

Lenin re-arms the party

Sun, 30/09/2007 - 20:00

The explosion of anger that swept aside the Tsarist regime in February 1917 led to a profoundly contradictory situation at the level of state power. Conservative and liberal politicians declared themselves the Provisional Government, although they had not participated in, let alone led, the uprising. They were deeply fearful of where the mass mobilisations and the workers' and soldiers' councils - the soviets that mushroomed - would lead. The revolution had given the soviets power. Now it had to be stopped.

However the leaders of the Petrograd Soviet also wanted a return to order. The Menshevik (reformist) leadership of the Executive Committee - Nikolai Chkheidze, its chairman, and Matvei Skobelev - together with the right wing of the Social Revolutionaries (SRs) and Alexander Kerensky, were convinced that the Russian Revolution, as a bourgeois revolution, must find its expression in a bourgeois government. The Soviet executive pledged support to the Provisional Government.

While the mass of Soviet delegates agreed to this, they also established (independently of the executive) an 'observation committee' to watch over the Provisional Government on behalf of the Soviet. This expressed both working class mistrust of the Provisional Government and a belief that the Soviet's job was to pressure that government to ensure it kept its promises. As a mass meeting of the Petrograd cable workers declared on 3 March:

'We consider the essential issue of the moment to be the establishment of strict control over the ministers appointed by the State Duma, who do not enjoy popular confidence. This control must be constituted by representatives of the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies.'

The workers looked to the Soviet to exercise that control. Workers' resolutions were automatically sent to the Soviet, not the Provisional Government. The soldiers too, who had mutinied to make the revolution, would accept no deployment orders not signed by the Soviet. What had emerged was a situation of dual power: power divided between representatives of two irreconcilable class forces. The working masses saw the Soviet as the weapon of their struggles. The bourgeoisie saw the Provisional Government as its bastion against those struggles. State sovereignty was, in reality, split. This inherently unstable situation is called dual power.

Such an arrangement reflected illusions on the part of a majority of workers in the feasibility of a partnership with the bourgeoisie. The leaders of the Soviet did not recognise that dual power was a shifting and unstable moment in struggle, the outcome of which must be resolved on behalf of one or other of the contending classes. They saw it as a permanent agreement between equal partners. As Leon Trotsky later put it: 'In the revolution of 1917, we see the official democracy consciously and intentionally creating a two power system, dodging with all its might the transfer of power into its own hands.'

Thus dual power can never be an objective of struggle - except in the sense of seeking the maximum strength for the workers organisations and the minimum for the remaining forces of the bourgeoisie. In reality it could only have been a prelude to one side or the other breaking the stalemate and depriving the

other class of all power. As Trotsky explained:

“Either the bourgeoisie will actually dominate the old state apparatus, altering it a little for its purpose, in which case the soviets will come to nothing, or the soviets will form the foundation of a new state, liquidating not only the old governmental apparatus, but also the domination of those classes which it served.”

The Bolsheviks unprepared

Until Lenin's return to Russia on 3 April, the momentous events of the February Revolution found the Bolshevik Party programmatically unprepared for its outcome - dual power. A special conference was summoned, lasting from 2-10 April, assembling 149 delegates representing 79,000 party members. It soon revealed an organisation with serious divisions about the way forward.

The Petersburg Committee, in charge of the whole city with its 15,000 party members, took the most conservative stance, believing that the tasks of the day remained those of the democratic revolution. On 3 March they resolved to: “not oppose the power of the Provisional Government in so far as its activities correspond to the interests of the proletariat and of the broad democratic mass of the people.”

This position was completely evasive about how “far” the Provisional Government was actually serving the interests of the masses, and implied no immediate challenge to the dominant Menshevik line within the Soviet executive.

The District Committee in Vyborg - the main industrial heart of the city - advanced a programme of demands that expressed mistrust of the Provisional Government. But they too continued to believe that the character of the revolution remained a democratic, bourgeois one.

The Russian Bureau of the exiled Central Committee - comprising Alexander Shlyapnikov, Vyacheslav Molotov and P A Zalutsky - veered between several different positions. At first they called for Provisional Revolutionary Government to be formed, from above, by the parties represented on the Soviet executive. Its agenda was to be confined to the “three whales” of Russian Social Democracy's minimum programme: the eight-hour day, the democratic republic and the confiscation of landed estates and their transfer to the peasantry, as well as preparing a constituent assembly.

Once again the perspective was of a purely democratic stage, beyond which the revolution could not go. Indeed initially this led them to ban leaflets issued by the more “left” Vyborg district calling for the formation of a soviet-based government from below. However this perspective of a pact with the other Soviet parties ran into a major obstacle. The Mensheviks and SRs, far from wanting to participate in a workers government with the Bolsheviks, wanted to enter one with the bourgeois parties, the Constitutional Democrats (Cadets) and the even more conservative Octobrists. Both of these parties wanted to carry on the war effort at all costs.

The rapid realisation of this fact pushed the Russian Bureau to the left and by 22 March it was characterising the Soviets as the embryos of a new state power.

It was the editorial board of the Bolshevik daily paper Pravda that occupied the most right-wing stance within Bolshevism. Edited by Joseph Stalin, M N Muranov and Lev Kamenev, the paper declared on 7 March: “As far as we are concerned, what matters now is not the overthrow of capitalism but the overthrow of autocracy and feudalism.”

Stalin reasoned: “The Provisional Government has, in fact, assumed the role of defender of the conquests of the revolutionary people . . . At present, it is not in our interest to force events by hastening the eviction

of bourgeois strata who, inevitably, will one day detach themselves from us.?

On 15 March, Kamenev used Pravda's pages to advocate conditional support for Russia's war effort now that the autocracy had been overthrown. Small wonder then that by mid-March rank and file worker Bolshevik cells in the Vyborg district were voting for calls to expel the Pravda leadership from the party.

This confusion was partly a product of the contradictions of Bolshevism's previous position that the bourgeois revolution, though it should be led by the workers and peasants (unlike the Mensheviks who insisted the bourgeoisie must lead it) must end in a 'democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry?'. This government was to constitute a self-limited stage, distinct from the socialist revolution. Yet February 1917 saw the logic of the mobilised masses' demands pushing beyond the minimum programme of the democratic republic. The soviets, militia and factory committees were the embryo of a new type of state, whose content was working class democracy, transcending the limits and forms of bourgeois democracy.

In their own particular ways the contending Bolshevik factions were either attempting to limit the struggle to the terrain of democratic demands (the Petrograd Committee and Pravda) or were striving to go beyond this (Vyborg and the Russian Bureau), but were as yet incapable of consistently posing this as a programmatic goal.

Shock at Finland Station

Lenin announced his change of position in public immediately on his return from exile to everyone at the reception at the Finland Station. The Menshevik Chkheidze, at the head of the Petrograd Soviet's official welcoming party, pleaded with Lenin to play his part in 'the closing of the democratic ranks?'.

Lenin, to his consternation, ignored his words and declared to the crowd: 'The world-wide socialist revolution has already dawned. . . Any day now the whole of European capitalism may crash. The Russian Revolution accomplished by you has paved the way and opened a new epoch. Long live the world-wide socialist revolution.?'

It was Lenin who was able to transcend the limitations of the old Bolshevik programme and perspective. And it is testimony to the vitality and strength of the Bolshevik cadres, as historically constituted since 1903, as well as to the open and democratic debate in the party that led to its programmatic re-armament at the crucial hour.

This refutes the Stalinist myth that Bolshevism was always monolithic, that temporary factions and internal struggle were alien to it. Likewise it refutes the Menshevik and anarchist dogma that Bolshevism was rigid and inflexible, incapable of learning from the revolutionary masses. It is, in short, the practical proof of the correctness of democratic centralism - ensuring full democratic debate and then a focused and disciplined carrying out of a decision once taken.

Why had Lenin changed his perspective on the historic tasks which the Russian Revolution could accomplish? His writings during the war, especially *Imperialism: the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916) led him to see that Russia was one, albeit exceptionally weak, link in the chain of world imperialism. It was not just a backward country - it was one entire historic stage behind Western Europe, thus awaiting its bourgeois revolution in order to progress to capitalism. Of necessity, therefore, the programme of an ongoing Russian Revolution could no longer be conceived of in the terms of an isolated national and democratic revolution, but instead as a component of the international revolution against capitalism itself.

This realisation - coupled with a sharp recognition of the nature and potential of the soviets in February and

March 1917 as a different type of state, one directly participated in by the worker and peasant masses, not standing over them and oppressing them - made it possible for Lenin to re-elaborate and re-focus the Bolshevik programme in the face of Russia's social explosion. This was to pit him against each of the contending Bolshevik groupings in Petrograd and enable him to create a higher synthesis out of their most healthy reflexes, especially the reflexes of those closest to the rank and file insurgent workers.

Lenin's initial responses to the Russian Revolution were expressed in a series of articles submitted to Pravda, his Letters from Afar. These had been written in Switzerland between the outbreak of the February Revolution and his departure for Russia. Their political content constituted such an alarming break with the 'old Bolshevism' still dear to Stalin and Kamenev that the editors published only a curtailed version of one of the letters.

In these articles Lenin argued that the soviet was 'an organisation of workers, the embryo of a workers' government', and that the only guarantee of destroying Tsarism lay 'in arming the proletariat, in strengthening, extending and developing the role, significance and power of the Soviet of Workers' Deputies'.

Lenin realised that what was now necessary was to smash the old bureaucratic police and military state machine of the exploiting classes and replace it with a state of a new type based on councils of delegates elected in the workplaces, barracks and villages, and recallable at the shortest notice by their electors.

This process was underway thanks to the actions of the masses in the February Revolution, but it needed to be completed consciously if the remnants of the old state machine, the army under the former Tsarist High Command, were not to use it to carry through a counter-revolution, which would sweep away the democratic gains of the workers, which, he emphasised, already made Russia 'the freest and most democratic country in the world'.

In forming the militia and the soviets, the Russian workers had taken a course in which 'they themselves should constitute these organs of state power'. In his third letter Lenin announced:

'I said that the workers had smashed the old state machine. I would be more correct to say have begun to smash it.'

The dual power outcome of the February Revolution necessitated either the transition to the workers' council (soviet) state or the triumph of bourgeois reaction.

A break with 'old Bolshevism'?

In order to programmatically re-arm the Bolshevik Party for the struggle Lenin presented his 'April Theses', The Tasks of the Proletariat in the Present Revolution.

Lenin clearly explained that the task was to advance from the first stage of the revolution in which the insufficiently class conscious workers had needlessly ceded power to the bourgeoisie to a second stage 'which must place power in the hands of the proletariat and the poorest sections of the peasants'.

Of necessity this meant the Bolsheviks adopting a stance of refusing all political support to the Provisional Government and maintaining intransigent opposition to any talk of 'revolutionary defensism' as long as Russia was waging an imperialist war.

But most importantly it meant recognising that the struggle had gone beyond the democratic programme, not because a democratic stage had been completed (as Stalinist historians have always claimed) but because the struggle for a parliamentary republic would be a backward step compared with the struggle to

realise the potential of the workers' council state that existed embryonically in the soviets. Only this outcome of the unresolved dual power could ensure the economic and political well being of the working masses.

As Lenin put it: "To return to a parliamentary republic from the Soviet of Workers Deputies would be a retrograde step. Instead the party must fight for the abolition of the police, the army and the bureaucracy, and for all these functions to be passed to the whole armed people."

However Lenin was also clear that his programme did not envisage the immediate "introduction" of socialism, i.e. a totally socialised and planned economy. In reality the proletarian revolution was to begin the transition to socialism, as an integral part of the international revolution. It could do so by establishing soviet control over a single national bank and bringing "social production and the distribution of products at once under the control of the Soviets of Workers' Deputies".

At its very heart, the 10 April Theses foreshadowed a programme of transition from dual power - the limits and dangers of which Lenin increasingly warned of - to the proletarian dictatorship, the goal of the Marxist programme.

Lenin's struggle to re-arm the Bolsheviks met with bitter resistance from many of his comrades. When Kamenev published the theses in Pravda, he prefaced them with the remark: "As for the general scheme of comrade Lenin, it seems to us unacceptable in that it starts from the assumption that the bourgeois-democratic revolution is ended, and counts upon all immediate transformation of this revolution into a socialist revolution."

Lenin's reply to such criticism was clear and to the point: "My answer is: the Bolshevik slogans and ideas on the whole have been confirmed by history; but concretely things have worked out differently; they are more original, more peculiar, more variegated than anyone could have expected. To ignore or overlook this fact would mean taking after those "old Bolsheviks" who more than once already have played so regrettable a role in the history of our Party by reiterating formulas senselessly learned by rote instead of studying the specific features of the new and living reality."

He went on to explain: "The revolutionary-democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry has already become a reality in the Russian revolution... The Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies - there you have the 'revolutionary-democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry' already accomplished in reality. This formula is already antiquated. Events have moved it from the realm of formulas into the realm of reality, clothed it with flesh and bone, concretised it and thereby modified it."

Over a process of three weeks of argument and debate in all the districts and cells of the party, Lenin won the majority to his programmatic line of advance. Putting its wavering and vacillating behind it, the Party now set out to win the masses to recognition of the potential power of the soviets and the fast-growing workers' militia, the Red Guards. The Party now embraced a programme of transition to workers' power.

Breaking with a view of the Russian Revolution as an isolated national event, the Party now fought for the Russian workers to stand in the vanguard of the international revolution. As Lenin told the party conference that endorsed his line: "The great honour of striking the first blow has fallen to the Russian proletariat, but it should never forget that its progress and revolution are but part of a world-wide and growing revolutionary movement which is daily becoming more powerful . . . We cannot see our task in any other light."

Thus the tenth thesis of the April Theses stated as a key goal of the Bolsheviks: "We must take the

initiative in creating a revolutionary International, an International against the social chauvinists and against the Centre.? By this Lenin meant an International, which excluded and fought those who supported the imperialist war, had gone over to the bourgeoisie and those who would not fight them but vacillated between imperialism and proletarian revolution.

Lessons of April 1917

In the Bolshevik Party Lenin had forged an instrument for revolution that had been tempered by years of struggle - both theoretical and practical, both internal and external. This Party was, despite the waverings of some of its leaders, a revolutionary party receptive to the needs of the revolution. Moreover it was an internally democratic party which could be won to change its positions. The triumph of Lenin's line reflected the strength of the Party itself and not just Lenin's genius. As Trotsky put it:

?The revolutionary tradition of the Party, the pressure of the workers from below and Lenin's criticism from above, compelled the upper stratum during the months of April and May, employing the words of Stalin, ?to come out on a new road?.

Source URL: <https://fifthinternational.org/content/lenin-re-arms-party>