Anarcho
1905
July 16, 2008

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Overview of the 1905 Russian revolution, plus an analysis of why Rosa Luxemburg's account of the mass strike is wrong about anarchism.

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Today's Marxists, like Luxemburg, simply regurgitate Engels' inaccurate diatribe without bothering to see what anarchism actually argues for. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given that the 1905 revolution confirmed anarchist theory just as much as, say, the one in 1917 or the descent of Social Democracy into reformism. And perhaps it is the fact that the anarchist analysis has been confirmed time and again (usually at the expense of Marxism) is why Marxists so regularly distort our ideas?

One last thing. The Russian anarchists were badly organised and simply not up to the task of influencing the mass strike movement in 1905. Instead the socialist parties (primarily the Mensheviks) took the lead and, consequently, lumbered the movement with Marxist dogmas (like the idea that the workers had to aid the bourgeois in creating a capitalist republic or that political action was the means of emancipation). It is fair to say that faced with a mass protest movement today, the British anarchist movement would be hard pressed to influence it even as it was applying libertarian ideas in practice. That situation needs to change. There is little point in being theoretically right when you cannot apply those ideas in practice.

This January marked the 100th anniversary of the Russian Revolution of 1905. The revolt started on January 22 when a peaceful, mildly reformist, protest march in St. Petersburg was shoot at by troops with more than 1,000 killed or injured. This day became known as "Bloody Sunday." Rather than squelch the protests, the repression fanned the flames of rebellion.

All across Russia, different sections of the people moved into active protest. The peasants and workers joined with the middle classes, intelligentsia and (minority) national groups against the absolutism and oppression of the Tzarist monarchy. Each class had different aims however. However, the two forces which played the leading part in the revolution were the workers and peasants, who raised economic and political demands while the middle-classes sought mostly the latter.

Unrest was spread as the year progressed, reaching peaks in early summer and autumn before climaxing in October. There were naval mutinies at Sevastopol, Vladivostok and Kronstadt, peaking in June, with the mutiny aboard the *Battleship Potemkin*. Strikes took place all over the country and the universities closed down when the whole student body complained about the lack of civil liberties by staging a walkout. Lawyers, doctor, engineers, and other middle-class workers established the Union of Unions and demanded a constituent assembly.

In the countryside, there were land-seizures by the peasantry (including the looting the larger estates) and a nation-wide Peasant Union was created. In the towns, the workers act of resistance was the strike. There was a general strike in St. Petersburg immediately after Bloody Sunday. Over 400,000 workers were involved by the end of January. The strikes spread across the country and continued throughout the year. In the process new forms of working class self-organisation were created. These were councils made up of workers delegate, the famous "soviets."

While the soviets were created by workers to solve their immediate problems (for example winning the strike, the eight-hour

day, working conditions) their role changed. They quickly evolved into an organ of the general and political representation of workers, raising political demands. Needless to say, their potential as a base for political agitation were immediately recognised be revolutionaries, and although they were not involved in the early stages both the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks attempted to gain influence in them. However, as Kropotkin put it, the general strike was the key development as *"the working men again threw the weight of their will into the contest and gave quite a new turn to the movement. A strike of bakers broke out at Moscow in October, and they were joined in their strike by the printers. This was not the work of any revolutionary organisation. It was entirely a working men's affair, but suddenly what was meant to be a simple manifestation of economical discontent grew up, invaded all trades, spread to St. Petersburg, then all over Russia, and took the character of such an imposing revolutionary manifestation that autocracy had to capitulate before it."*

The first soviet (which is Russian for council) was established in Ivanovna-Voznesensk during the 1905 Textile Strike. It began as a strike committee but developed into an elected body of the town's workers. Over the next few months Soviets of Workers Deputies were established in around 60 different towns. On October 13th, the more famous St. Petersburg Soviet of Workers' Deputies was created out of the 'Great October Strike' on the initiative of the printers' strike committee in order to better co-ordinate the strike.

This was Russia's first political general strike, lasting from September to October 30th. Although strikes had been common in Russia in the years leading up to 1905, this powerful weapon of direct action effectively paralysed the whole country. The October strike started in St. Petersburg and quickly spread to Moscow and soon the railwaymen strike paralysed the whole Russian railway network. *"A new weapon, more terrible than street warfare, had thus been tested and proved to work admirably,"* observed Kropotkin.

The soviets had challenged the power of Nicholas II and the general strike forced him to issue the October Manifesto, with its

Unsurprisingly, few Leninists mention the Bolshevik hostility to the soviets (at best, only in passing). Perhaps because the fundamentally anti-democratic and elitist perspective it portrayed came to the fore after the Bolsheviks had seized power in 1917 for, in 1918, the *"strong party"* did indeed make the soviets *"superfluous"* — by systematically disbanding any soviet elected with a non-Bolshevik majority.

Conclusion

Given the Bolshevik failure in 1905, perhaps it is unsurprising that Leninists rewrite the history on it. Trotsky, for example while admitting that the Bolsheviks *"adjusted themselves more slowly to the sweep of the movement"* and that the Mensheviks *"were preponderant in the Soviet,"* tries to save vanguardism by asserting that *"the general direction of the Soviet's policy proceeded in the main along Bolshevik lines."* Ironically he mocks the claims of Stalinists that Stalin had *"isolated the Mensheviks from the masses"* by noting that the *"figures hardly bear [the claims] out."*

For all the Leninist accounts of the 1905 revolution claiming it for their ideology, the facts suggest that it was anarchism, not Marxism, which was vindicated by it. Luxemburg was wrong. The *"land of Bakunin's birth"* provided an unsurpassed example of how to make a revolution precisely because it applied (and confirmed) anarchist ideas on the general strike and workers' councils. Marxists (who had previously quoted Engels to dismiss such things) found themselves repudiating aspect upon aspect of their dogma to remain relevant. When Rosa Luxemburg tried to learn the lessons of the revolt, her more orthodox opponents simply quoted Engels back. This required her, like Engels, to grossly distort anarchist ideas to make acceptable to Social Democracy. In 1917, Lenin did the same in **"State and Revolution."**

The Bolsheviks

While Leninists have been analysing the 1905 revolution, its soviets and general strike in some detail, one aspect of the revolution fails to be discussed in such detail. This is the Bolshevik hostility to the soviets and the fact that it was the Mensheviks who took the lead in supporting them and, ultimately, gained the upper hand in them.

Indeed, if the Bolsheviks had got their way the soviets of 1905 would have been a mere blip in the struggle. Opposing them because the soviets pushed aside the party committee and thus led to the *"subordination of consciousness to spontaneity,"* the Bolsheviks argued that *"only a strong party along class lines can guide the proletarian political movement and preserve the integrity of its program, rather than a political mixture of this kind, an indeterminate and vacillating political organisation such as the workers council represents and cannot help but represent."* Thus the soviets could not reflect workers' interests because they were elected by the workers!

The Bolsheviks gave the soviets an ultimatum: accept the programme and leadership of the Bolsheviks and then disband as being irrelevant! The soviets ignored them. This Bolshevik assault on the soviets occurred across the country. Thus the underlying logic of Lenin's vanguardism ensured that the Bolsheviks played a negative role with regards the soviets which, combined with "democratic centralism" ensured that it was spread far and wide. Only by ignoring their own party's principles and staying in the Soviet did rank and file Bolsheviks play a positive role in the revolution. This divergence of top and bottom would be repeated in 1917.

Lenin, to his credit, opposed this once he returned from exile. However, he did so only to gain influence for his party. In 1907 he concluded that while the party could *"utilise"* the soviets *"for the purpose of developing the Social-Democratic movement,"* the party *"must bear in mind that if Social-Democratic activities among the proletarian masses are properly, effectively and widely organised, such institutions may actually become superfluous."*

parliament, freedom of the press, assembly and association. They failed to remove him from power and he quickly reneged on his promises. By December, Trotsky and the rest of the executive committee of the St. Petersburg Soviet were arrested (a Bolshevik putsch in Moscow that month failed as it was disorganised and uncoordinated). The revolt was over. Tsarism was to remain in power until February 1917 when a similar wave of mass protests finally drove it from power.

Anarchism, Marxism and 1905

On the face of it, the 1905 Russian Revolution was a striking confirmation of key anarchist ideas. The use of direct action, the general strike, the creation of organs of working class self-management in the form of soviets were all practical examples of what anarchists had been arguing for decades. While the actual numbers of anarchists involved was small, the events themselves were a spontaneous confirmation of anarchist theory.

Unsurprisingly, Marxists disagree. Rather than confirm anarchist ideas, they stress the opposite. To see whether this is true or not, we need to look at what anarchists had to say about the general strike and the soviets. Once we do, we discover that 1905 had far more in common with anarchism than Marxism. Moreover, as well as confirming anarchist ideas it was only the anarchists who drew the correct conclusions from it, conclusions which Marxists only came to in 1917.

The General Strike

The anarchists embraced the general strikes in Russia as a confirmation of their long held ideas on revolutionary change. Marxists had

a harder task as such ideas were alien to mainstream Social Democracy. Yet faced with the success and power of a general strike, the more radical Marxists (like Rosa Luxemburg) had to incorporate it into their politics.

Yet they faced a problem. The general strike was indelibly linked with such hearsays as anarchism and syndicalism. Had not Engels himself proclaimed the nonsense of the general strike in his (diatribe) *"The Bakuninists at work"*? Had his words not been repeated ad infinitum against anarchists (and radical socialists) who questioned the wisdom of social democratic tactics, its reformism and bureaucratic inertia?

The Marxist radicals knew that Engels would again be invoked to throw cold water over any attempt to adjust Social Democracy politics to the economic power of the masses as expressed in mass strikes. The Social Democratic hierarchy would simply dismiss them as "anarchists." This meant that Luxemburg was faced with the problem of proving Engels was right, even when he was wrong.

She did so in an ingenious way. Like Engels himself, she simply distorted what the anarchists thought about the general strike in order to make it acceptable to Social Democracy. Her argument was simple. Yes, Engels had been right to dismiss the "general strike" idea of the anarchists in the 1870s. But today, thirty years later, Social Democrats should support the general strike (or mass strike, as she called it) because the concepts were different. The anarchist "general strike" was utopian. The Marxist "mass strike" was practical.

To discover why, we need to see what Engels had argued in the 1870s. Engels, mocked the anarchists (or "Bakuninists") for thinking *that "a general strike is the lever employed by which the social revolution is started."* He accusing them of imagining that *"one fine morning, all the workers in all the industries of a country, or even of the whole world, stop work, thus forcing the propertied classes either humbly to submit within four weeks at most, or to attack the work-*

the conquest of state power by means of a bourgeois republic by universal suffrage. At best, Marxists argued that an insurrection to create a republic was acceptable. Faced with the soviets, while seeing them as some sort of trade union body, no Marxist theoretician argued that they could provide the framework of a socialist society.

This can be seen from Lenin. When the anarchists applied to November 1905 to the Executive Committee of the Soviet to be represented along the socialist parties, they were rejected. The EC argued *that "in the whole of international practice, congresses and socialist conferences have never included representatives of the anarchists, since they do not recognise the political struggle as a means for the achievement of their ideals"* and because *"only parties can be represented, and the anarchists are not a party."* Lenin considered this *"to be in the highest degree correct."* However, *"if we were to regard the Soviet of Workers' Deputies as a workers' parliament or as an organ of proletarian self-government, then of course it would have been wrong to reject the application of the anarchists."* For Lenin, the soviet *"is not a labour parliament and not an organ of proletarian self-government, nor an organ of self-government at all, but a fighting organisation for the achievement of definite aims."*

Clearly, the development of the soviets were a striking confirmation of anarchist theory on revolution. It was twelve years later that Marxists came to the same conclusion anarchists had reached in the 1860s and had seen confirmed by the 1905 Russian Revolution — but with significant (and fatal) differences. Rather than see them as organs of popular democracy, the Marxists saw them simply as a stepping stone to party power. This perspective was evident in 1905.

This aspect of the revolution also confirmed anarchist ideas. Since the 1860s Bakunin had argued that *"the Alliance of all labour associations"* would *"constitute the Commune."* The *"Revolutionary Communal Council"* would be made up of *"delegates ... invested will binding mandates and accountable and revocable at all times."* These would federate by *"delegat[ing] deputies to an agreed place of assembly (all ... invested will binding mandated and accountable and subject to recall), in order to found the federation of insurgent associations, communes and provinces."* In other words a system of workers' councils created by the revolution itself was at the core of Bakunin's anarchism.

Unsurprisingly, Russian anarchists greeted the soviets with enthusiasm as non-party, non-ideological battle organisations of the working class. Kropotkin argued that anarchists should take part in the soviets as long as they *"are organs of the struggle against the bourgeoisie and the state, and not organs of authority."* In this, they shared common ground with many Marxists who also saw them as organs of struggle.

However, unlike Marxists, anarchists when further and saw these organisations created by the struggle against oppression as being the framework of a free society. One anarchist group likened them, as non-party mass organisations, to the central committee of the Paris Commune of 1871. Another related *"the institution of the Soviet to the organisation of the 'revolutionary commune' as the anarchists perceived it."* Another group concluded in 1907 that the revolution required *"the proclamation in villages and towns of workers' committees with soviets of workers' deputies ... at their head."* Clearly the Russian anarchists saw the soviets as a concrete example of Bakunin's revolutionary ideas and had no hesitation in placing them at the heart of their revolutionary vision.

Marxists, on the other hand, had a difficult time grasping the soviet's wider significance. Nothing like the soviets could be found in the writings of Marx and Engels. Orthodox Marxism looked at

ers, who would then have the right to defend themselves and use the opportunity to pull down the entire old society."

He stated that at the September 1 1873 Geneva congress of the anarchist Alliance of Social Democracy, it was *"universally admitted that to carry out the general strike strategy, there had to be a perfect organisation of the working class and a plentiful funds."* He noted that that was *"the rub"* as no government would stand by and *"allow the organisation or funds of the workers to reach such a level."* Moreover, the revolution would happen long before *"such an ideal organisation"* was set up and if they had been *"there would be no need to use the roundabout way of a general strike"* to achieve the goal.

Rosa Luxemburg repeated Engels arguments in her essay ***"The Mass Strike"*** in order to show how her support for the general strike was in no way contrary to Marxism. Her "mass strike" was different from the anarchist "general strike" as mocked by Engels as it was dynamic process and could not be seen as *"one act, one isolated action"* which overthrows the bourgeoisie. Rather, the mass strike to the product of the everyday class struggle within society, leads to a direct confrontation with the capitalist state and so it was *"inseparable from the revolution."*

The only problem with all this is that the anarchists did not actually argue along the lines Engels and Luxemburg claimed. Take, for example, Bakunin who saw the general strike as a dynamic process for as *"strikes spread from one place to another, they come close to turning into a general strike. And with the ideas of emancipation that now hold sway over the proletariat, a general strike can result only in a great cataclysm which forces society to shed its old skin."* He raised the possibility that this could *"arrive before the proletariat is sufficiently organised"* and dismissed it because the strikes expressed the self-organisation of the workers for the *"necessities of the struggle impel the workers to support one another"* and the *"more active the struggle becomes ... the stronger and more extensive this federa-*

tion of proletarians must become." And so strikes *"indicate a certain collective strength already"* and *"each strike becomes the point of departure for the formation of new groups."*

Bakunin also rejected the idea that a revolution could be *"arbitrarily"* made by *"the most powerful associations."* Rather they were produced by *"the force of circumstances."* Nor did he think that all workers needed to be organised, arguing that a minority (perhaps *"one worker in ten")* needed to be organised and they would influence the rest so ensuring *"at critical moments"* the majority would *"follow the International's lead."*

Which is what happened in 1905. Clearly Bakunin's ideas are totally at odds with Engels assertions on what anarchist ideas on the general strike were about.

But what of the "Bakuninists"? Again, Engels account is false. Rather than the September 1873 Geneva congress being, as he claimed, of the (disbanded) Alliance of Social Democracy, it was (in fact) a meeting of the non-Marxist federations of the First International. Contra Engels, anarchists did not see the general strike as requiring all workers to be perfectly organised and then passively folding arms "one fine morning." The Belgian libertarians who proposed the idea at the congress saw it as a tactic which could mobilise workers for revolution, *"a means of bringing a movement onto the street and leading the workers to the barricades."* Moreover, anarchists rejected the idea that it had *"to break out everywhere at an appointed day and hour"* with a resounding *"No!"* In fact, they did *"not even need to bring up this question and suppose things could be like this. Such a supposition could lead to fatal mistakes. The revolution has to be contagious."*

Perhaps this is why Engels did not bother to quote a single anarchist when recounting theory on this matter (as in so many others!)? The real question must be when will Marxists realise that quoting Engels does not make it true?

Clearly, the "anarchist" strategy of overthrowing the bourgeoisie with one big general strike exists only in Marxist heads, nowhere

else. Once we remove the distortions promulgated by Engels and repeated by Luxemburg, we see that the 1905 revolution and "historical dialectics" did not, as Luxemburg claim, validate Engels and disprove anarchism. Quite the reverse as the general strikes in Russia followed the anarchist ideas of a what a general strike would be like quite closely.

Little wonder, then, that Kropotkin argued that the 1905 general strike *"demonstrated"* that the Latin workers who had been advocating the general strike *"as a weapon which would irresistible in the hands of labour for imposing its will"* had been *"right."* However, without becoming an insurrection, the limits of the general strike were exposed in 1905. Unlike the some of the syndicalists in the 1890s and 1900s, this limitation was understood by the earliest anarchists. Consequently, they saw the general strike as the start of a revolution and not as the revolution itself. Thus Kropotkin recognised the general strike as *"a powerful weapon of struggle"* about also stressed the need for the soviets to function as *"battle organisations"* rallying the workers and peasants for *"the insurrectionary general strike."*

The Soviets

The soviets were the other key development in the 1905 revolution. They were composed of democratically elected workers from factories, subject to instant recall if they did not carry out their mandated tasks. They were born from the momentum of the struggle itself and played a crucial role in extending and developing the strike wave. Although most soviets only functioned for a short period, their importance should not be underestimated. Created by the workers themselves, they were their first taste of direct democracy and self-government. The bourgeois democracy of the Duma paled in comparison to them.