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Workers Against Lenin

Labour Protest and the Bolshevik Dictatorship

July 16, 2008

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A short review of a book which discusses labour protest
under Lenin. Essential reading.

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Jonathan Aves, Tauris Academic Studies, I.B. Tauris Publishers

Published in 1996 by an academic publishers, Aves book is essential reading for anyone interested in the outcome of the Russian Revolution. For decades Trotskyists have been arguing that the Russian working class had been decimated during the Civil War period and was incapable of collective decision making and organisation, so necessitating Bolshevik Party dictatorship over them. **Workers Against Lenin** provides extensive evidence to refute those claims.

In his work Aves provides an extremely well researched and readable account of labour protests during the period of 1920 to 1922. Rather than a working class which, according to many Trotskyists “did not exist,” the actuality was that workers under Lenin were more than capable of collective action and organisation. Perhaps it is because this struggle was directed against the Bolsheviks that explains this blind spot? In this they simply follow Lenin: “As discontent amongst workers became more and more difficult to ignore, Lenin ... began to argue that ... workers had become ‘declassed.’”

The most famous expression of collective workers struggle during this period was, of course, the general strike in Petrograd which set off the Kronstadt revolt. Due to Kronstadt, this strike wave is often downplayed or even ignored but, in fact, general strikes or very widespread unrest took place nationwide. Faced with this mass wave of protest, the Bolsheviks used a combination of concessions (on the economic demands raised, not the political ones like free soviet elections and freedom of speech and organisation for workers) and repression. They also called it the “*yolynka*” (which means “go slow”) rather than a strike movement to hide its real nature and size.

As Aves discusses, this was hardly an isolated event. Strike action, he notes, “remained endemic in the first nine months of 1920” as well. In Petrograd province, 85,642 people were involved in strikes, which is a high figure indeed as, according to one set of figures, there were only 109,100 workers there at the time! Rather than this being an isolated and atomised working class, what comes through clearly from Aves’ work is that the workers, usually drawing on pre-1918 experiences and modes of struggle, could and did take collective action and decisions in the face of state repression. As the Bolsheviks clamped down on all independent working class activity and organisation, it is hardly surprising that the workers became marginal to the revolution. Moreover, let us not forget that it was during this period that the Bolsheviks raised the dictatorship of the party to both a practical and ideological truism. Given workers opposition to the Bolsheviks, this was the only way they could remain in power. This implies that a key factor in rise of Stalinism was *political* – the simple fact that the workers would not vote Bolshevik in free soviet and union elections and so they were not allowed to. As one Soviet historian put it in his account of the “yolynka,” *“taking the account of the mood of the workers, the demand for free elections to the soviets meant the implementation in practice of the infamous slogan of soviets without communists.”*

Needless to say, this review cannot hope to cover all the important information contained in this book. Aves’ discussion on the intensification of war communism and Trotsky’s “militarisation of labour” is excellent, placing it in the period of peace at the beginning of 1920 and noting its ideological basis. Also of interest is his account of the “mini-Kronstadt” in the Ukrainian town of Ekaterinoslav in June 1921, where workers raised resolutions very similar to those raised at Kronstadt, including the demand for “free soviets” popularised by the Makhnovists.

Simply put, its hard to claim that, as all Leninists do, the Russian working class had “ceased to exist in any meaningful sense” in such circumstances. As such, **Workers Against Lenin** helps to undermine the various forms of the Bolshevik myth and, as such, is a key resource for studying the Russian Revolution. Being an academic book, it is expensive and will need to be ordered from a bookshop or from a library. However, the wealth of information contained in it, the social context in which it places protest and developments in Bolshevik policies and ideas, make it a must-read for all revolutionaries who want a revolution to be more than changing who the boss is.