

RUSSIAN REVOLUTION IN RETROSPECT

This auspicious meeting is to assess hundred years of “the Bolshevik *coup d'etat*” (as characterized by John Reed, *Ten Days That Shook The World*, Notes and Explanations, written - January, 1919, Progress, Moscow, p-18, and introduced by Lenin by the end of the year in the following words: “Here is a book which I should like to see published in millions of copies and translated into all languages. It gives a truthful and most vivid exposition of the events so significant to the comprehension of what really is the Proletarian revolution and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat.”) which heralded the birth of State Capitalism in Russia and postponing socialism by a century.

One may ask why we still think it important to understand the theories and practices of those who came to power in Russia in 1917 and those who have governed for some three quarters of a century with falsehood marking the entire course of the regime’s rise and demise – November 7, 1917 to December 26, 1990. It matters vitally to the workers of all countries because the same wrong theories are still impeding the achievement of Socialism. The urgent need of the time is the replacement of capitalism by a world-wide socialist system of society. This requires clear understanding of the socialist objective and of the means by which alone it can be achieved. In particular it requires approval of the reasons why Socialism was impossible in Russia in 1917 – as was pointed out by the SOCIALIST PARTY OF GREAT BRITAIN at the time – and of the deception and distortion practised by the so-called Communist regimes in Russia, China, Cuba and Vietnam and the erstwhile despotisms of Eastern Europe and elsewhere of describing their ruthless state capitalist regimes as ‘socialist’. Actually socialism means a radical change in the relation of production – a change of the wage labour / employer relation of production into an egalitarian cooperative relation of production via abolition of the wages slavery. This hadn’t happened in history.

I want to remind you that we consistently use the term Socialism for the kind of classless social system described in our *Object* and *Declaration of Principles*.

THE WORLD SOCIALIST PARTY (INDIA) since inauguration in March 1-3, 1995 has always held that the system of society known as Socialism becomes possible only at a certain stage in the forward march of mankind. It depends firstly on the *objective* condition – on the growth of the powers of production, transport and communication to the level at which the provision of the necessities and amenities of a full life could, with proper organisation and social planning, be assured for the whole population. Capitalism solved this technical problem long enough ago through the development of great industrial plants, technology and machinery and the breaking down of the physical barriers which formerly kept people in different parts of the world isolated from each other. It depends secondly on the *subjective* condition – on the growth of working class consciousness and organisation on a world-wide basis united by understanding of socialist ideas, and by agreement on the democratic political action necessary to replace capitalism by Socialism.

The two conditions interact with each other. The second could not precede the first and, as experience has shown, the growth of socialist understanding and organisation actually lags far behind the advance of productive capacity. “Circumstances make men just as much as men make circumstances,” so said Marx. However, the second part of the task remains yet to be accomplished.

Since one country can learn from another and the industrially more advanced could help the less advanced, it is not necessary for the latter to go through all the historical phases of capitalism. On the other hand, it is not possible for one country alone to leap forward into Socialism in a predominantly capitalist and hostile world. By this benchmark it was not possible for Russia in 1917 to achieve Socialism. Russia lacked both the necessary productive capacity and the necessary acceptance of socialist idea by the population; nor was the small socialist movement in other countries in a position to help by overthrowing capitalism. In that situation there was no way Russia could avoid having to develop along capitalist lines.

Russia 1917

In October (November in the Gregorian calendar) 1917 the party that seized power by means of a *coup d' e'tat* in Russia was the Russian Communist Party – known as the Bolsheviks (meaning majority) because their faction of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party had received the support of a majority of the delegates at a conference held in London in 1903.

The party had been formed in 1898 and had inherited traditions from various movements against the Tsarist autocracy active earlier in the nineteenth century. Russia was a predominantly agricultural country, freed from serfdom only in 1861 and with the mass of peasants brutally oppressed and desperately poor. Capitalism was growing but was still limited in extent and the immature capitalist class was so weak politically that it was commonly accepted that the full development of capitalism could only be achieved through a peasant and working class uprising to overthrow Tsarism. Some groups, however, believed it possible to introduce Socialism without going through capitalism and most of them, including many claiming to be Marxist, rejected the possibility of the workers and peasants being capable of grasping the meaning of Socialism. Lacking the universal suffrage and parliamentary institutions, and without the legal right to form political and trade union organisations, some groups turned in despair to political assassination.

In 1917, beside the Bolsheviks, the principal political parties were the other wing of the RSDLP, the Mensheviks (meaning minority) who believed that Russia must pass through the normal stages of capitalist development and a democratically elected parliament, and the Socialist Revolutionaries, a largely peasant party which stood primarily for the abolition of private property in land and which made use of political assassination as a weapon of struggle.

The organisational principles of the Bolsheviks were elaborated by their leader Lenin in a work *What is to be done?* published in 1902. In it he argued that in all countries “class political consciousness can be brought to the workers *only from without* [Lenin’s emphasis], that is, only from outside the economic struggle, from outside the sphere of relations between workers and employers.” Since for him workers by themselves were unable to go beyond trade union consciousness – incapable of developing “class political consciousness”. Thus, they require “the vanguard of the revolutionary forces” ... “an organization that will consist of professional revolutionaries” ... “the “dozen” tried and talented leaders (and talented men are not born by hundreds) ... “a dozen wise men” ... in a “conspiratorial” ... “strictly secret organization”. (*Lenin, SW. vol. I, Moscow 1967, pp. 163 – 210*). All along Lenin maintained this theory and practice of an elitist, vanguardist, centralist, conspiratorial, strictly secret party class relationship.

In the First World War owing to its weak industrial development Russia could not stand up to the might of more highly industrialised Germany. The hardships imposed on the civilian population and the troops through inadequate transport, defective equipment, scarcity of food and high prices, together with the inefficiency and corruption of the ruling class provoked revolt. There were frequent strikes for higher wages and for the ending of the war, and the mutinies at the front. Soldiers ordered to counter workers sided with them. Crowds attacked the houses of the Tsarist ministers. In this situation the government, in March (February under the old Russian calendar) 1917, ordered the dissolution of the Duma. This body, although elected on a limited franchise from which most workers and peasants remained excluded, declined and decided to carry on. The Tsar then abdicated.

In the confused period which followed the abdication there was first a provisional government formed by Liberals and other capitalist and landowning representatives in the Duma and eventually a government under Kerensky, leader of a group associated with the Socialist Revolutionary party, whose authority rested partly on the committee of the Duma but increasingly on the Committees of Workers and Soldiers (Soviets) which had sprung up all over Russia and which were rapidly pushing the less representative Duma into the background.

While Kerensky's government retained the backing of the Soviets the Bolsheviks were unable to make headway against it, but as the Kerensky government grew more unpopular, because of its efforts to continue the war, one after another of the Soviets elected Bolshevik majorities; and when an All-Russian Soviet Congress met in November 1917 (October under old Russian calendar) a clear majority, 390 out of 676, were Bolshevik delegates, and it passed resolutions in favour of peace, the dispossession of the landowners and the setting up of a temporary 'workers and peasants' government, pending the election of a democratic 'constituent assembly' which was to decide the future constitution. Backed by successful risings in Moscow and other towns the Bolsheviks consolidated their position as the government, made peace with Germany and faced a long period of civil war provoked by reactionary groups which were supported by the British, American and other governments.

The elections to the Russian Constituent Assembly

The elections that were organized as a result of events in the Russian Revolution of 1917 and were held on 25 November 1917 (although some districts had polling on alternate days), around 2 months after they were originally meant to occur. It is generally reckoned as the first truly free election in Russian history. One study gives the following results:

The vote by parties for the whole country

Socialist Revolutionaries	15,848,004
Ukrainian Socialist Revolutionaries	1,286,157
Mensheviks	1,364,826
Constitutional Democrats	1,986,601

Bolsheviks	9,844,637
Others	11,356,651
<i>Total</i>	41,686,876

The dissolution of the Constituent Assembly 1918

One of the Bolshevik government's first actions, a prelude to the ruthless dictatorship that followed, was to dissolve the constituent assembly as soon as it met, in January 1918, because a majority of the delegates there represented parties in opposition to the Bolshevik Party. They gave as their excuse that the voters had changed their views after the elections.

In March 1918 Lenin declared “*unquestioning subordination to a single will* is absolutely necessary for the success of processes organised on the pattern of large-scale machine industry. Today, however, the same revolution demands – precisely in the interest of its development and consolidation, precisely in the interests of socialism – that people *unquestioningly obey the single will* of the leaders of labour.” [Lenin’s italics] – *Lenin, The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government*, SW 2, p. 673

Two years later, at the 9th party congress (Mar 29 to Apr 5, 1920), Lenin derogatorily despised the “still surviving **notorious democratism**” to uphold his vanguardist “democratic centralism” theory whereby he not only imposed dictatorship of his party but also superimposed his “one person rule” over a nomenclatural hierarchy. Lenin's own words in a speech on *Economic Construction* in 1920 were also revealing when he said: 'the Soviet Socialist Democracy is in no way inconsistent with **the rule and dictatorship of one person**; that the will of a class is at times best realised by a dictator, who sometimes will accomplish more by himself and is frequently more needed. At any rate, the principal relation toward **one person rule** was not only explained a long time ago but was also decided by the Central Executive Committee.' – Cited: The *Socialist Standard*, May 2013, p.17 [emphasis added]; Also see Lenin, *Selected Works* (1st Russian ed.); Vol. XVII, p. 89; quoted in Martov, *The State and the Socialist Revolution* (New York, 1938), p. 31.

Twenty-one conditions

There were the Draconian conditions, officially the Conditions of Admission to the Communist International which refer to the conditions, most of which were suggested by Lenin, to the adherence of the communist parties to the Third International (Comintern, founded at a Congress held in Moscow March 2–6, 1919, officially dissolved by Joseph Stalin in 1943). The conditions were formally adopted by the Second Congress of the Comintern, July 19 to August 7, 1920. The conditions were devised to keep the affiliated ‘communist’ parties subservient to the Russian national interest by wiping off any traces of democracy in mutual relations.

Kronstadt 1921

Finally, the last nail of Leninist dictatorship over the coffin of democracy was fastened at Kronstadt. The *Kronstadt Revolt* began on 28 February 1921. The naval squadron stationed at Kronstadt outside

Petrograd – “the pride and glory” – of “the Russian Revolution” since March 1917, which supplied contingents to every fighting front during the civil war – was eventually *gagged* and *dragged* to a “rebellion” against: “the new Communist slavery” ... “the bureaucratic trade unions” and the oppression of peasants, and for election of Soviets. (Cited by M. Dobb, *Soviet Economic Development Since 1917*, pp. 119-120). [Also, see E. H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution*, 2, p. 271-2 and the footnote thereat.] Lenin’s calumny against the Kronstadters and Trotsky’s ignominious order to the Red Army to “shoot them down like partridges” culminated in the massacre of some 18000 workers, soldiers and sailors.

The Peace

The Bolsheviks had campaigned under the slogan "Peace, Bread and Land." Immediately on gaining power they persuaded the second All-Russia Soviet Congress to adopt a decree on peace drafted by the Bolshevik leader, Lenin. It invited the peoples and governments of the nations at war to begin negotiations at once for peace 'without annexations and indemnities' and to conclude an immediate armistice.

The appeal met with some response from sections of the working class in various countries but was ignored by the governments with which Russia had been allied. Thereupon the Russian government entered into separate negotiations with Germany and its allies. The German authorities imposed harsh armistice terms, including the continued occupation of large territories that had been part of Tsarist Russia. Many members of the Bolshevik party wanted to reject the terms and advocated the waging of a 'revolutionary war'. Lenin understood that Russia was in no position to wage such a war. So he declared: "It is a question of signing the terms now or signing the death sentence of the Soviet Government three weeks later" and eventually won over the Central Committee of the Party to his point of view.

At the seizure of power the Bolsheviks had been opposed by the Mensheviks and the majority of the Socialist Revolutionaries. A minority of the Socialist Revolutionaries, however, gave the Bolsheviks their support and was at first represented in the first government. They resigned over disagreement about accepting the harsh German terms to end the war and over the government's policy of subordinating the trade unions.

Marxism-Leninism?

From the middle of 1918 the Bolshevik government began arresting the Menshevik and Socialist Revolutionary leaders, expelling their delegates from the Soviets and driving the parties underground. By 1922 the Communist Party was the sole legal political party in Russia.

The Communist Party’s seizure of power in 1917 started the three quarters of a century long Communist Party rule over Russia. They claimed that their coup would lead to the speedy establishment of Socialism there and in the rest of the world, and that other countries should follow their example. They went on propagating this by feeding the world with blatant lies and publishing and distributing heavily subsidized fatefully distorted Collected Works of Marx and Engels to lay a Marxian layer over those of Lenin. Stalin baptized this dogma Marxism-Leninism. However,

Marxism-Leninism is an oxymoron. In fact Marxism and Leninism are poles apart.

As a Marxist organization, as the agent of change, the Socialist Party of Great Britain rejected the Communists' claim and showed at the time that it was based on wrong theory and was incapable of succeeding.

The wrong means must inevitably lead to wrong ends

There were various proponents on the methods needed to reach Socialism. There were those who held to parliamentary action and those who opposed it; those who advocated physical force or the general strike for the conquest of power; those who thought in terms of minority movements and those who relied on democratic methods; those who believed that Socialism could be built up gradually within the capitalist framework.

No socialism without socialists

What's more, the necessary development of the means of production to a stage at which Socialism is economically possible, the other necessary pre-requisite of Socialism is the existence of a majority which understands and wants Socialism and is determined to achieve it.

This condition did not exist in the Communist Party-controlled countries. Socialism cannot be marshaled in gradually by the assorted Leftists or imposed by a Communist Party dictatorship.

Both groups claimed to have found the shortcut road to Socialism and both rejected the Socialist Party of Great Britain's principle that the vital task was to win over the working class to an understanding of Socialism. While the 'gradualists' were promising that with Labour government Socialism would come in "like a thief in the night", Lenin was making the exaggerated declaration that "If Socialism can only be realised when the intellectual development of all the people permits it, then we shall not see Socialism for at least five hundred years". (From a speech at the Peasants' Congress in 1918, reported by John Reed in *Ten Days that Shook the World*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, p-240). The irony of the claim is that, on the contrary, Lenin and his coterie have forced us see capitalism doing business further over one hundred years more.

Lenin's socialism

In the *State and Revolution* written in August-September 1917, Lenin shrewdly devised a trick, an arbitrary "scientific distinction" between 'socialism' and 'communism' whereas for Marx and Engels as also us the two terms are synonymous meaning post capitalist participatory democratic administration of the means of production and distribution held in common. However, Lenin proceeded with his 'distinction' to define his 'socialism': "socialism is merely state-capitalist monopoly which is made to serve the interests of the whole people and has to that extent ceased to be capitalist monopoly." [Lenin's emphasis] – *Lenin, Impending Catastrophe and How to Combat It*, written September 10-14, 1917, Selected Works, Vol. 2, p. 247

Rubbish. You could never lead capitalism, whatever the form – individual, joint-stock, state, or

corporation all being essentially private – “*to serve the interests of the whole people*”. Capitalism works objectively to serve the interests of the capitalist class against the interests of working class. Lenin’s definition threw overboard one of the basic principles of Marxism – the theory of surplus value. Every class conscious worker knows capitalism means profit production via wages slavery, if capital exists so exists wages slavery. Thus socialism is the negation of capitalism. But classified wages slavery remained intact in Russia.

You know, falsehood, regimentation and coercion cannot withstand the test of time. The vindictive dictatorships of Russia and her satellite police states in Eastern Europe met with their ignominious demise by 1990.

Once Engels observed

“The worst thing that can befall a leader of an extreme party is to be compelled to take over a government in an epoch when the movement is not yet ripe for the domination of the class which he represents and for the realisation of the measures which that domination would imply. What he *can* do depends not upon his will but upon the sharpness of the clash of interests between the various classes, and upon the degree of development of the material means of existence, the relations of production and means of communication upon which the clash of interests of the classes is based every time. What he *ought* to do, what his party demands of him, again depends not upon him, or upon the degree of development of the class struggle and its conditions. He is bound to his doctrines and the demands hitherto propounded which do not emanate from the interrelations of the social classes at a given moment, or from the more or less accidental level of relations of production and means of communication, but from his more or less penetrating insight into the general result of the social and political movement. Thus he necessarily finds himself in a dilemma. What he *can* do is in contrast to all his actions as hitherto practised, to all his principles and to the present interests of his party; what he *ought* to do cannot be achieved. In a word, he is compelled to represent not his party or his class, but the class for whom conditions are ripe for domination. In the interests of the movement itself, he is compelled to defend the interests of an alien class, and to feed his own class with phrases and promises, with the assertion that the interests of that alien class are their own interests. Whoever puts himself in this awkward position is irrevocably lost.” – Engels, *The Peasant War in Germany*, Ch – 6, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1850/peasant-war-germany/ch06.htm>

As if Engels foresaw Lenin’s dilemma some seven decades before occurrence!

What the Socialist Party of Great Britain said about the Russian Revolution:

In order to place in proper historical perspective what is written here about the seizure of power by the Russian Communist Party in 1917, and about subsequent developments in Russia, we reproduce brief extracts from articles published in our official journal, THE SOCIALIST STANDARD, in the period 1918-24.

August 1918 `the Revolution in Russia –Where it Fails'.

`Is this huge mass of people, numbering about 160,000,000 and spread over eight and a half millions

of square miles, ready for Socialism? Are the hunters of the North, the struggling peasant proprietors of the South, the agricultural wage slaves of the Central Provinces, and the industrial wage slaves of the towns convinced of the necessity, and equipped with the knowledge requisite, for the establishment of the social ownership of the means of life? Unless a mental revolution such as the world has never seen before has taken place, or an economic change has occurred immensely more rapidly than history has recorded, the answer is "No!"

What justification is there, then, for terming the upheaval in Russia a Socialist Revolution? None whatever beyond the fact that the leaders in the November movement claim to be Marxian Socialists.'

July 1920 `A Socialist View of Bolshevik Policy'.

`We have often stated that because of a large anti-Socialist peasantry and vast untrained population, Russia was a long way from Socialism. Lenin has now to admit this by saying: "Reality says that State Capitalism would be a step forward for us; if we are able to bring about State Capitalism in a short time it would be a victory for us. How could they be so blind as to see that our enemy is the small capitalist, the small owner? How could they see the chief enemy in State Capitalism? In the transition period from Capitalism to Socialism our chief enemy is the small bourgeoisie, with its economic customs, habits and position." (*The Chief Tasks of our Times* by Lenin, page 11).

Here we have plain admissions of the unripeness of the great mass of Russian people for Socialism and the small scale of Russian production. If we are to copy Bolshevik policy in other countries we should have to demand State Capitalism, which is not a step to socialism in the advanced capitalist countries. The fact remains, as Lenin is driven to confess, that we do not have to learn from Russia, but Russia has to learn from lands where large scale production is dominant.'

March 1924 `The Passing of Lenin.'

`Despite his claims at the beginning, he was the first to see the trend of conditions and adapt himself to these conditions. So far was he from "changing the course of history"... that it was the course of history which changed him, drove him from one point to another till today Russia stands half-way on the road to capitalism. The Communists, in their ignorance, may howl at this, but Russia cannot escape her destiny. As Marx says:

"One nation can and should learn from others. And even when a society has got upon the right track for the discovery of the natural laws of its movement – and it is the ultimate aim of this work, to lay bare the economic law of modern society – it can neither clear by bold leaps, nor remove by legal enactments, the obstacles offered by the successive phases of its normal development. But it can shorten and lessen the birth-pangs." (Preface to *Capital*, Vol. I, by Karl Marx.)

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June 16, 2017

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