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Article by MACG

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This month marks the 90th anniversary of the overthrow of the capitalist Provisional Government in Russia in October 1917 and the establishment of the power of the workers' Soviets. It was a triumph of working class strength and organisation and, for a few short years, was a beacon of liberation to the workers of the world. Tragically, it was all to end in catastrophe.

Russia under the Czar was a byword for reaction (even the calendar was out of date — it was November in the West during the October Revolution). In February 1917 the Russian people arose, furious at the carnage of World War I and centuries of oppression. The Czar was overthrown and a new Provisional Government came to power. The new government, however, continued the war and dithered about reform. Cabinet reshuffles failed to stem the mounting anger of the workers and peasants. Previously popular workers' parties like the Mensheviks lost support, while the Social Revolutionaries, the main party of the peasants, split.

The Bolsheviks, the only significant party opposing the war from the outset, were weak in February 1917, but grew swiftly. The Anarchists at first were insignificant and disorganised, but their

strength improved at a growing pace as Russia descended into crisis. The great revolutionary force, however, was the working class itself. Factories and other workplaces elected delegates to a Soviet (i.e. council) for their city, first in the capital Petrograd and then in Moscow and elsewhere. As the year wore on and the Provisional Government dashed the hopes of the population, the Soviets grew in strength and spread from city to city, federating first provincially and then at a national level.

By October 1917, the Bolsheviks had displaced the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries as the strongest party in the Soviets. They were calling for “All power to the Soviets”. The Second All-Russia Soviet, with a new Bolshevik majority, was due to meet and Petrograd was rife with rumours that the Provisional Government would impose emergency rule. The Petrograd Soviet acted first. Armed workers’ detachments composed of Bolsheviks, Anarchists and others took the Winter Palace and other key buildings with very little resistance and dissolved the Provisional Government. The All-Russia Soviet convened the next day as the new power in Russia.

What followed was both inspirational and tragic. The Bolsheviks, heroic advocates of workers’ control in opposition, sabotaged it in power. They progressively suppressed all opposition, both from capitalist counter-revolutionaries and from revolutionaries who wanted to defend Soviet democracy. A State was formed above the Soviets and sucked the life out of them.

Meanwhile, in the Ukraine, a separate revolution unfolded at the same time as the Russian one. The Bolsheviks took longer to get established and events were strongly influenced by an Anarchist peasant army led by Nestor Makhno. The Makhnovists were unfamiliar with urban economic problems, however, so had little strength in the cities. After they had defeated the counter-revolutionary armies, the Makhnovists were crushed by the Bolsheviks.

The other tragic lesson comes from the Kronstadt uprising. Kronstadt was a naval garrison on an island facing Petrograd and was the bastion of the strongest and most committed revolutionaries. In early 1921, after the final victory over the counter-revolutionary armies, the Kronstadt Soviet publicised its support for the demands of striking Petrograd workers. They called for new elections to the Soviets and freedom for Anarchists and Left Socialists. The Bolsheviks replied by crushing the uprising with great bloodshed. They then adopted economic compromises with the peasants which went beyond the Kronstadters’ demands – but retained their one-party dictatorship.

Lenin, the leader of the Bolsheviks, died in 1924 and under Stalin, things got even worse. He abolished the already flawed internal Bolshevik (now “Communist”) Party democracy, eliminated many social gains of the Revolution, particularly those of women, and betrayed revolutions outside Russia for diplomatic advantage. And the massacres and purges which made Stalin’s tyranny one of the worst in history have been a stain on the reputation of communism ever since.

While the so-called “Communist” Party eventually drowned it in blood, the Russian Revolution stands as both an inspiration and a lesson for all workers. Hail the October Revolution!