

A Requiem for Nationalisation

Alliance of Revolutionary Socialists

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The current world crisis of capitalism is provoking a wave of proletarian protests, and will inevitably provoke them in the future. In the CIS, the first serious sign of things to come was the workers' revolt at the Kherson machine-building factory this February. By now it is clear that the reactionary Party of Regions has subdued the workers' struggle, and it is time to analyse the reasons behind this defeat. We have to learn from mistakes, and in order to save the approaching future struggles in the CIS and the world from a similar fate, we must pick out the key factors in the defeat.

The Kherson Revolt: What it Was and How it Ended Up

On the 2 February, workers from the Kherson machine-building factory have "marched along the main street of the city (Ushakov street) towards the regional administration, where they presented their demands to the authorities... Among them was the following:

- payment of back wages (total of 4.5 million grivnas)
- nationalisation of the factory with no compensation
- a guaranteed market for the produce, which is complex agricultural machinery

Having seen their demands ignored, the workers broke into the factory grounds and occupied the administrative building on the 3rd of February. Various Trotskyites and Stalinists have claimed there was a takeover of the whole factory, but in reality the owner's security personnel remained at the factory, and it appears to have been a power-sharing situation at best.

On the 9 February, an independent trade union was established at the Kherson machine-building factory, replacing the old trade union cell of the FPU. The new trade union, called Petrovets, joined the structure of the Confederation of Independent Trade Unions of Ukraine, led by Mr. Wolynets, i.e. it effectively entered the confederate structure currently serving as a tool of the Timoshenko bloc. At this point we must explain the political situation within the city. The Ukrainian bourgeoisie is currently divided into the "orange" league (the loose Yushenko and Timoshenko alliance) and the "blue-white" league (the Party of Regions led by Yanukovich). The owner of the Kherson machine-building factory, Mr. A. Oleinik, is also a prominent member of the Party of Regions; and while the Party of Regions' domination of the Kherson regional administration is almost at 60%, the appointed head of the administration (as placed there by Yushenko) is Boris Silenkov – an "orangist". This gives some clue about the internal struggles between bourgeois cliques over Kherson, and both cliques attempted to take advantage of the Kherson workers' revolt. In the end, the stronger Party of Regions established control over the workers, bringing the workers' revolt to an end by taking away their independence and converting them into a tool in its hands.

Mr. Oleinik's interest amidst all this is also clear; to use the workers in obtaining leverage over state resources and in gaining access to the treasure trove of state orders, credit and subsidies – and he was successful. On the morning of 13 February, the Party of Region's representatives parked two combine harvesters in front of the regional administration building, thus initiating a

“blue Maidan”¹ with the aim of displacing Silenkov. The trade union cell at the Kherson machine-building factory agreed to participate in this!

Here is what Trotskyites from “Socialist Resistance” write : “On 13 February, 2 millions grivnas were given to Mr. Oleinik by the regional authority... Thus the only winner so far has been the owner, who thanks to the workers’ action obtained a decent sum from the authorities. It must be noted that the given sum was not from the reserve fund, and therefore was taken from funds intended for public sector workers, pensions, benefits, etc.”.

The “social compromise”, so much cherished by the bourgeoisie has been reached: Oleinik got the money and the workers got a promise that they may at some point get a glimpse of some of it.

After this “compromise” the demand for nationalisation was taken up by the workers — or at least by the trade union representatives speaking on their behalf.

“On 14 February ”, as UKRINFORM² quotes Oleinik, “the workers’ collective annulled the nationalisation demand, and agrees with me resuming control over the enterprise. Now, I will fight for the right to work and for the functioning of the enterprise together with the workers’ collective”.

Something that the Trotskyites and Stalinists almost took for a spark that will start the fire in Ukraine, and what was in fact a genuine proletarian protest, alas one with mistaken demands and perspective, in the end mutated into a money-making venture for the capitalist. And this occurred precisely due to the false perspective.

But of course; the demand for nationalisation was initially a demand not for social revolution, but for state support for a capitalist enterprise, its rescue by the bourgeois state. And so it did; exactly in the manner that it can, by giving a sum of tax money, the very “sum that was not from the reserve fund, and therefore was taken from funds intended for public sector workers, pensions, benefits, etc.” to the capitalist. If the Trotskyites and the Stalinists sincerely hoped that the bourgeois state could act in some other manner, they can only blame their own short-sightedness.

So now we can draw conclusions. Destitute workers, deprived of income for some months, rose up for collective struggle. During the struggle they made some mistaken demands; but at least got full support from Marxists advancing in status at their expense. This bourgeois slogan (which allegedly makes neoliberals tremble in fear) was immediately snatched up by a bourgeois clique. In a couple of days the workers bent back down, having seen the errors of their demands and having no alternative ideas at their disposal.

During the events at Kherson machine-building factory, the Stalinists and the Trotskyites advocated a “nationalisation under worker control”. We should investigate the compatibility of this position with the growth of proletarian class-consciousness and revolutionary action, and whether or not it leads to subordination of the proletariat to the bourgeoisie and its state.

What is the main difference between demands for nationalisation on the one hand and a struggle for concrete material demands on the other? The demand for nationalisation, i.e. for the transfer of the enterprise into state property (i.e. the bourgeois state – there is no other state) implies a struggle for an alternative capitalist strategy, for the strengthening of state capital against

¹ From Ukrainian «Майдан Незалежності» (Maidan Nezalezhnosti), Independence Square, the central square in Kiev. Was used by the protesting masses during the “Orange Revolution” in the winter of 2004–2005.

² Ukrainian Information Bureau

private capital. Those who venture to advise the bourgeoisie on taking up such a strategy become effectively mere advisors to capital – and no more than that.

However, as one might say, why not struggle for a form of capitalism that is more materially advantageous to workers? Must we really be ideologues and stick to a utopian vision of a global socialist revolution while ignoring the immediate needs of people who are suffering?

Well, we must say that we are not ideologues, and that we are opposed to reformism. This is not due to some utopian visions, but due to the realisation that the concept of a type of capitalism materially advantageous to workers is utopian in itself.

In order to understand that the bourgeois state's nationalisation policies cannot materially advance the working masses, one has only to observe modern Russia. Putin's rule saw to the increase of interventionism, to the advance of the bureaucracy that tamed the pseudo-oligarchs, to the domination of heavily state-owned corporations in key profitable sectors of the economy, where bureaucracy and business jointly prosper from the masses' poverty. Yet all of this did not lead to the improvement of the workers' material conditions; nor did it lead to the bourgeois progress – after 8 years of growth the Russian economy had not even reached its level of 1990. It is now evident that the interventionism of Putin's rule did not serve the interests of the working masses at all (which is only to be expected) and did not even serve to the realisation of a progressive modernisation of the Russian economy; instead, it served only to the parasitic consumption of the exploiters' class – the two-headed hydra of bureaucrats and businessmen.

Furthermore, surely the classical example of the Belarus Trotskyite Razumovskiy, who is from "Socialist Resistance", and a supporter of nationalization, shows how effectively the elements of private and state capitalism can intertwine around exploiting the proletariat. The very Belarus where a vast state-capitalist sector did not obstruct the state's intention for neo-liberal reforms (see "banishment from a social paradise" by F. Sanczenia:)

Despite classical Marxist concepts³, the state, after all, is not a neutral instrument, not a field of battle between the rulers and the ruled, but by its own nature is an exploiter in itself. It is not an estranged, mysterious entity with its own separate interests, but consists of quite concrete chiefs, bureaucrats and cops who are exploiters and subjugators by themselves, as well as being tied to other exploiters' and subjugators' private-capitalist interests. Regardless of the proletarian masses' pressure on them, this exploitative gang can never cease being what it is; even when it offers certain concessions to the struggling masses, it does this with the aim of subduing revolutionary spirit, replacing it with illusions and later taking the concessions away. The imperative of the Communist movement is not pressurising the bourgeois state, but destroying it. This aim is not a utopian vision, but a means to further survival of humankind.

We only support demands that do not contradict the revolutionary imperative. We support workers who struggle for the improvement of their material conditions, provided that their struggles are based on a direct control and self-organisation, whereby workers form new types of social relations without relying on state-integrated trade unions, let alone relying on the state itself! Only in such a struggle can workers understand that their Right to Life is violated by the existence of the capitalist system, and that this system must be destroyed. Only in such a struggle can workers obtain the experience of self-organisation that is necessary for the destruction of the old world and the creation of a new world.

³ – We distinguish between Marx's revolutionary ideas and the reformist ideology of Marxism (social-democracy, it's modern successors, trotskyists, etc).

Both the Stalinists and the Trotskyites, who, as it turns out, are not that different after all, advocate nationalisation, justifying it with the restoration of a functioning enterprise and helping workers to survive. However, nationalisation can result in re-selling of the enterprise to a different private owner, as has been shown in our first article. It is by no means certain that the current bourgeois state of Ukraine, which is in a condition of permanent crisis, can see to any kind of restoration of the enterprise.

Workers' control:

Why it is Not Sufficient

“Leninist-Bolsheviks” justify their advocacy of nationalisation by portraying it as a special case, a “good” nationalisation of sorts – one under worker control. They portray this “worker control” as a miraculous drop of wine that can turn a bucket of bourgeois poison into a sweet Communist brew.

We have previously addressed the issue of workers control in our article “The Workers’ Movement: What shall it be?”:

“For example, let’s consider the demand for “worker control over enterprise accounts”. The demand for worker control assumes that the ownership and authority over the enterprise (and the whole of society) remains with the bourgeoisie, while the workers merely control the functioning of this authority in their immediacy. It is certain that as long as the bourgeoisie retains its grip on authority, it will not permit real worker control over its authority. Meanwhile, when the workers have power sufficient for ousting bourgeois monopoly on control, there isn’t much sense in stopping half way. Why arrange worker control over bourgeois authority when the latter can be ousted completely? Therefore, the demand for worker control in the conditions of absolutist capitalism is unrealistic in the majority of cases (exceptions will follow shortly), and is outright harmful in revolutionary conditions.

The bourgeoisie will meet the demand for worker control only in exceptional circumstances, and precisely then the illusions of its protagonists will be harshly shattered. Enterprise owners will lift secrecy barriers around their commerce and open accountancy books with the aim of convincing the workers of the enterprise’s dire financial situation and of the need for putting aside class struggle in order to avoid bankruptcy. The bourgeoisie, skilled in double accountancy and various other manipulations, will undoubtedly reach its aim, and the realisation of “worker control” will only become a tool for reaction and exploitation.

Overall, these Trotskyite concepts of “transitional” capitalism controlled by the workers are just a tidy utopia, which in fact causes harm by distracting proletarians from genuine struggle for class interests and revolution.”

To stress, we must re-emphasise this: “transitional” demands, such as worker control and nationalisation are not simply methods of advancing material conditions of the exploited. Such little presents from the state in fact severely undermine the autonomy of worker action by integrating it into the system of exploitation.

In the case of an already established worker control, with an existence of some sort of dual power within the workplace, we must positively consider demonstrating to the workers the instability and a short potential life span of such power-sharing practice, explaining the inevitable transformation of such arrangements either into a restoration of the full power of capital, or into

an establishment of full power of workers' assemblies. But supporting demands for worker control is simply an idolisation of an unstable and unsustainable situation, and is therefore blatantly misguiding of the proletarian masses.

The Ukrainian Crisis and Our Tasks

“Firstly we must note that the modern bourgeois Ukraine is undergoing a severe economic, social and political crisis: The takeover of the Kherson machine-building factory by its workers; The backlash against gas companies that were intending cutting gas supplies to Ivano-Frankovsk; An uprising in Mekeevka, which was suppressed by Berkut (the Ukrainian version of the Russian OMON).

Such is the intensity of the situation up to now. There is a triple crisis in Ukraine while the global crisis is only just beginning:

- 1) An economic crisis, tens of factory closures, a huge government debt and prospect of defaulting.
- 2) A social crisis, mass unemployment, growing mass poverty and swelling protest.
- 3) A political crisis as the Ukrainian state is in a permanent collapse. The leading power groups cannot agree on a common strategy. The army is paralysed.” (M. Magid: “The Ukraine two steps away from a social upheaval... or a collapse?”)

We cannot yet tell how this crisis will end; will the Ukrainian elites stabilise the situation, will the Ukraine burn in a fire of imperialistic wars between bourgeois cliques, or will a social revolt ignite and spread, turning into a social revolution? We cannot tell, but one thing is clear: for the revolution to succeed, the working masses must not trust a single bourgeois clique, power group, official trade union, party, state or capitalist, they must not turn into a tool of any bourgeois grouping, they must preserve their own class independence, they must fight for their own emancipation. Our task, the task of the protagonists of social revolution, is to popularise such consciousness.

What Should Have Been Done?

We were accused of lacking a positive program, of having nothing to offer to the workers. We must object; this is not so, and we were left behind because our group does not have direct contact with the Kherson workers. If we did have a chance to participate in their struggle, we would have offered the following to them:

- seizing the running of the factory into the authority of a workers' assembly
- getting the scrapped equipment back [Here we must note that there are 1500 workers in the factory, and including their families and friends, the given collective presents a rather significant force, and with a real prospect for an application of such a force in the conditions of the Ukrainian triple crisis, the authorities would have to seriously consider fulfilling the demands of returning the equipment.]
- demanding the immediate payment of back wages

- agitating for workplace overtakes by worker collectives in other cities and in other enterprises of Kherson and the Ukraine
- trying to create a city workers' council in Kherson

We think that it is necessary to convince workers of the state's hostile nature, and of the need for them, together with all the other working and oppressed people, to take care of themselves, to develop links with each other, to develop ways of organising production and marketing without any intermediates (i.e. the state and the capitalists).

We fully understand that "socialism in one factory" is not possible, that it is doomed to failure when isolated. However, the proletarian struggle can succeed only after a series of defeats; even after suffering defeat, the Kherson workers have acquired invaluable experience, which is not only theirs, but is now appropriated by the Ukrainian and the global proletariat.

...In 1919, many protagonists of the Bavarian Council Republic viewed in their victory as totally fulfilled, and thought that it is possible to start constructing communistic relations in all aspects of social life. But the great Communist revolutionary, Eugene Levine, disagreed; he understood that the isolated Council Bavaria was doomed, and that with the given deadly hostile forces it is pointless to contemplate communistic changes in culture and education, but is instead necessary to struggle to the very end, to inflict maximum damage upon the enemy and by a glorious defeat to inspire the German and the global proletariat to future struggle. Defeat during a fierce struggle gives the proletariat invaluable class lessons as opposed to defeat during compromise. This also holds true for the strike movement. If a strike is broken after the workers allow themselves to be fooled, the only result is complete demoralisation. But if the strike is defeated after a fierce struggle due to a lack of forces, the result is a learned lesson; one which shows that given enough forces, the forces of a whole collective, a whole city or even country, victory is a real prospect.

Currently, proletarian class struggle occurs in two weakly interacting dimensions. In one, there is the spontaneous, "wild" proletarian protest, whereby the protesting workers have a very indefinite understanding of how and for what to struggle; these are easily deceived and suppressed by the class enemy. In another, there is a multitude of small revolutionary groups, which are rather weakly connected to the masses. With the given relative isolation of the two dimensions of proletarian struggle, there is no real prospect of a victorious social revolution. Only once the working masses understand the impossibility of eliminating their misery within the framework of the capitalist system, and once they comprehend the necessity of an absolute social revolution — then and only then will this revolution morph from ideas of some small groups into a regular revolutionary practice of the proletariat. Only when the struggle is developed under the control of the struggling masses themselves, while the most progressive elements find an integrated revolutionary organisation that can combine the struggle for concrete demands with the struggle for wider social revolution, only then will capitalism's final hour arrive...

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