

Lenin and Workers' Control

Tom Brown

1960s

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The pursuit of power

A POLITICIAN who has one single overpowering aim and pursues it relentlessly, even wading in blood, has, if circumstances are favourable, a chance of success. He is not usually good at long-sight or broad-sight, but on a single aim he makes fluffy liberals his victims. The same is true of tycoons.

Lenin and the Bolshevik party had that single purpose, to gain and keep absolute power; all other things were means to that end, or were forced on them by the pursuit of it. This is true of collectivism and nationalisation. I shall quote a great deal from Mr. M. H. Dobb, M.A., because of his long service to the Communist Party, his position as lecturer in economics at Cambridge University and the respect given him by the CP. Dobb wrote two books which will help us – **Russian Economic Development Since the Revolution**, in the early twenties, and, in 1948, **Soviet Economic Development Since 1917**. The latter, a most interesting book, is published by Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd.

“The leitmotif running through the speeches and writings of Lenin in 1917 was the overshadowing importance of the class which held the actual reins of power. For him this issue was paramount.” S.E.D.S. 1917, p.82.

We know, of course, that when a Bolshevik uses the term “working class,” he means in this context “the Party,” which alone has the right to speak for the “working class.”

Soon after the March revolution the peasants began to seize the estates of the big landowners. Dobb speaks of numerous cases of what the police called “agrarian lawlessness,” mostly the taking of timber from estate woodlands and estate labourers’ strikes in April, although we know that seizures of land had already started. The Provisional Government received reports of such happenings from 174 districts, mainly the Central Region and the Middle Volga.

On May 3, 1917, came the Government decree to establish land committees. Less than two weeks later a peasant congress at Kazan resolved to confiscate all estate land and a local landowner reported that “local administrative authorities are unable to restrain the local land committees” (see p.75). Early in July, Prince Lvov, head of the Provisional Government, resigned, mainly because he accused his government of a tendency “to justify the disastrous seizures of property that are taking place throughout Russia ... instead of combating aggressive tendencies.” (ibid, p.76).

“In industry a parallel form of direct action was taking place in the summer and autumn ... In the summer reports began to multiply of arrests of engineers by workers, acting in the name of local Soviets, and of the forcible expulsion from factories of unpopular foremen. On June 1 a national resolution of the executive committee of the Soviets advised all industrial workers to ‘create councils at the enterprises, the control embracing not only the course of the work at the enterprise itself, but the entire financial side of the enterprise’” (ibid, pp.76–77).

Deposed by the workers

Dobb goes on to relate what were then well-known facts of further direct action in mine and factory. In June at Kronstadt dock committees were insisting on inspecting the books and accounts of the management and preventing illicit removal of materials. In the cable works the owner was

deposed by the workers, after being accused of trying to close the works and sell out to a foreign bank.

In July, 1917, a conference of Ukrainian factory committees decided to remove directors who “refuse within five days to satisfy workers’ demands.” From Kharkov the Government received complaints by factory owners that the management of one of the city’s largest factories and the director of the locomotive workers had been kept under arrest by the workers for 24 hours.

In Petrograd, in autumn, some factories were to be closed by the owners. The workers at once prevented the transfer of machine and materials from the works. At Nikolaev on the Black Sea the workers at a shipyard sent delegates to places supplying the yard with raw materials to ensure supplies. In Moscow a meeting of leather workers’ delegates decided to proceed at once to prepare the sequestration of the industry.

In October, on month before the Bolsheviks took power, the coal miners, after a series of strikes, took control of the mines. “Atuman Kaledin (later to be a leading figure in the Civil War) wired the Minister of War: ‘At the moment the entire power has been seized by various self-appointed organisations which recognise no other authority than their own.’” (ibid, p.78).

In large and small factories of many kinds the workers were taking complete control, while the peasants were sweeping away the landowners and their managers.

In the take-over of industry the soviets played little part, most of the action being taken by the factory workers on the spot, sometimes backed by delegate meetings of factory workers of the district.

It is well to recall what was a soviet. In the revolution of 1905 and again in 1917, the workers and peasants quickly formed makeshift councils. In the towns they were formed first of all by delegates from factories and other places of work, later were added delegates from the professions and even from groups of shopkeepers. Political parties then were allowed to affiliate. These councils were called soviets. But by the last-mentioned type of affiliation the way was open to any unscrupulous politician to invent groups and gain more votes, also political theory tended to hog the discussion. But in the case of the factory mass meeting and committee this hardly arose, so that the workshop became the centre of revolutionary action and construction in the towns.

Two kinds of soviet

In the country the soviet was usually overwhelmingly peasant, concerned with getting the land under the control of the tillers and attending to local social needs. Most political parties had no interest in the peasants’ aims, certainly not the Bolsheviks. Those who were with the peasants in this takeover were the Anarchists and Syndicalists, particularly in the Ukraine, and, in the great majority of cases, the peasants’ own party, the Left Social Revolutionaries. Soldiers and sailors also formed soviets.

The real soviets had nothing in common with the present so-called “soviets,” nor were they initiated by the Bolsheviks. Until a month before they took power, the latter did not have a majority on any significant soviet. “In the course of the preceding month (October) the Bolsheviks had secured a majority in the Soviets of Petersburg and Moscow and of one or two other cities” (ibid, p.79). The peasant soviets were all for the Left S.R.’s.

The Anarchists and the Left S.R.'s and the peasants, with or without anyone's encouragement, were sweeping to victory in their battle for "the land to the tillers." Nothing could stop them. Nothing except satanic treachery. That was coming.

The kiss of death

LATE in 1917 the Russian provisional government was confused, weak and ready to fall. Peasants, wage workers, soldiers and sailors, growing stronger in their soviets, were moving in half awakening to take over the direction of the country. Lenin saw his opportunity.

The peasants were winning their battle for the land, so the Bolsheviks suddenly switched their land policy and, in the face of a successful revolution, cried with the Anarchists and Social Revolutionaries, "The land to the peasants!" Lenin wrote his **State and Revolution**, which looked like an approach to Anarchism and a rebuff to Marxists, and an alliance with the Left Social Revolutionaries was made.

On November 7 the rising against the Kerensky Government was made in Petrograd, the attack on the Winter Palace being led by a Russian Anarchist, Bill Shatov, returned home from America. The sailors of Kronstadt, "the flower of the 'October Revolution'," were given pride of place in the battle. Success followed in Moscow. Under Lenin a new government was formed, some seats being given to the Left S.R.'s and to smaller groups, such as Maxim Gorki's Novaya Zhizn. However, the Bolsheviks held the posts of physical power, they were the commissars who controlled the army, the police and the jails; the S.R.'s and Gorki got the portfolios of education and such. Revolutionaries in Russia then seemed to trust one another a great deal. Certainly the non-Bolsheviks never intended a one-party dictatorship. They were soon to learn, as others are still learning, that an alliance with the Communists is the kiss of death.

On November 18 the Peasant Congress met in the Duma. The Bolsheviks had tried hard to gain a majority, but could command only 20 per cent. of the delegates, the Left S.R.'s having a big majority and beloved Maria Spiridonova in the chair. The delegates expressed the self-confidence of the delegates in their handling of the land question.

Isvestia of November 10, 1918, published Lenin's Land Decree, seemingly giving to the peasants the land they already possessed, but in fact limiting the land they might take. "It was the intention of the Bolsheviks, however, that a considerable portion of the estate land should not be subject to distribution, but be retained as model State farms; and the annexe to the decree referred explicitly to 'Territories where cultivation is of a high order: gardens, plantations, nurseries for plants and trees, orchards, etc.' as 'not subject to division', but as reserved for 'the exclusive use of the State or district as model institutions'; and similarly 'studs, State and private cattle-breeding establishments, poultry farms.'" M.H. Dobb, **Soviet Economic Development since 1917**.

Dobb goes on to say that peasant pressure curtailed the plan, for example only between two and three million acres of sugar beet estates were left to the State, instead of 10 to 12 million. The land possessed by the peasants increased from 70 per cent. of all cultivated area to 96 per cent. In the Ukraine the increase was from 56 to 96 per cent. and the land workers were in almost complete control of agricultural production.

'Decree of Workers' Control'

Lenin at the same time tried to stop the take-over of industry, his "Decree on Workers' Control" came on November 14, 1917. Here we must be careful, the decree was not written in English and translation of political terms is often faulty and influenced by the political consciousness of the translator. The Russian words used in the decree do not mean the same thing that is meant by "Workers' Control" in the English-speaking world. Dobb comes halfway to admitting this, "In fact the very word that is usually rendered into English as 'control' has in Soviet usage a meaning that goes at least halfway towards what in England would be referred to as 'supervision' and might at any rate be not inappropriately rendered as 'steering'." (Ibid.). The works committees were intended to be something that we would now recognise as ancestors of the Joint Production Committees organised by the British Communist Party and the Engineering Employers' Federation in the late war.

Bolshevism somehow acquired the reputation of being "Socialism, but in a hurry." Dobb denies that it was so and, ascribing the myth to such writers as R.W. Postgate (**Bolshevik Theory**) and Norman Angell, goes on to say, "But the placing of Socialism on the immediate agenda was explicitly disclaimed. Clause 8 of the April Theses clearly affirmed: 'Not the "introduction of Socialism" as an immediate task, but to bring immediately social production and distribution of goods under the **control** of the Soviet.'" (Ibid, p.68). That is, State control. With a fatalism worthy of Marxist determinism, Lenin's party was moving, not to collectivism, but to the extension and intensification of the Czarist centralised State. It was the workers who were driving towards collectivism.

"The 'amalgamation of all banks into a single national bank, control over which should be exercised by the Soviet', and national control of syndicates and cartels were called for, but only as 'measures which do not in any way imply the "introduction of socialism" and which have been frequently undertaken during the war by a number of bourgeois States', which are 'entirely feasible economically.'" (Ibid, p.68).

"Later, writing on the eve of the November revolution on **The Threatening Catastrophe and How to Avert it**, he spoke of the nationalisation of the oil industry and of the coal industry as necessary 'to increase the production of fuel' and to combat 'the stopping of production by the industrialists'; the complete syndication of industry under State control – a measure which 'has already been put into practice in Germany' and does not directly, in itself, infringe upon the relations of private property to any degree." (Ibid, p.69, also Lenin, **Collected Works**, XXI, book 1).

"Compulsory syndication under the control of the State, this is what Capitalism has prepared the way for and what the Junker State has put into effect in Germany; this is what will be completely realised in Russia by the Soviets." Lenin, **Will the Bolsheviks Maintain State Power?** (pp. 52–53).

"But no sweeping measures of confiscation or nationalisation were immediately proposed. Rather was it a controlled or directed capitalism, steered by such measures of economic control as had come to be the common stock-in-trade of belligerent governments that was contemplated." Dobbs, **S.E.D.S. 1917**, p.83).

Lenin spoke of the State power adapting itself to the existing conditions "as gradually as possible and breaking with as little of the old as possible." Lenin, **Selected Works**, Vol. IX (p.284).

Two opposed principles

DOBB quotes an oft-repeated story by Lenin (taken from M. Farbman, **After Lenin**): “When workers’ delegations came to me with complaints against the factory owners,” Lenin once said, “I always said to them: ‘You want your factory nationalised. Well and good. We have the decree ready and can sign it in a moment. But tell me, can you take the organisation into your own hands? Do you know how and what you produce? And do you know the relations between your product and the Russian and international market?’ And inevitably it transpired that they knew nothing.”

There is no scrap of evidence to support Lenin’s fable, but there is abundant evidence, including that of Dobb, to the contrary: “Many factory committees were beyond the legal powers awarded to them in the Decree on Workers’ Control, and eventually took the administration of factories into their own hands. This was a continuation of the spontaneous movement of direct action on the part of peasants and factory workers, which had gathered momentum under the Provisional Government.” (ibid, p.88). “In the spring of 1918 a syndicalist tendency had become widespread among factory committees; the notion that factories should be run directly by the workers in them, and for the benefit of those workers.” (ibid, p.89).

“Against this illegal nationalisation on the initiative of factory committees and local Soviets” the Bolshevik Government took action (p.90), but the movement went on as though the workers of Russia had never heard Lenin’s fable, the “know nothing” workers seemed very confident.

Local initiative

In December, 1917, **Sovnarcom**, the Cabinet, instituted **Vesenka**, Supreme Economic Council, to supervise control of industry from the centre. Vesenka and the Cabinet, on April 27, 1917, again ordered an end to industrial confiscation. “But the instructions continued to be disobeyed: and efforts made by Vesenka in the direction of centralisation met with considerable resistance. The case of a group of factories in the Urals which the central authorities had decided to leave in private hands was not untypical. The local factory committee, declaring that the attitude of the owners was provocative, announced their intention of taking over the factory.” The State-controlled “Central Council of Trade Unions” sent a delegation from Moscow to prevent the seizure and backed it with a telegram forbidding such action against the owners.

To this telegram the only reply was a laconic report announcing the date on which the factory had been taken over on the authority of the local Soviet. Of individual firms that had been nationalised prior to June, 1918, only 100 were nationalised by decree of the centre, while 400 had been nationalised on the initiative of local organisations. When the starch and molasses factory, **Zhivilov**, was nationalised by the Government, the factory committee refused to hand over to the administrator whom Vesenka had sent to take charge; and when the District Economic Council of the Northern Region instituted a system of government inspectors to bring the metal works of Petrograd under its control, serious conflicts ensued between the inspectors and the factory committees (see also British Labour Delegation Report, 1920, p.96). In the railway shops there actually appeared an organisation grandiloquently terming itself the “Alliance of Workers’ Representatives,” which agitated against centralised control in the interests of “the autonomy of the workers’ committees.” (Dobb, pp.90, 91).

It will be noted that Dobb equates collectivism and workers' control with nationalisation, that is State ownership and centralised State control. A strange attempt to reconcile two obviously opposed principles.

The Left S.R.'s were continually protesting against Bolshevik attempts to turn the popular tide of collectivism and develop capitalism under a "Junker State" type economy. Against such protests Lenin wrote his pamphlet **The Principal Tasks of our Day**, calling "State capitalism" a "gigantic step forward" and talking of a future society in which "elements of both Capitalism and Socialism," would exist together (partly republished in **Selected Works**, vol. IX, 156–7).

Concessions to capitalism

Dobb speaks of some moves in that direction, thus: "For certain enterprises, particularly where foreign capital was involved, proposals were canvassed for the creation of 'mixed companies' in which State and private capitalists should participate jointly." And – "some abortive negotiations took place in March (1918) between the Soviet Government and a group of capitalists headed by the wealthy Moscow merchant Meshchersky for the formation of a mixed company in which foreign capital should participate, to control a certain group of enterprises in the metal industry ... and a similar proposal came from a company known as the Stakhaev Company."

"In the early summer a commission instituted to frame conditions on which concessions might be given to foreign capital was considering certain proposals made by a Norwegian firm and a Russo-Dutch syndicate for railway extensions in Siberia and the Donetz Region."

"In the circumstances of the time very little was to become of these projects, although they were later to be revived on a limited scale after the civil war in the early period of the New Economic policy." Dobb, **S.E.D.S. 1917**, p.85.

Bolsheviks Russia looked like being a very unhealthy and uncertain country in which to live. The enterprises were not adventurous enough to risk wealth and life in a famine and bureaucrat ridden land. The great plans for capitalist expansion soon came to nought, foreign capital shied away and those merchants who had the wealth to do so left the country – except those who found jobs in the bureaucracy. The wage workers and peasants were left; on them fell the sabre cuts of dictatorship.

The managers take over

WAR WAS DRIVING all governments to greater State control of the economy. This was especially true of such a totalitarian state as the Bolsheviks were creating, but Dobb speaks of other causes. The reason "for the accelerated transition to general nationalisation in the second half of the year (1918) was twofold. In the first place, many factory committees went beyond the legal powers awarded them in the Decree on Workers' Control and eventually took the administration of factories into their own hands". (Dobb, p. 88). Of course a political dictatorship could not allow industrial democracy to exist; the latter had to head the execution list.

The other cause of the Decree of General Nationalisation, which applied to tall companies with more than a million roubles of capital in mining, metals, textiles, glass, leather, cement, timber and electrical trades, was quite different. "It might have seemed as if the government had suddenly capitulated to the Left. The immediate reason for the decree, however was a rather special

one, which gave it an emergency character. There were considerable fears in Moscow at this time that the Germans, having already occupied the important industrial regions of the Ukraine, might proceed, here and in other regions as well, to protect important industrial concerns from future nationalisation by transferring them to German firms". (Dobb, p. 95).

Dobb goes on to describe in some detail the actions of the Germans, through Count Mirbach, to protect this future "German property", and the counter-moves of the Russians, but whether from this or other causes, the turn was to greater nationalisation. But would the greater State control find an easier solution to Russia's economic problem?

The problem, the breaking down of much of industry, transport and farming, could be solved by starting at the bottom, in the localities, and co-ordinating the economic units from there outwards. This the workers and peasants were doing. In June, 1920, a delegation of British trade union and Labour Party leaders, with the addition of Bertrand Russell, was invited to Russia. From speeches made by its members on their return, they seemed to be enthusiastic about the methods used by the workers in industrial collectives under workers' control, to overcome crises.

Everyone in a factory would spend a day in the forest, taking their own sleds, axes and saw, and cut timber to keep the boilers and engines going. Some factories, with the aid of peasants' carts, went to coal mines to collect fuel for their plant. Foundries organised scrap iron drives to feed their furnaces. Relations between factory and factory, for mutual support and exchange, were created. Economic relations between factory and peasants, exchanging manufactures for food and raw materials, were extensive.

The 'know-nothing' workers

Workers' control in industry was allied to peasant farming and to artisan production, a strong economic trignon which the Bolsheviks destroyed, then tried to revive under NEP.

Many and ingenious were the devices of those whom Lenin despised as "know nothing" workers, to overcome shortages. One which took the fancy of some members of the British delegation was the building of a local Soviet House, a community building, without iron fittings. The house was built of timber, notched, and all windows, doors and floors held, as there were no nails, by square pegs driven into round holes; the door hinges were of leather.

And how did the centralised control of Barrister Lenin shape up to the job? Divisions of the Supreme Economic Council, called Glavki, had been created by Lenin and these bodies were to guide and control industry. According to Dobb (ibid, p. 112), confusion – based on wrong and useless information – reigned throughout these divisions. An example: "A committee of investigation set up in June, 1920, reported that many Glavki not only 'do not know what good and in what amounts are kept in the warehouses under their control, but are actually ignorant even of the number of such warehouses'". (Dobb, ibid, p. 112).

In agriculture this control was even more disastrous, causing several famines and war against the peasants which is still going on. Stalin's enforcement of his collective farms in 1929 resulted (according to Dobb, p. 246) in a reduction of cattle by nearly a third by 1931 (more later); sheep and goats by half; horses by a quarter (later by half). Some figures are much higher than Dobb's, who seems to quote Stalinist statistics of that time. The wastage of arable area during this fatal centralisation of farming was enormous. Stalin himself, in an attempt to shift the blame on to

his appointed deputies, wrote an essay, "Many are made dizzy by success", **Labour Monthly** (Communist), June, 1930.

Even in 1962, 1963 and 1964, Russia has bought many million tons of grain from the U.S. and Canada (a less fertile land than Russia) and Khrushchev's central planning of "the new lands" has proved disastrous. Peasants under Czarism did much better when allowed to settle themselves.

From the beginning of Lenin's regime the workers were put under pressure at their jobs that made the old regime seem like organised benevolence. Individual managers were appointed from above and piecework, hated by workers throughout the world, was enforced. This was denounced as a "relic of capitalist exploitation" by Riazanov, a recently resigned Bolshevik, and by Gorki's group, as well as the workers' representatives (see Dobb, p. 91).

The managers were backed up by such armed force that they had never enjoyed under the Czar. The factory committees were abolished. The unions, by force and fraud, were brought under first Communist Party, then State control and the same fate befell the co-operatives. Stakhanovites, petted persons, produce false "norms" of work, 8 or 10 times the normal, which the workers were forced to emulate and which cut their piece rates. Pollitt, leader of the British CP, on his return from Moscow in 1929, boasted that he had seen, as a typical example, one man doing the work of three. Bad as it was under the Czar, the new devils, as in the parable, were even worse than the old.

To those Leninists who now shout "Workers' Control" and to the Trotskyists, too, we say look at the work of Lenin and Trotsky in power. To the Stalinists and the present followers of Khrushchev, who also falsely cry "Workers' Control", we recall the continuation of Lenin's evil work by the latter-day totalitarians.

There have been only two sources of Workers' Control of Industry and Farming, the Syndicalist movement of the world and the spontaneous reaching of the workers towards a better life.

We are still cursed by a 19th Century idea that all change, even a change of tyrants, is necessarily good. There is an old Russian proverb, which is the equivalent of the English, "Better the devil you know than the devil you don't know." Bitter XX Century experience should have taught us its truth.

Franco's rule is even worse than that of the Spanish monarchy; Dollfuss's was more cruel than that of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Kaiserism in Germany aroused the wrath of decent people, but shrank into insignificance beside the crimes of Nazism.

The counter-revolution

The Russian people did not want to change one vile tyranny for another, much less did they wish for a worse oppression. Under Czarism there had been some small area of expression. Despite repression there were strikes of workers and demonstrations. Russian writers produced a splendid literature, including many workers of revolt (H.G. Wells said that a list of the world's best 12 writers would be all Russian).

The aims of the Russian Revolution of March, 1917, were, for the workers, control of their work and equality; for the peasants, the land to the tillers; to all the exploited, liberty of person, assembly, organisation and speech. All semblance of these were destroyed by Lenin. The seizure of power by the Bolsheviks was not a revolution, but the counter-revolution. It is not unusual for the counter-revolution to masquerade as the revolution; that is its only chance of success.

But Lenin's men were not satisfied when they had butchered or jailed the Socialists, Social-Revolutionaries, Liberals, Anarchists and Syndicalists. Next they turned upon themselves. Most of the Central Committee died at their comrades' hands. Throughout Russia and even beyond, untold hundreds of thousands of Communists were murdered by their fellow party members.

The revolution does not devour its own children; the counter-revolution does that.

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A pamphlet by Tom Brown of the Syndicalist Workers' Federation (an early predecessor to today's Solidarity Federation) on Lenin and his contempt for workers' self-organisation.

Published in the 1960s, it has been transcribed here with one copy's typos and stylistic inconsistencies kept intact.

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