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An attempt at a Libertarian Soviet Revolution

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An attempt at a Libertarian Soviet Revolution

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At last, we have reliable information which allows us to understand the true character of the Kronstadt movement, which the bolshevik government has just crushed. And we can affirm, without hesitation, that this movement was shamefully slandered: it has absolutely nothing in common with the Whites, generals, Monarchists, agents of the Entente, etc. It is also not a movement of dupes, led without their knowing by reactionaries.

It is an absolutely spontaneous movement, without preparation, without conspiracy, without outside guidance; it was only led by the sailors of Kronstadt themselves, who knew full well what they wanted. And what they wanted is in no way a counter-revolution, but change which will allow on the contrary the Russian revolution to move forward, towards real equality and a real management of the people by themselves. They took the defence of the soviets – a creation of the Russian workers' masses – against a government which has, in effect, suppressed them, and replaced them by a dictatorship of civil servants.

What may have confused the Western public and give credence to the slander, was the joy shown at the news of the Kronstadt up-

rising by the bourgeois press and the Russian reactionary parties. But isn't that always the case? If there was an attempt at a revolution in France, wouldn't the Royalists try to fish in troubled waters? And, during the war, didn't the German government encourage the Irish movement, and even the Russian bolshevik movement, to further its own interests? Did this prevent those movements from being clearly revolutionary? "Reactionary manoeuvrings" are always an easy argument by which we shouldn't be fooled. When we think that, in 1893-94, Jaurès¹ thought the Jesuits were responsible for anarchist assassinations and talked about some red silk shirts which had allegedly been found at all the homes searched and which had certainly been given to them by people from the Church!

In Kronstadt, like everywhere else, reactionaries, if they were more intelligent, should have, from the start, seen that they had nothing to gain from it. In their *Izvestia* (paper of the Provisional Revolutionary Committee), the revolted sailors vividly rejected the slander and clearly stated that they had nothing in common with White generals.

By their action, the Kronstadt insurrection showed its complete independence. Completely destitute, they still refused supplies from the Entente. They even refused the financial help, almost 500 000 francs, which Russian financiers in Paris offered to send. From Paris also, a hundred Russian officers from reactionary armies offered their service to Kronstadt, by radio; they were told:

"Stay where you are, we do not need you."

Everyone who knows the Russian revolutionary movement knew, from the start, what to think. Kronstadt sailors were already, during the first revolution, in 1906, at the front of the movement; their role was very important in the 1917 revolution. They have proved themselves to be of an absolute intransigence and an extreme fighting spirit; under the Kerensky government², they

the hardest, the most important question remains: the question of production not by the state, but by the producers themselves.

appear, the Izvestia, and that is what gives us information on the goals and character of the movement. [...]

A note-worthy fact: everything which we said of the character of the Kronstadt movement was confirmed by the bolsheviks themselves. A Russian bolshevik paper published in Riga, the Novyi Pout, while propagating the fantasy of a reactionary Kronstadt, carelessly published, in its March 19th issue, the following lines:

“The Kronstadt sailors are, generally, anarchists. They are not to the right, but, on the contrary, to the left of communists. In their latest radio broadcasts, they claim: “Long live the power of the soviets!” Not once did they exclaim “Long live the Constitutional Assembly!” Why did they rise up against the soviet government? Because they don’t think it is soviet enough! They proclaim the same half-anarchist, half-communist slogans which the bolsheviks themselves had shouted three years and a half ago, right after the October revolution.

In their fight against the soviet government, the Kronstadt insurrectionists talk about their deep hatred for the “bourgeoisie”, and everything that goes with it. They say: the soviet government has become “bourgeois”, Zinoviev is “stuffed”. Here, we are facing a rebellion from the left, and not a rebellion from the right.”

The Kronstadt insurrection had been – for the moment at least – vanquished. We do not know what impact it had in Russia, although we feel a community of spirit between this and all these peasants’ and workers’ revolts which, at the same time, were or are taking place around the vast Russia. But a definite conclusion can be drawn for us. Revolutionary Russia is making rapid progress: it hardly lingered on a purely political emancipation and on the cult of universal suffrage, but asked the great social question straight away. Now, it is the social-democrat centralising statism which is falling apart.

The soviets, as they are imagined in the minds of the masses, represent an extreme decentralisation and autonomy. The great,

proclaimed the Kronstadt commune and claimed their autonomy. At the time, the government felt reluctant to use repression and an agreement was reached. Trotsky said at that time, answering some arguments: “Yes, the Kronstadt sailors are anarchists. But, when the moment of the decisive fight for the revolution comes, those who are now calling for repression will be soaping some ropes to hang us all, while the Kronstadt sailors will give their lives to defend us.” – Later, when the bolsheviks were the spokespeople for popular demands (“peace, land and all the power to the workers’ and peasants’ soviets”), the Kronstadt sailors did more than their fair share to grant them their victory. And, during the past few years, they were again Petrograd’s rampart against reactionary armies. And they would have suddenly become agents of the Whites? Kronstadt, a nest of reaction? Impossible.

Information, documents from over there, have now confirmed what we had felt until now. Let’s say a few words about the march of events themselves.

At the end of February, troubles erupted among Petrograd’s workers; it was an issue of supplies. There were strikes, and, as always, strikers were arrested. Kronstadt, where discontentment against the government was already rife, was moved and decided to support the Petrograd comrades. The movement already took a political turn. The powers of the Kronstadt soviet had long expired, but the government refused to allow new elections, in order to preserve the power of the old, bolshevik soviet. This was actually only one of the manifestations of the dictatorship of the communist party, from which the Kronstadt sailors had to suffer more than once.

A delegation was sent by the sailors to Petrograd, to study the situation there and design a plan for common action. When it came back, the following agenda was voted, on March 1st, by an assembly of the crews of battleships:

“Having heard the reports of the representatives sent by the General Assembly of the Fleet to find out about the situation in Petrograd, the sailors demand:

1. Immediate new elections to the Soviets. The present Soviets no longer express the wishes of the workers and peasants. The new elections should be by secret ballot, and should be preceded by free electoral propaganda.
2. Freedom of speech and of the press for workers and peasants, for the Anarchists, and for the Left Socialist parties.
3. The right of assembly, and freedom for trade union and peasant organisations.
4. The organisation, at the latest on 10th March 1921, of a Conference of non-Party workers, soldiers and sailors of Petrograd, Kronstadt and the Petrograd District.
5. The liberation of all political prisoners of the Socialist parties, and of all imprisoned workers and peasants, soldiers and sailors belonging to working class and peasant organisations.
6. The election of a commission to look into the dossiers of all those detained in prisons and concentration camps.
7. The abolition of all political sections in the armed forces. No political party should have privileges for the propagation of its ideas, or receive State subsidies to this end. In the place of the political sections various cultural groups should be set up, deriving resources from the State.

8. The immediate abolition of the militia detachments set up between towns and countryside.
9. The equalisation of rations for all workers, except those engaged in dangerous or unhealthy jobs.
10. The abolition of Party combat detachments in all military groups. The abolition of Party guards in factories and enterprises. If guards are required, they should be nominated, taking into account the views of the workers.
11. The granting to the peasants of freedom of action on their own soil, and of the right to own cattle, provided they look after them themselves and do not employ hired labour.
12. We request that all military units and officer trainee groups associate themselves with this resolution.
13. We demand that the Press give proper publicity to this resolution.
14. We demand the institution of mobile workers' control groups.
15. We demand that handicraft production be authorised provided it does not utilise wage labour.”

The same resolution was then proposed at the Kronstadt citizens' general assembly, which comprised around 16,000 people, and unanimously adopted. It then became a sort of charter for the movement. On March 2nd, at the Kronstadt delegates' meeting of the ships, military units, workshops and workers' unions (300 people in total), a “Provisional Revolutionary Committee” was appointed and put in charge of organising new elections, free this time, for the local soviet; this Committee made a daily newspaper