

When women set Russia ablaze

Wed, 11/07/2007 - 18:17

The specific role of women workers in the February revolution occurred because of the very acute way the war had affected them. The mobilisation of soldiers and production for the war effort led to enormous deprivation in the cities and villages of Russia. As early as April 1915 there were riots by women demanding bread, and these continued sporadically right through to 1917.

Between 1914 and 1917 the number of women employed in the factories increased because of the conscription of men to the front line. Women earned about half the wages of men. They were concentrated in textiles and chemical industries, where hours were long and conditions poor. They often suffered physical and sexual harassment from the bosses and their lackey foremen. The intensity of the oppression of these women led to explosive rebellions.

International Women's Day

By February 1917 the class struggle was intensifying. Although there were many strikes in Petrograd during January and February, none of them sparked the whole city in the way the women were to do. In preparation for International Women's Day, Bolsheviks, Mensheviks and the Mezhrainitsy group (a group of socialists committed to neither the Bolsheviks nor the Mensheviks) planned propaganda and educational meetings for the day. In the Vyborg district on 20 February some workers called for a strike. But all socialist organisations argued that the class was not ready for a mass strike because of inadequate political preparation or contact with the soldiers.

The action was intended to be limited to factory meetings in order to make propaganda. The socialist groups all underestimated the mood of the women workers in the factories. One account records: 'The largely female staff of the Vasilesky Island trolley-park [tram station], sensing general unrest a few days before 23 February, sent a woman to the neighbouring encampment of the 180th Infantry Regiment to ask the soldiers whether they would shoot at them or not. The answer was no, and on the 23rd, the trolley car workers joined the demonstration.'

On the morning of the 23rd several illegal meetings were held in textile factories in the Vyborg district around the theme 'War, high prices and the situation of the woman worker'. Anger boiled over at these meetings. One by one they voted to strike, but did not leave their protest at that. Taking to the streets in their thousands, the women marched to nearby factories, shouting for the workers, women and men to join them. The flying picket was dramatically effective. By 10:00 am ten factories were shut with 27,000 workers on strike. By noon it was 21 plants with 50,000 strikers!

Many accounts report the women entering factories, banging on the gates, throwing snowballs at windows to get workers out. It seems that where factories did not immediately respond to the call to join the action, more direct methods were used. Flying rocks and pieces of iron were persuasively used at some plants. In the Vyborg district there were 59,800 men and women on strike by the end of the day, 61 per cent of all factory workers. Rank and file Bolsheviks played a leading role in pulling plants out alongside the women

workers, but many of the leaders were far more reluctant. The Vyborg leader Kayurov wrote later:

?...to my surprise and indignation... we learned... of the strike in some textile factories and of the arrival of a number of delegates from the women workers who announced [that they were going on strike]. I was extremely indignant about the behaviour of the strikers, both because they had blatantly ignored the decision of the district committee of the party, and also because they had gone on strike after I had appealed to them only the night before to keep cool and disciplined.?

Despite such indignation the Bolsheviks were able to quickly overcome these feelings and seize the opportunity offered to them. Agreeing to build the strike, they gave political leadership by raising the slogans, ?Down with the autocracy! Down with the war! Give us bread!?

In other districts of the city, strikes were less extensive, but no less militant. Over the whole city between 20 and 30 per cent of the workers struck, with over 80 factories shut. The demonstrators from the Vyborg district were determined to reach the governmental centre of Petrograd, but the police blocked their way at one of the bridges. Eventually the demonstrators began crossing the ice of the frozen River Neva. However, the police managed to contain them, albeit with difficulty. A police report of the day explained: ?At 4:40pm crowds of approximately 1,000 people, predominantly women and youths, approached Kazan Bridge on the Nevskii Prospekt from the direction of Mikhailovskaia street, singing and shouting ?give us bread!??

Anger and desperation

The demonstrations were not confined to those who went on strike - women queuing for bread quickly joined in. One manager reported coming out from his bakery shop to announce that there was no more bread: ?No sooner had this announcement been made than the crowd smashed the windows, broke into the store and knocked down everything in sight.?

Such acts were widespread. The Bolsheviks argued against ?vandalism? and tried to direct the protests by organising meetings and by calling for a three day general strike plus intensified propaganda towards soldiers. In the following days the number of workers on strike increased steadily. The government sent police and troops in to disperse the demonstrators by any means necessary, but the revolutionary wave was able to meet this challenge by winning Cossacks over and eventually whole regiments joined the insurgents.

Workers were arming themselves in their militia, and it was women workers who played a vital role in breaking the troops from the regime. As Trotsky?s account reveals: ?A great role is played by women workers in the relation between workers and soldiers. They go up to the cordons more boldly than men, take hold of the rifles, beseech, almost command, ?Put down your bayonets; join us!? The soldiers are excited, ashamed, exchange anxious glances, waver; someone makes up his mind first, and the bayonets rise guiltily above the shoulders of the advancing crowd. The barrier is opened; a joyous ?Hurrah!? shakes the air. The soldiers are surrounded. Everywhere arguments, reproaches, appeals - the revolution makes another forward step.?

The mass strike eventually won to its side the vast numbers of peasants in uniform, the soldiers. Exhausted by the deprivation caused by the war, sickened by its carnage, these soldiers were eager for change. The action of the working class ignited their rebellion and made the fall of the autocracy inevitable. Without its military power the Romanov dynasty could not last a minute. The Tsar?s wife expressed the arrogant short sightedness of the autocracy when she wrote to her husband:

?This is a hooligan movement, young people run and shout that there is no bread, simply to create

excitement, along with workers who prevent others from working. If the weather were very cold they would probably stay at home. But all this will pass and become calm, if only the Duma will behave itself.?

The regime falls

These words, expressing hope that events would be settled by the weather and the tame parliamentarians of the Duma (its Bolshevik deputies were in prison or exile), were forced down the throat of the pampered Tsarina by the revolution. Within the borders of the Russian empire, modern capitalism coincided with a peasant economy that was staggering in its backwardness, and meant misery for some hundred million peasants.

The combination of a land starved peasantry and a highly concentrated urban working class (four million strong) obliged the autocracy to maintain a vicious political dictatorship. But the existence of the autocracy - and then the war - intensified the contradictions of Russia's combined and uneven social development to the limit. When they exploded the seemingly all powerful Tsarist regime fell in a matter of days. As Trotsky and Lenin both observed, the chain of world capitalism had broken at its weakest link.

The development of the revolution and the abdication of the Tsar opened up a whole new period for the Russian working class. The bourgeois provisional government that emerged from the February revolution was unstable, balanced alongside organs of a different kind of power, the soviets of workers' and soldiers' deputies.

Within the factories, workers were emboldened. Factory committees sprang up, demanding control over pay and conditions. The workers' militia conflicted with the weaker civil militias of the government.

Women workers continued to play an important role. They were among the most determined to win an eight hour day. They sought decent wages and supported demands for equal political rights, including the vote. Three thousand women laundry workers launched the first major strike against the provisional government, demanding the eight hour day, a living wage and expropriation of the laundries. The Bolsheviks sent Alexandra Kollontai to work alongside the women.

Later, the party set up a Women's Bureau, led by Vera Slutskaya. This relaunched the paper *Rabotnitsa* (Woman Worker) and built up support in the factories, among soldiers' wives and led large demonstrations against the war.

Revolutionary lessons

The role of women workers in the Russian Revolution was magnificent, and taught the revolutionary leadership much. But their very spontaneity meant that they were not always in the revolutionary vanguard throughout 1917; they struck, demonstrated and rioted because of the intensity of their oppression, but this also reflected their newness to political and trade union activities.

This is often true of working class women - their role within the workforce as a 'peripheral' element, poorly paid, shifted in and out of work depending on the fortunes and needs of capitalism leads to them being generally poorly organised in unions and political parties. Even where membership of unions is high, women are rarely active in the leadership because of their oppression which denies them time, due to domestic commitments, and they face obstruction by male leaders.

This lack of traditional organisation has contradictory results: on the one hand women can be the most militant fighters, because they are unfettered by the conservatism, which can so often take root inside the union organisations; but, on the other hand, it makes women easy targets for anti-working class propaganda.

In the weeks after the February Revolution liberal bourgeois feminists mobilised thousands of working class women to demonstrate for women's suffrage and continuation of the war! The Bolsheviks were able to establish a mass base among women by mid-1917, which led them once again to demonstrate against the war, but this took special efforts at organisation and propaganda.

The lessons we can learn from the Bolsheviks and working women in this period are rich indeed. The revolution, as Lenin was to point out years later, would never have succeeded without the mobilisation of women. Special forms of propaganda and organisation are needed to win them to the side of the revolutionary party, but, once won, they will be the most brave and militant fighters for they have so much to gain!

Source URL: <https://fifthinternational.org/content/when-women-set-russia-ablaze>