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Moscow workers revolt against Bolsheviks

Anarchist Federation (of Britain)

July 2001

The food shortages in Bolshevik-controlled Moscow in 1921, including staples like bread, ignited a whole set of demands amongst the working class. From January this discontent was voiced through mass meetings in plants and factories. Bolshevik repression was denounced and the call for free labour as opposed to militarised labour was raised. When Bolsheviks at meetings suggested that the discontent was just about “stomachs” they were shouted down.

The Bolsheviks responded with increased repression, unleashing the Cheka, the secret police. But it was the Moscow Cheka who had been one of the causes of the discontent. Between December 1918 and November 1920 they had shot 578 people, and arrested 40,000, 6 per cent of the adult city population. They shot 345 people from January-May 1920 and liquidated their stock with shootings of 2–3000 prisoners just before this.

Most of the arrests were of juveniles, forced to steal food and these were imprisoned in appalling conditions.

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Strikes broke out and the metalworkers led the way. Denouncing the regime in a conference they held in February, denouncing the issue of special ration privileges to 10,000 top Bolshevik Party leaders.

Street demonstrations began, kicked off by a strike at the Vtorov money printing works. The soldiers called in refused to fire, and special armed Bolshevik detachments (ChON) shot at the striking workers killing and injuring several¹. That evening mass meetings took place on the railways, at the women's higher education institute and at the university. Several factories struck the next day. 1500 people demonstrated and tried to call out the soldiers. These were disarmed by the Bolsheviks and locked in their barracks. All Moscow's Bolsheviks were mobilised and armed. These fired on the crowd.

A demonstration on February 23 brought out 10,000 workers, where speakers made strong criticisms of the Bolsheviks. That day Moscow was placed under martial law with a 24-hour watch on factories by the ChON. Strikes had been accompanied by go-slows and calls on Bolshevik deputies to the soviets to be recalled. The Bolsheviks now made wide-scale arrests and some of these were among the 300 socialists beaten in prison by the Cheka on the night of April-25-26. Disturbances and unrest continued into March but the movement had been defeated. It was to herald the Kronstadt uprising against the Bolsheviks later in the year and showed the anti-working class and counter-revolutionary nature of the Bolsheviks.

¹ Lenin reporting to the Moscow Soviet (Feb 27) lied about this saying that *"What did happen was that a gun went off in the hands of an agent provocateur, resulting in the death of a Communist. This was the only casualty during these rather unfortunate days."*