Russia: sectarians abandon the gains of October

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How much of a watershed was the attempted coup of August 1991 in the USSR? Did it lead to the overthrow of the workers' state? Keith Harvey replies to some ultra-lefts

The August 1991 coup attempt in Moscow continues to throw a long shadow over the Stalinophile wing of degenerate Trotskyism. This event and Yeltsin's subsequent seizure of power from Gorbachev, his dissolution of the CPSU and then the USSR itself plunged these sects into the deepest gloom imaginable. They proved utterly unable to analyse what had actually happened. After a longer or shorter period of bewilderment they all decided to cut the Gordian knot and proclaim that the gains of the Russian revolution had finally been liquidated. Their confusion and ideological collapse was provoked by their inability to develop either a programme or operative tactics for the Russian proletariat during the long death agony and final spasm of the Stalinist dictatorship.

Those claiming to be Trotskyist were obliged to do more than sit on their principles. They had to advance tactical solutions in the face of a clash between the Stalinist conservatives and those mass, nationalist, democratic and proletarian forces that were the express target of the Emergency Committee (SCSE). How could the planned property relations of the workers' state be defended from the assault of the open capitalist restorationists while at the same time championing the political rights of the working class and national movements?

The Stalinophile sectarians claimed that it was necessary either to back the coup plotters' bid for power or else abstain on this clash. When the Stalinists proved their impotence, when the 'Red Army' sided with Yeltsin, when the workers failed to rise in revolt against the 'Yeltsin dictatorship?; that is, when their illusory perspectives proved utterly bankrupt, these groups decided that either as a direct result of the 'Yeltsin coup' or during the following months the workers' state finally perished. For these groups a capitalist state of one form or another is now in existence in Russia.

There is an underlying unity between the positions advanced by these Stalinophiles in the course of the coup days and their analysis of the end of the workers' state. In the first case they grossly overestimated the anti-capitalist character of the forces grouped within the SCSE. Then in the aftermath of their defeat, they underestimated the difficulties that still lay ahead of Yeltsin in using his newly-won political power to overthrow the post-capitalist property relations.

And the reason for this underlying unity is clear. All these forces evinced a tendency to identify the Stalinist bureaucracy with the workers' state itself, and to see its defeat as synonymous with the end of post-capitalist property relations.

These sects have one and all decided to direct their rage and disillusionment at the LRCI, the only tendency to produce a programme and operative revolutionary tactics during the August coup and since. Our sectarian opponents, clearly believing that if you repeat a bare faced lie often enough it will gain
currency, pepper their polemics with assertions that we supported Yeltsin during the days of the abortive coup in Moscow.

We did nothing of the sort. We gave not one iota of political support to Yeltsin, and nor did we in any way support his grab for power.2

It cannot be denied for a single minute that the defeat of the coup objectively aided Yeltsin?s grab for power, just as the defeat of the Kornilov coup in September 1917 stabilised Kerensky?s regime for another month or so. But there the analogy unfortunately ends. The Bolsheviks, without giving a shred of political support to Kerensky, fought arms in hand to defend the dissolution of his government by Kornilov, all the better to go on to overthrow Kerensky themselves, at the head of the armed workers, in October. Alas, there were no modern Bolshevik forces in Russia in 1991.

Political opposition to Yeltsin does not itself, therefore, answer the question: what response should Trotskyists have made to the coup itself? If it was necessary and principled to defend the democratic rights of the workers and the oppressed nations, then it had to be done?alongside the Yeltsin-led forces. If, on the other hand, the objective strengthening of Yeltsin was indeed a greater evil than a Yannaev-Pugo dictatorship then it would have been necessary to help the latter to come to power. Abstention out of fear of political contamination by ones opponents was an untenable and cowardly position.

We were unequivocally in favour of action to defeat the coup makers. It was in the interests of the workers to thwart them in their aims. In the aftermath of the coup?s collapse we were equally opposed to Yeltsin?s assault on state power.

In the event, we make no apology for outlining a series of tactics designed to fulfil all these objectives. What were they? First of all we called on the working class to stop the coup and smash the plotters by class action, a general strike, obstructing the army and KGB?s manoeuvres. This meant trying to win over the soldiers and arm the workers. The LRCI called on the Soviet workers to form soviet-type bodies?agitationally linking this to the defeat of the coup and the defence of all those democratic rights the masses had won or wanted to win.

Linked to this was the need to put demands on Yeltsin, Popov, Sobchak and their military and KGB supporters to open the arsenals, use all the media to spread the call for a general strike, for workers? militia. Yeltsin made a timid call for a general strike and backed off as soon as it became clear that he had the support of a large section of the army and even the KGB. Sobchak actually disarmed workers in Leningrad who had armed themselves.

A revolutionary organisation in the USSR in 1991 would have offered and called for such a limited united front against the coup. The fact that the leaders such as Yeltsin and the so-called Democrats would almost certainly have rejected it is no argument against addressing them with the call for a united front. It would have created the best possible conditions for forming the united front at the base, amongst those who had huge illusions in Yeltsin.

The nature of Yeltsin?s politics in no way precluded Trotskyists from seeking a united front with Yeltsin and his supporters against the coup. A principled united front never involves political support for ones temporary allies or a stifling of political criticism. For this reason, as Trotsky put it, it is possible to make a united front with ?the devil and his grandmother?, on one condition: not to bind one?s hands.

This is why, at one and the same time as we called for a united front against the coup, we warned that the democratic restorationists would be the main danger if the bureaucratic conservatives were defeated and if
the working class proved neither conscious of the need nor strongly organised enough to take power into its own hands. We opposed any working class political support for, or confidence in Yeltsin and his gang and as far as was possible (given the workers? illusions or apathy) we advocated mobilising opposition to their seizure of power. The moment the coup collapsed and the Yeltsinites began their grab for power we called for breaking the united front and urged the workers to strike out independently to seize power from the bureaucrats and the restorationists.

Nevertheless, up to the point of the failure of the coup the immediate main danger was a victory for Pugo and his coterie. Since the democratic restorationists were obliged to resist the coup in order to survive themselves, it was possible?and given the relationship of forces, necessary?to form a common front of resistance with those forces led by them.

This was doubly true since almost the entire politically conscious minority of the proletariat (the independent unions, especially the Miners? Federation) were led by Yeltsinites. These workers constituted a sort of labour aristocracy, have adopted pro-market positions and were therefore prone to AFL-CIO influence. But their organisations were then the only unions with a record of struggle and with any sort of internal democracy.

One of our more vigorous detractors, the Revolutionary Trotskyist League (RTL-USA) state that ?the LRCI even went so far as to send a representative to the ?White House? to defend the counter-coup of Yeltsin and imperialism.?3 It is completely untrue to say that we went with the aim of defending the counter-coup and imperialism. Moreover, we were not there in defence of bourgeois democracy? in general, nor was it in defence of the parliamentary institutions as institutions.

But it did include a common defence of these parliaments and city soviets against dissolution or arrest by the coup-makers because this was a key element in the crushing of centrally organised resistance.

As in the case of the control of the media and communications system, these common measures of defence were simultaneously and inseparably measures of defence for the workers? organisations and workers? liberties. No-one who was serious about defending the latter could stand aside from defending the former.

The coup-makers? attack and Yeltsin?s defiance of them made the Russian parliament building the focus of resistance to the coup. Had Yeltsin?s general staff been arrested or killed then the army and the KGB would have rallied decisively to Pugo, Kryuchkov, Yanaev and co. They would thereafter have mopped up all resistance piecemeal, including the resistance of the miners, and the other independent unions.

Last but not least the ?socialist? and ?Trotskyist? groups would have been taken apart. These facts were for us a hundred times more important than the fact that Bush and Major were jamming the airwaves with messages of support. As Trotsky once said, politics would be a simple business if one simply had to put a minus wherever the bourgeoisie put a plus.

In the absence of any alternative centre for organising proletarian resistance separate from the Yeltsinite and ?democratic? forces, it would have been doctrinaire, abstract and sectarian to counterpose a non-existent workers? democracy or soviets to existent democratic rights and to institutions created by their exercise. Our task was to use the institutions to hand, to defeat the immediate greater danger whilst at the same time fighting to develop class organs which could become weapons against the ?devil and his grandmother? that circumstances forced us to bloc with during August 18-20.

The International Bolshevik Tendency sought the victory of the coup plotters. Its central justification for
supporting the SCSE in August 1991 is that it would have held up the social counter-revolution. In their special supplement in September 1991 they wrote;

?The August coup attempt was a confrontation in which the working class had a side. A victory for the coup leaders would not have rescued the USSR from the economic impasse that Stalinism has led to, nor would it have removed the threat of capitalist restoration. It could, however, have slowed the restorationist momentum at least temporarily, and bought precious time for the Soviet working class.?4

What can this possibly mean? If the Stalinists are incapable of solving the problem of the stagnating Soviet economy, of overhauling the planning mechanisms and of reversing the tendency towards restoration, then the question arises; who can? The only answer must be the working class. But this answer begs another question in turn; namely, what are the best political conditions in which the working class could obstruct the restorationist measures in the here and now, strengthening its self-organisation and class consciousness in the process, and advancing towards the overthrow of a social layer that prevents society going forward?

In truth, the rest of the left received their answer to these questions many years before?in Poland. There, the 1981 imposition of martial law by General Jaruzelski was supported by the IBT (then members of the iSt). They supported the crushing of Solidarnosc because the workers? demands for ?free elections? to the fake-parliamentary body (Sejm) and ?free trade unions? were ?the transitional slogans of imperialist counter-revolution?. The iSt refused to grapple with the contradiction presented by a 10 million-strong mass movement. Solidarnosc was at that time a working class movement for better wages and conditions and for political reform.

In general, its leadership used the mass movement to wrench concessions from the bureaucracy, including market reforms in the operation of the economy. Part of the highest leadership of Solidarnosc was consciously pro-capitalist and wanted to use Solidarnosc to promote its aims. Faced with this the task of Trotskyists consisted of seeking to split the masses from their leadership, who in the last analysis had more in common with the bureaucracy than with the objective interests of the workers massed in Solidarnosc.

The IBT did not learn any of this from Poland. On the contrary, they endorsed their mistake. They argued;

?While we defend democratic rights, we regard collectivised property in the means of production as a much more valuable conquest for the working class, and private property, not political dictatorship, as the greater evil . . . If the Emergency Committee had had reliable military units in the capital, and triumphed solely by force of arms, it might well have attacked the freedoms granted under Gorbachev sooner than Yeltsin. Many union leaders could have been jailed, union publications suppressed and meetings broken up . . . This was the choice we faced in Poland in 1981.?5

Did the martial law ?breathing space? in Poland improve the prospects of political revolution, halt the restoration process, split the masses from the leaders of Solidarnosc? Not at all. The first years of the coup were used by the regime to break up working class organisations that were free from Stalinist control and thereby remove the threat to its privileges?which was what inspired the Stalinists to move in the first place. But within two years, and on this basis, they were able to accommodate with the old leaders of Solidarnosc and move towards the restoration of capitalism.

Meanwhile, the hatred for Stalinism was intensified and the idea that Stalinist bureaucracy and planned property relations were synonymous was entrenched. Moreover, any opportunity for a revolutionary, Trotskyist, alternative to be built was temporarily prevented by the coup. As a result the pro-capitalist consciousness of the Polish workers was deepened immeasurably by the experience of repression.6
For Trotskyists the central strategic task of the political revolution is to so develop class consciousness that the workers become convinced themselves of the need to defend the collectivised property relations. In the USSR the biggest obstacle to this task was the existence of the Stalinist bureaucracy; it was at one and the same time the architect and enforcer of political and national oppression, the disorganiser of the planned economy, and the chief source of pro-capitalist ideas.

It is simply absurd for the IBT to suggest we are petit-bourgeois democrats? or view democratic rights as the holy of holies?. We judge the question of democratic rights from one standpoint only: which rights will assist the working class in attaining class consciousness? The working class can only become conscious of its historic goal?political revolution?through the experience of organising, discovering voluntary bonds of solidarity, testing out proclaimed saviours and misleaders in open struggle.

For all these reasons to side with the bureaucracy against the working class and its democratic restorationist misleaders is criminal folly. It is in fact to drag the banner of Trotsky?s name in the filth of Stalinism. It is the worst possible disservice to the cause of defending the planned property relations.

Our Stalinophile opponents see an unbroken continuum between the existence of democratic rights and the overthrow of capitalism. We reject this. The chief obstacle the restorationists have to overcome is not the totalitarian bureaucracy but the working class. Destruction of the workers? state does not just mean ousting Stalinist administrators. It means tearing up the established social and economic relations that the working class experience as part of the legacy of October: relatively full employment; welfare and food provision tied to the factories and state farms. It means imposing drastic price increases which the working class can still resist with all its might. By doing all it can to defeat the Stalinist-revanchist coup, the working class confronts the enemy Yeltsin with the decisive contest still ahead.

This then is the lesson of history. The IBT by contrast steer clear of any attempt to examine the balance sheet of Poland after 1981. Rather, when the IBT search for an argument to justify the claim that the ?borrowed time? could have been used to strengthen the cause of political revolution, they set aside the record of history and reach instead for fantastic speculation.

They say that if the SCSE had mobilised popular support for their action against Yeltsin then it ?would have remained partially dependent on a popular base for the consolidation of their rule. This would have opened the door for continued and expanded working class political action.? They say that if the SCSE had mobilised popular support for their action against Yeltsin then it ?would have remained partially dependent on a popular base for the consolidation of their rule. This would have opened the door for continued and expanded working class political action.?8

In place of this nonsensical fantasy the IBT should ponder why the SCSE did not call on the working class. Could it have been that the coup plotters were in dread fear of losing their power and privileges over this working class? Is this not why they did not call for the defeat of Yeltsin in the name of socialism, collectivised property, October 1917 and the working class? Is it not because the SCSE wanted to resolve the conflict by keeping the struggle within the bureaucracy, to strengthen their hand and set the terms of a new style of capitalist restoration? The IBT should have followed a policy guided by the answers to these questions, rather than by their Stalinophile delusions.

In the same way that the IBT retrospectively bemoaned the heavy-handed repression meted out by Jaruzelski as unnecessary to the task of crushing Solidarnosc, in Russia they hoped the Stalinists would act more decently, if firmly. But when the time came the ?hardliners? only acted less professionally?thankfully. But if they had succeeded we can see what the situation would have been. Their decrees banned strikes, and clamped down on the press. Moreover, and here we see a difference even with Poland, the success of the SCSE would have seen a huge repression of the national movements in the republics, quite possibly a bloody suppression. This would have certainly solidified the ideological ties between nationalist restorationists and the masses.9 In short, any time bought would only have been used
up effectively by the forces of political and social counter-revolution. How could it be otherwise given that the left wing would have been defeated and, as the IBT admit, the Stalinists could not improve the situation?

Having rested the first argument on the shifting sands of speculation about what did not happen, the IBT rest the other half of their case on more dependable foundations: dogmatism. Their argument is straightforward enough.

?The Emergency Committee represented the wing of the bureaucracy most dependent upon the survival of the central state apparatus, and thus saw its threatened break up as a mortal danger. The Soviet working class, for entirely different reasons, also had a stake in the preservation of the institutions of the degenerated workers? state, which were an obstacle to capitalist restoration. There was therefore a temporary convergence of interest between the Emergency Committee and the historic interests of the working class. . . ?10

Let us look at it closely. The weight of the argument rests on the nature of the ?central state apparatus? and ?institutions of the degenerated workers? state? that both sides are held to have a common interest in preserving. The working class have every interest in preventing the break up of central planning agencies, distribution agencies, statistical agencies, wholesale system, departments that administer the monopoly of foreign trade and so on; preserve them from dissolution by restorationists and try to take them out of the hands of the bureaucracy.

Revolutionaries and workers should be prepared to block with anyone prepared to help in this. All those prepared to keep the books closed to the agents of the IMF, all those prepared to boycott directives to allow individual enterprises to trade directly with multinationals and bypass the state, all these should be appealed to from above and below with the aim of united front activity. Moreover, revolutionaries place demands on the Stalinist bureaucracy to this effect. Naturally, not for one minute do we renounce the struggle to take these institutions out of the hands of the Stalinists.

Was that what the SCSE was defending on the night of 18 August? No. The ?central state apparatus? that they put Gorbachev on sick leave for undermining with his Union Treaty for was quite different. In the first place, the SCSE acted to defend the all-Union apparatus of repression and political administration. This was most immediately threatened by the proposal to turn the USSR into a real federation with major powers for the republics. Sections of the Army High Command and the KGB saw that the break-up of the centralised state would drastically reduce the scope of their plunder and privilege, which for the bureaucracy is based on power rather than property.

Even then, in the event, major sections of the High Command and the all-Union apparatus failed to stand up and be counted. Sections of the CPSU also saw themselves at risk, but the CPSU as a whole was hopelessly split and had to be by-passed by the plotters in the decisive days.

The IBT should think carefully what the most immediate effect of tightening and ?rescuing? the all-Union structures would have been. They were understood and felt by the masses to be agencies of Russian and Moscow oppression in place to prevent their self-determination. The Soviet workers of whom the IBT likes to speak are not an abstraction simply fighting for economic demands in the factories. They were mobilised in many places around legitimate demands for national self-determination or self-management. And the fact remains that a correct strategy for political revolution inside the USSR in those months depended crucially on a correct policy towards the national question. Had the coup succeeded the SCSE would have crushed these struggles and thereby strengthened nationalism and its pro-capitalist wing.
The whole self-justification of the IBT and all those who backed the SCSE rests not on a serious analysis of the political dynamic of the day but on rigid adherence to a dogma. All dogmas contain an important element of truth. But dogma begins when the truth becomes modified in central and crucial aspects by the passage of time; in taking this into account the dogmatists see only ?revisionism? or ?capitulation to liberal and social democratic opinion?.

On this question the dogma starts from Trotsky?s correct observation that the Stalinist bureaucracy was a parasite feeding off the healthy body of the USSR; it provided no useful function but it had every interest in the self-preservation of the body without which it would perish. Hence, all Trotskyists ?know? that the Stalinist bureaucracy would have to defend the post-capitalist property relations in order to defend its privileges; workers could bloc with them not to defend their privileges but to defend the foundation of future political and economic conquests.

But this truth of Trotsky?s was historically grounded and therefore relative. Trotsky placed alongside the first analogy, another. What if the parasite was harmful, life-threatening even? What if the contradiction was such that the parasite brought to death?s door the body on which it depended?

By the mid 1980s the Stalinist caste in the USSR was utterly incapable of developing the body off which it fed; nothing it could do, no action it could take, could improve the situation. The IBT admit that the SCSE could have found no solution to their crisis. They could have only made matters worse. So they exclude even that a renewed period of economic growth could have provided the conditions under which the working class could have grown and prospered and spontaneously regained some allegiance to the idea that planned property was an advance over capitalism.

When the SCSE acted they had no other policy to that of Gorbachev. They even believed they were acting to preserve his original strategy against his new concessions. Having repressed the democratic and national movements and restricted, at the very least, the operation of working class organisations, the bureaucracy would have adopted the policies of the market and set out on a more authoritarian capitalist road, one that left the working class less room for intervention to halt the process.

Had the coup succeeded, then instead of the essentially political and ideological ties that today bind the ex-Soviet masses to the pro-capitalist Yeltsin despite 18 months of misery, the masses would face a form of repression that would deny them the right or the possibility even to consider which political forces are worthy of their support.

The harsh fact for the ?hardliners? was that their level of power and privilege could no longer be extracted upon the basis of a degenerate?indeed, moribund workers? state economy; their privileges and the continued existence of these relations had come into an absolute rather than a relative contradiction with each other. For the hardliners, privileges could be negotiated and transferred into wealth and property, but on one condition: that they kept the USSR together in the process of an authoritarian transition to capitalism.

In their recent publication and attack on the LRCI the Revolutionary Trotskyist League (RTL) state that the LCC(I)11, like the RTL, ?stood clearly for independent mobilisation of the working class against the coup plotters and Yeltsin. The LCC(I) clearly understood that neither the open bourgeois forces (Yeltsinites), nor the Stalinist bureaucracy . . . was supportable.?12

We have already dealt above with the arguments as to why the defeat of the SCSE was preferable. But the point to note about the RTL is their cowardice. Originally, the RTL argued that:
The Stalinist bureaucracy was the main danger only for three days. During those three days it was necessary to focus working class resistance against the coup. Given this correct estimation we argued that they should have overcome their subjectively sectarian fear of opportunist contamination and have united with the democratic restorationists?the devil?s grandmother?to stop this main danger?. But they refused.

In fact the RTL rapidly shifted position and adopted a line in complete contradiction to the first: For the RTL . . . the Yeltsinites were not even temporarily the lesser evil, since they were the chosen agents of imperialism to oversee capitalist restoration.

This is the position they have now settled on with their partners in the LCC(I). Naturally, they have never accounted for the change. But even so, if Yeltsin was at least an equal danger they should have refrained from acting against the coup altogether, and have advised the workers to stay at home. But they did not do this either.

If the LCC(I)insist that the triumph of Yeltsin was synonymous with the end of the workers? state then they have a duty to retrospectively argue that they should have supported the SCSE since they would have delayed this outcome at the very least. In short, between the IBT and the LRCI there is no coherent middle ground on the question of the 1991 coup.

The Spartacists (ICL) top the list of political cowards. Everything in their previous arsenal of positions on Stalinism dictated that they should support Pugo et al. But they did not. They say that the reason they did not support the coup was that the SCSE did not call upon the working class to smash the Yeltsinites at the barricades. This position flies in the face of their support for the crushing of Solidarnosc. Jaruselski did not seek to mobilise the Polish workers against their leaders. He crushed them nonetheless, and the Spartacists supported it. Despite this inconsistency, they retained their false Stalinophile premise. The question of leadership of the fight against restoration and Yeltsin is left to the Stalinists.

The Spartacists? chronic sectarian logic then led them into a further quandry. Because the SCSE did not do exactly what the ICL wanted, they refused them their support.

The ICL?s position then became even more absurd. They now say that the August Coup and its aftermath appear to have been decisive in the direction of development of the SU, but only those who are under the sway of capitalist ideology would have been hasty to draw this conclusion at the time?

This is a breathtaking confession of bankruptcy. The ICL maintain that the August Coup was decisive, and yet insist that it would have been wrong to recognise it at the time! To have recognised this truth at the time would have been a result not of the application of Marxism, but of bourgeois ideology! Everything is turned upside down: those who recognise a truth are declared wrong, and bourgeois ideology becomes the font of human understanding. Marxism is thus transformed from a science to a squalid exercise in self-justification.

If the August Coup was decisive than the Spartacists should be critical of themselves for sitting on the fence at the time, not denouncing those who correctly estimated its significance.

But what were the consequences of the coup? How decisive was it for the Marxist understanding of the class character of the Russian state?

In the day and weeks following the August coup the Stalinophiles queued up to announce the end of the workers? state. In September 1991 the IBT argued:
All available evidence leads us to conclude that the defeat of the coup and the ascension to power of the elements committed to reconstructing the economy on a capitalist basis constituted a qualitative turning point.  

For the IBT the crucial question is whether or not the Stalinist bureaucracy is still holding state power. This a total break with Marxism. Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky all defined the class character of a state as a whole, that is, a bourgeois state or a workers? state, by the property relations and forms upon which the state superstructure is erected.

As Trotsky said,

"... we base our politics first and foremost upon our analysis of property forms and class relationships. A more detailed and concrete analysis of the factors in the superstructure? is possible for us only on this theoretical basis."  

Trotsky speaking of the still healthy Bolshevik state noted its:

"dual character; socialistic in so far as it defends social property in the means of production, bourgeois in so far as the distribution of life?s goods is carried out with a capitalistic measure of value and all the consequences ensuing therefrom."

Trotsky correctly saw the degeneration of the workers? state as the quantitative and qualitative growth of the latter tendency as against the former, indeed the erection by a series of minor civil wars? of a dictatorship that blocked the advance to socialism.

Of course, it will be objected there are periods, necessarily short ones, where the economic base of society, the property forms, belong to one class whilst political power has passed into the hands of another. The IBT appeal to this to support their argument:

"If the character of states were defined by property relations alone, then the Bolsheviks, who did not conduct extensive nationalisations until the summer of 1918, stood for eight months at the head of a bourgeois state."  

But here we have a situation where the workers? government and the workers? soviets are in the process of expropriating the bourgeoisie and smashing the bureaucratic military machine of the capitalist state, replacing it with the economic and political forms of the workers? state. In any transition period shorthand definitions, which suffice for ?normal? periods, are inadequate and we have to elaborate them. Between October 1917 and July 1918, the dictatorship of the proletariat was in conflict with a capitalist economy. As defined by the character of the state machine, without a doubt this was a workers? state. This was what had to be defended against counter-revolution.

But at the same time that the capitalist mode of production was being uprooted in the USSR a bourgeois counter-revolution was beginning in the state machine.

The rise to political power of a totalitarian bureaucracy was a partial, (i.e. not an economic but a political) restoration. The class character of this dictatorial state machine, the military-bureaucratic superstructure which Trotsky insisted was an instrument of economic parasitism and political oppression against the working class, was far from proletarian. Indeed, Trotsky insisted that it was bourgeois in type, even approximating to fascism in its political form. Can a state in which such a regime can still exist be a workers? state? Yes: but its proletarian character stems not at all from the bureaucratic dictatorship let alone the Stalinists? supposed subjective commitment to preserving the planned property relations. It
stems solely and exclusively from the survival of the planned and statified property relations.

Thus there exists a contradiction between the political and social regimes. In support of their position the IBT quote Trotsky on this contradiction:

?But what does such a type of conflict between the economy and the state mean? It means a revolution or a counter-revolution. The victory of one class over another signifies that it will reconstruct the economy in the interests of the victors?19

This is correct and there are numerous historical examples of the political nature of state power changing and then going on to effect changes in the property relations. But did Trotsky say that this change in the state superstructure would alter the character of the property relations immediately? In the same article he clearly says no:

?Only the intrusion of a revolutionary or a counter-revolutionary force in property relations can change the class nature of the state?20

The task is to identify the exact qualitative turning point in this ?intrusion?. A change of leading personnel within the already bourgeois-type state machine?from objective to subjective restorationists?is not the qualitative moment of transition from a workers? to a bourgeois state.

Only a tendency that had in all essentials abandoned Trotsky?s analysis could identify the collapse of the bureaucratic dictatorship with the collapse of the workers? state itself. Any Marxist, let alone a self-proclaimed Trotskyist would have to show when and how the return to capitalist social relations had taken place. Not our ultra-orthodox dogmatists! No sooner had the Stalinist party?s hold on power been broken, no sooner had the pathetic August putsch shattered all their fond hopes for the preservation of this dictatorship than our dogmatists proclaimed the restoration of capitalism and abandoned the defence of the planned and statified property relations, the only real gains of October.

Where does this anti-Trotskyist method come from? To discover this you have to trace the IBT?s method to the Spartacist League of the 1960s. In attempting to analyse the Cuban Revolution the leaders of the Spartacists developed the idea that the Castro bonapartist regime in 1959 and 1960 did not defend either capitalism or any other set of property relations. Rather, it was a petit-bourgeois government that was uncommitted to the defence of either. This situation was said to have existed until Castro finally jumped into the camp of Stalinism under the hostile pressure of the USA and turned Cuba into a deformed workers? state.

This was an unnecessary innovation. It is well within the marxist understanding of Bonapartism to recognise that a petit-bourgeois regime can oscillate under the pressure of more fundamental forces between defending first one and later a different set of property relations. It does not mean that the governmental regime becomes detached from the state which it administers. The class character of the state is defined as always by whatever social form of property exists and is actually being defended by bodies of armed men and women. Nor is it difficult to understand that a government, providing it has the requisite bodies of armed men at its disposal, can act to overthrow the property relations. But if its does so, as a government, as a regime, it does not have a neutral class character but is either a bourgeois or a workers? government. It can either be a revolutionary Bolshevik government based on organs of working class power, or a degenerate Stalinist workers? government which opposes all self-activity of the masses and blocks the road to socialism.

The IBT entered the period of the death agony of Stalinism, like the ICL, saddled with this utter confusion
on the character and the role of the state in revolution and counter-revolution. Hence, they attribute the class character of the state to the subjective intentions of the office holders. This would be shallow enough if it were not for another unpleasant fact; namely, which office holders, which elements of the superstructural state machine is considered to be decisive?

The main group within the LCC(I)?Voce Operaia?inherited this methodology from their flirtation with the iSt. The RTL had to abandon their position to embrace the LCC(I). Writing about the nature of the state that exists in Russia, in January 1992, they state that following the success of Yeltsin:

"The USSR was no longer a workers? state of any kind. The political power was passed into the hands of the bourgeois forces. The state was no longer a weapon to defend the collective property and the planned economy. . . . restoration is a process and not a sudden event. But the class nature of the state depends also on the process which it vouches for . . . the Russian state is today an instrument of the capitalist restoration and not of guardianship of the collectivised economy."21

So the class character of the state is derived in much the same way as for the IBT; they reduce the question of the nature of the state to the project of its government. Since joining the LCC(I) the RTL have endorsed this view:

"Which classes the state serves . . . is the most important criterion for the definition of the state."? The RTL fail to account for the important differences that this analysis has with their own developed in their earlier press on the restoration of the capitalist state in Poland where they argued that "four requirements for reaching a qualitative transformation . . . from a deformed workers? state to a capitalist state? were needed. One of these included abolition of the planned economy (as defined by the introduction of currency convertibility). For Voce Operaia (VO) this is not relevant; yet the LCC(I) endorsed the RTL position on Poland at their last gathering! 22

VO are not content with sharing the position of the IBT. They try to enrich marxism with the following gem.

"If Comrade Mandel looks for a ruling Russian capitalist class, he wouldn?t be able to find it yet. But if he digs much deeper he would discover that, thanks to Gorbachev first and Yeltsin then, there is today a ruling class. It is the Western imperialist bourgeoisie, of which the former Soviet State is only an Euro-Asian offshoot."23

Following this trend of thought, which dissolves the part (Russia) into the whole (global imperialism) we could argue with just as much ?logic? that since the Stalinist bureaucracy too was an agent of world imperialism within the old workers? state, then the old workers? state was in reality a capitalist state . . . without capitalists!

The Spartacists (ICL) themselves at first showed a greater degree of caution and native pragmatism than the IBT, but eventually they arrived at a similar conclusion. A resolution of their International Conference in November 1992 states:

"Given the linear extension of recent developments, the International Conference is compelled to note and draw conclusions from the position that the degenerated workers? state of Stalin and his heirs has been destroyed."24

As the originators of the methodology employed by the IBT on the question of the state, it was to be expected that they would see the point of qualitative transition in the same way, straightforward, transparent and wrong. But they managed to make a hash of it.
It was developments during the course of 1992 which they saw as crucial: the dissolution of the USSR, the introduction of price rises, the crushing of the air traffic controllers strike and, finally, the dissolution of the Red Army. Here it is hard not to agree with the criticisms made by the IBT of their former teachers; none of this rings true. It is an eclectic mish-mash and amounts to disappointed hopes in the Red Army they had been hailing for over a decade as the core of the gains of October. For the IBT the workers? state stood or fell with the CPSU. For the ICL it was the Soviet Armed Forces.

Those who claim the Russian workers? state is no more have a difficulty in explaining the significance of the events of the last 18 months in Russia. A perpetual and still unresolved battle has taken place between the fast track restorationists around Yeltsin and a broad coalition of chauvinists, conservatives and state capitalists. Many of the latter supported Yeltsin in August 1991 but have resisted him ever since.

Assessing the failure of the coup attempt and Yeltsin?s victory we stated presciently as early as 30 August 1991 when Yeltsin seemed unstoppable:

?The ?conservative? faction is under fierce attack from the Yeltsinites and even from Gorbachev. But it still has redoubts and pockets of resistance. It still has large numbers of deputies in the Supreme and republican soviets. In Azerbaijan and some central Asian republics its still holds power. There the duality of power has a territorial aspect. Unless they are removed in the next months they could launch a limited counter-attack as the restorationists themselves hit a crisis provoked by resistance to their programme.?25

In November 1991 we published the following statement of our differences with the RTL which included:

? . . . . the LRCI differs with the RTL in that the latter believe that the pre-existing dual power between the two major factions of the bureaucracy has been decisively resolved. The LRCI believes that whilst Yeltsin has established a restorationist government with executive power over the USSR and RSFSR state apparatus, and thus has shifted the balance of the dual power qualitatively in his favour, it has not yet resolved it.?

Everything since then has proven us correct. This conflict is not just a squabble within the government; it takes the form of a split throughout society and divides the state machine itself. The social-restorationist forces are gathered around Yeltsin.

The powers given by the constitution to the Presidential executive is the source of their claim to sovereignty. On the other side, the Congress of Peoples? Deputies and to a lesser extent the Supreme Soviet claim equal authority for vetoing measures against Yeltsin. This split runs through the country and effects the armed forces on whom neither side has been able to count completely and which so far have declared their neutrality in all decisive conflicts.

In short, we have had an uninterrupted situation of dual power or dual powerlessness26.Clearly this situation is unstable and must be resolved.

The IBT and the RTL/LCC(I) are blind to its existence and prefer not to consider the question at all in their analysis of the last 18 months. This is natural enough since their whole analysis cannot accommodate the social facts of the last period.

It is only necessary to give a precise content, to evaluate the present stage of the intrusion of the restorationist state machine into Russia?s property relations to arrive at an understanding of the nature of the dual power in Russia today. The object of the struggle, the prize for the victorious camp, is indeed an economic one. As we have argued ever since 1990 the dismantling of the central state mechanisms for administering the plan was a necessary but insufficient step on the road to overthrowing post-capitalist
property. Contrary to the claims of the IBT and LCC(I) we have never identified a high degree of nationalised property on its own as signifying the existence of a workers? state.27 Therefore, we do not associate a given level of privatisation with the restoration of capitalism. Rather, we have taken the reality of advanced ?market socialist? degenerate workers? states as our starting point for analysing the moments of qualitative transition from a highly decentralised planned economy (e.g Yugoslavia in the 1980s) to a weak capitalist market economy.

In Eastern Europe the central state co-ordinating agencies that set physical targets and co-ordinated material resource allocation were greatly weakened in the 1980s. Thereafter, the decisive mechanism for ensuring the existence of some form of planned economy was the state central banking system. It distributed credits to enterprises, guaranteed the wages fund and mediated inter-enterprise debts. Through these financial mechanisms money retained its passive role and was prevented from acting as capital. Enterprises were thus prevented from acting according to commercial criteria. In short, the law of value of capitalism (production for profit) did not direct the accumulation process.

It has been our contention that in a highly centralised planning system like Russia the effect of the August coup on the economy has in many ways served to place Russia in a similar situation to that faced by countries such as Yugoslavia in the 1980s.

The IBT and ultra-lefts, on the other hand, centre all their attention on the abolition of the central administrative planning mechanisms that co-ordinated the allocation of physical goods. They fail to see the significance of the role played by the Central Bank in reproducing the essentials of the planning system.

It is for that reason that the economic goal of the contending forces in Russia today is control of the Central Bank and its allocation of credits to enterprises.28 Each side?Yeltsin and Khasbulatov?have their own parallel administrations that check and control each other within these economic agencies. Only by resolving the political struggle over which body has sovereignty in Russia will Yeltsin be able to claim the prize and set about forcing the Central Bank to act as a weapon for the restoration of capitalism instead of subverting that process.

This is why the IBT analysis is so shallow. First, they hold subjective intentions to be paramount and neglect the fact that there is in Russia a gulf between the wish and the deed; moreover, even if they were right they still come up against the problem that there are competing forces who have yet to stamp their rule decisively on the direction of the economy.

None of this is to deny that enormously damaging pro-capitalist measures have been taken with huge effects on the working class. But they remain as yet preparatory, and secondary to the question of fundamental property transformation. Moreover, the imperialist bourgeoisie, who know a thing or two about property, have no doubt that the fundamental crossing of the Rubicon is yet to come.

The failure of the IBT to comprehend the nature of the transition process underway and their theoretical impatience also flow from another misunderstanding, this time concerning the nature of the Stalinist bureaucracy itself. In seeking to justify their support for political dictatorship they advance the following argument:

?The need for political dictatorship is in inverse proportion to the strength of the ruling group. Private property in the means of production is a powerful social institution with deep roots in society, independent of any political regime . . . . Precisely because the Stalinist bureaucracy was a usurper caste, with no historical claim to legitimacy and no independent social moorings, it was forced to rely on a strict monopoly of political power. The Stalinists? use of dictatorial methods was an indication of their weakness, not their
strength. The overthrow of the Stalinist bureaucracy by the workers would involve only a change in the forms of political rule, leaving the economic foundations intact.  

This is saying no more than that the roots of bourgeois property and a capitalist class are much more solidly planted than the Stalinist caste in a workers' state. Thus, the argument goes, we should support the maintaining of the caste dictatorship since it is an easier target to dislodge than a ruling bourgeois class.

This is a hopeless conflation of two arguments. The first, which is undoubtedly true, is that the caste is historically illegitimate, that it serves no necessary function to the system of accumulation and that its elimination would immeasurably improve the functioning of the economy. This is very unlike the capitalist class in its mode of production. But this idea is then mixed up with another, altogether wrong one: that the bureaucracy simply sits on top of some essentially undisturbed economic foundations as a political parasite and thus it can be removed by minor surgery.

It is not the Stalinist bureaucracy's roots but the IBT's understanding that is shallow. The bureaucracy does not simply function at the level of political administration and distribution. The caste is differentiated and functions down deep into the minutest layer of the functioning of economy—in the factories, within the trade unions, within all pores of society. Yeltsin and the IBT have found to their cost that simply removing the tops of the nomenklatura, and dissolving the national apparatus of the CPSU has not destroyed the bureaucratic caste. The political revolution will have to deal with a mighty social formation which will not pass from the scene as easily as the IBT imagine.

And we are seeing negative proof of this now in the process of social counter-revolution. The enterprise managers, the backbone of the Industrial Union, are a mainstay of Civic Union and are tied closely to bureaucrats from the Central Banking administration. The old trade union apparatchiks from the bureaucracy still form the most important leaders of the largest trade unions. The roots of the Stalinist caste go further down than the IBT imagine. They have proved capable of considerable resistance to capitalist restoration, not out of a collective consciousness but out of individual self-interest. They are united in their desire to negotiate a highly statised transition that allows the bulk of them to survive the transition intact.

The tendencies that have already abandoned the defence of the planned property relations also all demonstrated how shallow their grasp of Trotskyism was. They identified the workers' state with the caste rule of the bureaucracy itself. Their cursing of this same bureaucracy was based on an epiphenomenal assessment of their policies. When push came to shove they had no adequately developed programme for defending these gains and no tactics for winning the proletariat itself to this defence.

Now they have nothing to say, nothing to offer the Russian workers as the decisive period of restoration approaches. Their Stalinophile sectarianism is a pathetic alibi for abstention.

No wonder that they can only write dyspeptic and slanderous polemics against the one tendency that not only understood and analysed this historic crisis but elaborated a transitional action programme to address it. Russia's workers will learn nothing from these pseudo-Trotskyist wailers at the funeral of the Stalinist bureaucracy.

Let the dead bury their dead.

NOTES
1 We deal in this article with the following groups: the International Bolshevik Tendency (IBT); the Liaison
Committee of Communists (LCC(I)), including the recently affiliated Revolutionary Trotskyist League (RTL-USA); the International Communist League (Spartacists) formerly iSt.

2 We said at the time: ?It was natural and necessary to bloc with all and anyone who by deeds was prepared to resist the closure of parties (except fascist ones), publications and democratically elected forums (e.g. republican parliaments) that the workers have expressed themselves through.? All blocs to stop the SCSE ?had to be carried out within the context of no political support for Yeltsin at all .

2. Trotskyist International No7, p6

3 See International Trotskyist no7 Spring 1993, p9. The RTL, then RTT, were at the time of the August coup, a fraternal group of the LRCI, but not within its democratic centralism. We broke this relationship over the differing positions adopted around these events.


5 1917 No12, p6

6 The trajectory of figures like Jacek Kuron is symptomatic. Once a leading Solidarnosc activist he became Minister for Labor quelling the workers? demands in the restoration process.

7 1917, No12 p6

8 ibid

9 The IBT should dwell upon the lesson of the relatively ?peaceful? separation of Lithuania from Moscow and the relatively swift process of disillusionment that occurred with Saujudis as a result, a process leading to the free election of the old (now ex-) Stalinist chief as President!

10 1917, No12, p6

11 The LCC(I) formed in 1991 consists of Voce Operaia (Italy), RWP (Sri Lanka), RKL (Austria), Spartaksund (Germany), CCP (France); RTL

12 International Trotskyist No7 ibid

13 International Trotskyist No4, p3

14 Workers Power, November 1991

15 Spartacist, Winter 1992-3, p17

16 1917 Supplement September 1991. p3

17 Trotsky, In Defence of Marxism, New York, 1973, p 123

18 1917, No12, p5

19 ?Not a workers and not a bourgeois state?, L Trotsky, November 1937, in Writings, 1937-38 p64. Quoted by the IBT in 1917 Supplement, September 1991

20 ibid, p63

21 Voce Operaia, No 21

22 Perhaps there is an underlying tension in the respective positions because after ?a rich discussion? the LCC(I) decided that Serbia was still a workers? state, despite that all were agreed that the Stalinist bureaucracy are seeking to introduce capitalism! We are told that because of the war in Bosnia they have not taken ?the final measures?(!?) to make it a capitalist state. What these are and why they are necessary when the state is run by people committed to capitalism we are not told. But the RTL tell us that for them when ?the bureaucracy in Belgrade reaches an agreement with imperialism on the borders of a new Serbian capitalist state (it has already happened ?LRCI) the workers? state cannot prevail without an immediate political revolution.? Now a diplomatic agreement is the Rubicon, (?the final measures?) where once it was ?currency convertibility?! Such flexible thinkers!

23 Voce Operaia, No 21

24 Spartacist Winter 1992-3 p17

25 Trotskyist International 7 p7

26 The IBT construct one whole argument based on a complete misreading of what we wrote early in 1992. In January 1992 Workers Power wrote, ?The Soviet Union is dead.? This only registered the fact
that the political framework of the USSR was abolished and replaced by the CIS. This did not mean the end of the property relations of the workers' state. The IBT were trying to prove too much because they believed that the LRCI only later hit upon the idea that Russia was still a workers' state so as to minimise the importance of Yeltsin's counter-coup, so 'distraught' was the LRCI about the consequences of Yeltsin's victory.

27 See 'Poland's transition to capitalism?', in Permanent Revolution 9 and 'Understanding the restoration process? in Trotskyist International 7
28 As Deputy Prime Minster for the economy?Fyodor?said in spring 1993, alluding to the Bolsheviks sending in sailors to disperse the Constituent Assembly in 1918; ?Yeltsin should send in a detachment of sailors to occupy the Central Bank.? Financial Times 22 March 1993
291917, No12, pp6-7

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