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When the working class took power

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The October Revolution – When the working class took power

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The capitalist media have made little comment on the 90th anniversary of the 1917 October Revolution in Russia. Yet on the 80th anniversary in 1997, capitalist commentators and historians produced books and articles seeking to denigrate revolutions in general and the Russian Revolution in particular. This year, just one such book by Robert V. Daniels: *The Rise and Fall of Communism in Russia* has so far been published. Peter Taaffe looks at the events of the October revolution and asks: does this comparative silence have something to do with the changed background to discussion about the events of October 1917?

Unlike ten years ago, a kaleidoscope of ‘colour’ or ‘flower’ revolutions in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, and now the ‘saffron’ revolution in Burma, have broken out.

These ‘revolutions’ are acceptable to representatives of the possessing classes because they have not challenged the foundations of capitalist rule but, if anything, have sought to consolidate and ‘perfect’ them.

The October 1917 Russian Revolution by contrast instituted for the first time working-class power. As tsarist General Zalesky, speaking for the ‘dispossessed’ capitalists and landlords, said when he mournfully surveyed the Russian Revolution:

“Who would believe that the janitor or watchman of the Court building would suddenly become Chief Justice of the Court of Appeals, or the hospital orderly manager of the hospital, the barber a big functionary, yesterday’s ensign [junior military officer] the commander-in-chief, yesterday’s lackey or common labourer burgomaster, yesterday’s train oiler

chief of division or station superintendent, yesterday’s locksmith head of the factory?”

But that was precisely what Russia became after the Bolsheviks led the Russian masses to overthrow the landlord and capitalist system, crowned by the tsarist dictatorship, that was a torture chamber for the mass of the people. Moreover, only in Russia, following the October overturn, did the workers take power and establish real workers’ democracy.

In the last 90 years there have been many opportunities for the working class to follow the path of the Russian workers of 1917. Robert V. Daniels argues falsely that revolutions are a product of “underdeveloped” societies in the first stages of industrialisation.

Yet, in the post-second world war period, a revolutionary wave even greater than that following the Russian Revolution swept Western Europe – in Italy, in France, even in Britain, where troops voted Labour en masse because they were determined to end the mass unemployment and poverty of the interwar years.

In 1968, in France, there was a general strike of ten million workers, the greatest in history. They occupied the factories and reached out for power but were blocked by the leaders of their own organisations, the Communist Party, trade union and ‘socialist’ leaders.

In the Portuguese Revolution of 1974, the capitalist state disintegrated. The great majority of Portugal’s officer caste was enormously radicalised, moving in the direction of socialism, (in Russia, the officers remained implacably hostile, in the main, to the revolution).

In all these cases, the revolutionary process took place in Europe, in ‘developed’ advanced industrial countries. Revolution, a social overturn, unfolds when there is no other way out. Before this, the masses advance and retreat several times before they believe it is necessary to undertake the ‘final assault’. This is how the Russian Revolution developed over nine months, through different phases of revolution and counter-revolution.

The July Days prepared the ground for the counter-revolution’s offensive, with its brutal hounding of the Bolsheviks and massive slander. This culminated in tsarist General Kornilov’s attempt, under the cover of the Kerensky coalition, to drown the revolution in blood with a march on Petrograd.

The Menshevik/Social Revolutionary coalition government was suspended in mid-air as the masses themselves, under the leadership of the Bolsheviks – some of them released from jail like Trotsky to defend Petrograd – smashed Kornilov’s coup.

Similarly, when General Spínola attempted to derail the revolution in Portugal by seizing power in March 1975, the Portuguese working

class, emulating the actions of their brothers and sisters 58 years before – without knowing it – completely undermined Spínola’s forces. Workers’ fraternisation tactics even won over Spínola’s special battalions of paratroopers. This in turn propelled the revolution forward, resulting in 70% of industry being taken over.

Kornilov’s defeat in 1917, however, did not result in a similar outcome because of the Mensheviks’ and Social Revolutionaries’ hostility to the idea of taking power and establishing a socialist regime.

A revolution is not the product of a handful of individuals proceeding to stage a ‘coup’, as capitalist historians argue. Daniels’ book implies that the October Revolution could have been prevented: “The moderate soviet leaders could have forestalled the Bolshevik demand for ‘All power to the soviets’ only by taking full power themselves.”

He cites another historian: “If Kerensky had made immediate peace and given all land to the peasants, it is possible that Lenin would never have come to the Kremlin. Such a programme, of course, was Bolshevism in 1917. Its rejection by the moderate elements assured the triumph of their opponents.”

But these ‘moderates’, tied hand and foot to capitalism and landlordism, could not carry out this programme. Thoroughgoing land reform met the resistance of the landlords and the capitalists, who were very often one and the same, united through bank capital.

The agricultural revolution in Russia – one of the tasks of the capitalist-democratic revolution – could only be implemented by a workers and peasants’ government coming to power. The Bolsheviks, and only the Bolshe-

viks, worked for this throughout the tumultuous events of 1917.

Initially, the masses were confused and hostile to the Bolsheviks' ideas. In July, when the Bolsheviks were persecuted and driven underground, the Donetz miners, then under the influence of the compromising Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries, took an oath at a gathering of 5,000 people reading: "We swear by our children, by God... that we will never relinquish the freedom bought with blood on 28 February 1917... we will never listen to the Leninists [who] are leading Russia to ruin, whereas the Social Revolutionaries and Mensheviks say: 'The land to the people, land without indemnities; the capitalist structure must fall after the war and in place of capitalism there must be a socialist structure'."

As Trotsky commented, this oath directed against the Bolsheviks in reality led straight to the Bolshevik revolution. They were the only ones who could give land, peace, bread and freedom. Their opponents were tied to the system that was incapable of delivering this to them.

Slowly, as the masses saw and understood what the Bolsheviks stood for, hostility to their policies was remoulded into deep, implacable support. One soldier in the Moscow garrison said: "After the attempt of Kornilov, all the troops acquired a Bolshevik colour... All were struck by the way in which the statement (of the Bolsheviks) came true... that General Kornilov would soon be at the gates of Petrograd."

Growth of Bolsheviks

The Bolsheviks grew massively in August and September. The masses "drink up the Bolshevik slogans just as naturally as they breathe air". Conversely, the Social Revolutionaries and Mensheviks collapsed; the former from 375,000 votes in elections to the Moscow Duma in June to only 54,000 in September.

The Petrograd garrison boasted 90% for the Bolsheviks, in some detachments over 95%. In the shop and factory committees, the same process was clear. At the beginning of the revolution in February, the Bolsheviks were a small minority with 1% or 2% in the soviets and only 4% when Lenin returned to Russia in April 1917.

At that stage, Lenin declared: "We must base ourselves only upon the consciousness of the masses. Even if it is necessary to remain in a minority, so be it ... We will carry on the work of criticism in order to free the masses from deceit. Our line will prove right. All the oppressed will come to us. They have no other way out." And so it proved in the tumultuous months following Kornilov's defeat.

Revolution is a process, which Daniels points out, "develops over a period of years, through discernible stages". This description, generally correct in its time-scale, did not apply to Russia because the urgency of ending the slaughter of the first world war gave the revolution its concentrated character and high tempo.

But revolutions, ultimately, arrive at decisive moments when power is posed. If the oppressed masses do not seize the opportunity, then a downswing occurs where the former exploiters seek to take back the revolution's gains through counter-revolution.

Sometimes this assumes a bloody character, as it did after the defeat of the 1925-27 revolution in China, in the bloody terror of Chiang Kai-shek's Guomindang and the murder, rape and brutality of invading imperialist armies like the Japanese.

Undoubtedly, if the working class had not taken power, then a new Kornilov and a reign of terror, not the 'tranquil' humane capitalist democracy dreamed of by capitalist professors, would have ensued. But a revolution is determined by the whole preceding period and the existence of certain prerequisites. In Russia, the ruling classes – the nobility, monarchy, bureaucracy and the politically weak capitalists, with no real roots in the mass of the people – were rotting away.

The oppressed nationalities' demands for freedom were denied by the compromisers. The revolt of the peasantry and the demand for the land was widespread. 77% of the peasant departments were in revolt that autumn. The working class – concentrated in big factories and a dynamic force – felt that they "could no longer live like this". This was undoubtedly the mood in autumn 1917.

These conditions may exist, yet a revolutionary opportunity can still be missed through faulty leadership. History shows this, both before 1917 and since. Friedrich Engels, co-founder of the ideas of scientific socialism with Karl Marx, pointed out that there can be periods in the life of society when 20 years is like one day and then there can be one day when the events of 20 years are concentrated.

Broadly speaking, this is what characterises a revolutionary period. Lenin, in urging the Bolshevik party to lead the revolution, wrote from the Finnish underground where murder threats

had driven him after the July days, that the fate of Russia could be decided in two or three days.

In reality, the possibility of the working class and poor peasants taking power lasted only two or three months, probably in September and October. Immediately before the October overturn, the masses in Petrograd and elsewhere were becoming impatient, muttering that perhaps the Bolsheviks were like other parties, would dither and not take power. To the left of the Bolsheviks, the anarchists began to grow.

Fearful that the Bolsheviks could miss the opportunity and, from exile, fearing that even the soviets had degenerated under Menshevik and Social Revolutionary influence, Lenin urged the Bolshevik party to take power, basing itself on the more representative shop stewards and factory committees.

Trotsky, present in Petrograd, was more in touch with the colossal changes being wrought in the soviets. The 'parent' of all Russia's soviets, the Petrograd soviet, swung decisively towards the Bolsheviks. Meanwhile, Kerensky's coalition government sought to move the most revolutionary battalions of soldiers out of Petrograd, obviously in preparation for a march on 'Bolshevik' Petrograd.

To counter this the Petrograd soviet, which had installed Trotsky as its chairman in September, organised a Military Revolutionary Committee to defend the revolution's gains. This body carried through the October insurrection. For this to be achieved, it needed the existence of the 'subjective factor', the Bolshevik party. The existence of this party led to the successful October Revolution.

International impact

Daniels argues that the Bolsheviks failed in their ‘internationalist’ perspective: “Despite the high hopes of 1919, world revolution failed to materialise.” On the contrary, the October Revolution initiated the ‘Ten Days that Shook the World’. Lenin and Trotsky saw the Russian Revolution as the impetus to a European and world revolution.

There were revolutions in Germany in 1918, in Hungary in 1919 and a series of upheavals which, if the working class of the rest of Europe had possessed a leadership like the Bolsheviks, would have completely transformed the situation in Europe and the world, and with it changed history.

The role of a mass party cannot be separated from the process of revolution. It is like the forceps for an obstetrician at a difficult birth. Without this, revolutions can and have resulted in abortions.

Despite abundant revolutionary opportunities in the 20th century and in this one (Nepal, for instance), only in Russia did the working class directly take power and establish – for a short time (1917-23), it is true – workers’ democracy. This meant the election of all officials, the right of recall, no official to receive more than the average worker, etc.

Because of the blight of totalitarian Stalinism, the atrophy and collapse of the old working class organisations - the social democracy and communist parties - and their hollowing out into empty bureaucratic machines, new generations of young people and workers tend to reject the idea of ‘parties’ and even organisation.

Yet, without the lever of a mass party with a farsighted revolutionary leadership, history shows that a revolutionary opportunity can be squandered with terrible consequences for the masses. The lesson of the Russian Revolution is that a party is required but one that bases itself on politically aware workers with their conscious control, democracy and influence reflected at all levels.

The same applies to the kind of state needed in transition from capitalism to socialism. Daniels writes: “Every great revolution has ended in some sort of dictatorship.” So it has been, so it will be in the future, he implies. Entirely discounted are the objective realities confronting revolutions up to now.

For instance, the great 18th century French Revolution took place in a state with a higher economic and cultural level than those surrounding it. Mortally afraid that they would meet the same fate as France’s royalty and aristocracy, feudal Europe, together with the British capitalists, ganged up against revolutionary France. This was one factor leading the revolution from the extreme democracy of the sans culottes through stages to Bonaparte’s dictatorship.

The Russian Revolution, the greatest single event in human history, was carried through on the basis of the most democratic organisations of the working class, the soviets (workers’ committees) and of the most democratic workers’ state ever seen.

It degenerated not because Stalinism was inherent in Marxism-Leninism, as Daniels and others imply, but because of the Russian Revolution’s isolation. Lenin and Trotsky never perceived it possible to establish socialism in isolation in such an economically and

culturally backward society. Only the triumph of the European revolution would have guaranteed the maintenance and extension of the democracy from the outset, through the construction of a European socialist united states.

Instead, the young workers' state was confronted with civil war, as the dispossessed landlords and capitalists collaborated with 21 armies of imperialism to try to destroy this state. At one stage, the revolution was confined to two cities, Petrograd and Moscow. The rest of Russia was in the hands of landlord-capitalist reaction.

However, the revolution's class and internationalist appeal ultimately led to victory, which would have been impossible without the mass support of the European and world-wide working class.

Daniels' arguments about Bolshevism's inherent dictatorial character during the civil war are bogus. He indicts the Bolsheviks for banning parties opposed to them. He leaves out one small detail. All these parties except for the fascistic, right-wing reactionary Black Hundreds, were allowed to exist in the first stage after the revolution. Only when they took up arms, resorted to the methods of civil war, did the Bolsheviks take action.

How did Abraham Lincoln act towards the slaveholders during the American Civil War? Did he allow their representatives to function in areas controlled by the Union? Did Oliver Cromwell and the parliamentary forces in the English Civil War let King Charles I's forces operate in their areas?

Merely posing the question shows how absurd and abstract is 'democracy' for the exploiters in a civil war, a war between the classes. Such

methods, however, would not be necessary when a revolution develops in an advanced industrial country, which will inevitably spread internationally. There are now convulsions on the world financial markets - a harbinger of coming economic recession.

Much as some sneer at the prospect of revolution in the modern era, these convulsions, together with massive 'unfortunate' social eruptions (which they freely describe as 'revolutions' when they are on capitalism's 'periphery'), will become a reality in the 21st century in the 'advanced' societies as well.