Mexico too the upheaval in 2006 saw millions mobilise and, in one region, the masses developed a proto-Soviet in the form of the Oaxaca Commune.

The world seems neither short of social political crisis, nor resistance. And if all this has happened, in a period of economic boom, what can be expected when the next global recession strikes?

But we should also add a word of caution. If the last hundred years teach us anything, it is that a successful socialist revolution will not happen as a result of some mechanical or unconscious process. Rather, a new generation of militants must be won to a re-elaborated communist programme, which, equally must be built solidly on the revolutionary lessons of February to October 1917. We republish the Road to Red October in the expectation that it will find many readers in the years immediately ahead and help to arm them for the 'Octobers' of the twenty first century.

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