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Socialism from Below in The Russian Revolution

Workers Solidarity Movement

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titled to assert its dictatorship even if that dictatorship temporarily clashed with the passing moods of the workers democracy.”

An unexpected disaster?

Almost 130 years ago (50 before the soviet revolution) Michael Bakunin described how the nature of ”states, must tend towards complete power and having become powerful it must embark on a career of conquest, so it shall not be conquered”. This analysis seems to almost prophetically predict the course the Soviet Union took. Bakunin, however was no prophet. When he saw the centralised way, through State power, that the Marxists wanted to bring about revolution, he could make some accurate predictions of the product of that revolution. ”The rule of scientific intellect, the most autocratic, the most despotic, the most arrogant and the most contemptuous of all regimes. They will be a new class, a new hierarchy of sham savants, and the world will be divided into a dominant minority in the name of science, and an immense ignorant majority ”

economic organisations, and not from above, by means of an authoritarian political centre

Trotsky on Socialism from Below

”The very principle of compulsory labour is for the Communist quite unquestionable .. . the only solution to economic difficulties that is correct from the point of view both of principle and of practice is to treat the population of the whole country as the reservoir of the necessary labour power - an almost inexhaustible reservoir - and to introduce strict order into the work of its registration, mobilisation and utilisation”.

”I consider that if the civil war had not plundered our economic organs of all that was strongest, most independent, most endowed with initiative, we should undoubtedly have entered the path of one-man management in the sphere of economic administration much sooner and much less painfully”

1920, War Communism & Terrorism

”the working class...must be thrown here and there, appointed, commanded just like soldiers. Deserters from labour ought to be formed into punitive battalions or put into concentration camps”

to the 9th Party Congress, 1920

In attacking an internal faction of the Bolshevik Party at the 10th Party Congress in 1921 he accused them of

”having placed the workers right to elect representatives above the party. As if the party were not en-

In 1922 after seeing the product of the Russian revolution first hand, Emma Goldman described how ”Soviet Russia had become the modern socialist Lourdes”. Eighty years after the revolution in Russia a reflection on that period has more than just historical value. Many left wing organisations still hold up this era as the model for future revolution. In order to challenge this Bolshevik conception of organisation and revolution we look at what the consequences of this model were.

The Bolsheviks organised as a vanguard party, which intended to lead the revolution. This structure led to particular outcomes and a look at the 'hidden' history of the Russian Revolution illustrates this. Lenin in State and Revolution talks of a society where every cook shall govern. But in reality the party in its capacity of leader of the revolution was governing. By November 9th 1917 a soviet in the Peoples Commissars of Posts & Telegraphs had already been abolished by decree. Even earlier than this, the revolution having barely liberated the workers from wage slavery, Bolshevik leaders were telling workers that ”the best way to support Soviet Government is to carry on with ones job”.

Lenin in March 1918 wrote that the party relates to workers by leading ”them along the true path of labour discipline, along the task of coordinating the task of arguing at mass meetings about the conditions of work with the task of unquestioningly obeying the will of the soviet leader, of the dictator during the work”. So much for every cook governing. These are not just isolated incidents. The party soon began to institutionalise its dominance, for instance factory committees instead of being allowed to form federations had to report to undemocratic bodies which were hand picked by the party. It is in this context that Daniel Guerin argued that ”In fact the power of the soviets only lasted a few months, from October 1917 to the spring of 1918.”

How the Bolsheviks did go about 'securing' the revolution? Trotsky as leader of the Red Army reintroduced bourgeois army discipline, not only including executions for desertion but also all the petty regulations like saluting that gave officers special positions. He abolished election of officers writing "The elective basis is politically pointless and technically inexpedient and has already been set aside by decree". The White Terror was responded to with collective punishments, categorical punishments, torture, hostage taking and random punishments, these were not just directed at known 'Whites' but also at their friends and families. On the 3rd of September 1918, Ivestia announced that over 500 hostages had been shot by the Petrograd Cheka, not because they had committed a crime but because they were unlucky enough to come from the wrong background.

Some will argue that this terror was legitimised by the White Terror. But the terror by April of 1918 was to be used against political groups that supported the revolution but opposed Bolshevik rule. Over two days in April 1918 40 anarchists were killed or wounded and around 500 put in prison in a series of attacks in Moscow and Petrograd. All the major anarchist publications were banned in May 1918. This despite the fact that anarchists had fought for the revolution in October, four anarchists being on the MRC which coordinated the rising. Over the next four years, hundreds then thousands of anarchists were to be arrested, jailed, tortured, exiled and executed. Other pro-revolution left parties suffered a similar faith and by 1919 so did workers who acted independently against the regime.

Bolshevik modes of organisation have particular outcomes, the centralisation of power. This sort of organisation means that 'Stalin didn't fall from the moon' but was the inheritor of this undemocratic organisation. This is in opposition to 'Socialism from Below' and the motto of the First International, "The emancipation of the toilers must be the work of the toilers themselves" and not the work of some 'vanguard' party.

Was This You

Bogush was one of the anarchists of Russian origin deported from the USA in 1921 for his part in opposing the imperialist slaughter of world war one. Soon after arriving he went to see the area controlled by the Makhnovists at a time when they were in their third treaty with the Bolsheviks. He was a few hours there when the Bolsheviks for the third time betrayed this treaty, attacking the Makhnovists without warning. He immediately returned to Krakov where he was arrested by the Cheka, and shot in March of 1921.

Lenin on Socialism from Below

"The irrefutable experience of history has shown that the dictatorship of individual persons was very often the vehicle, the channel of the dictatorship of the revolutionary classes"

"...our task is to study the state capitalism of the Germans, to spare no effort in copying it and not shrink from adopting dictatorial methods to hasten the copying of it"

"Socialism is merely the next step forward from state capitalist monopoly. ...socialism is merely state capitalist monopoly which is made to serve the interests of the whole people and has to that extent ceased to be capitalist monopoly"

The Anarchist Alternative

...We believe, in fact, that in a time of social revolution, what is important for the workers is for them to organise their new life themselves, from the bottom, and with the help of their immediate