Hungary 1956: A revolution against Stalinism

Part two

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This month marks the fiftieth anniversary of one of the most seminal episodes in the postwar history of Eastern Europe—the bloody suppression of the Hungarian Revolution by Soviet tanks. We are reprinting here the second and concluding part of an article dealing with the historical and political background to the popular uprising against the Stalinist bureaucracy, which was first published in the International Workers Bulletin*, the printed forerunner of the* World Socialist Web Site*, in February of 1997. The original German version appeared in December 1996 in the German newspaper* Neue Arbeiterpresse.

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At the heart of the military confrontation which began on October 23, 1956 lay the question of political power. Hungarian workers established revolutionary committees or elected councils all over the country. These were organs of workers' power, similar to those which had appeared in Russia in the revolutions of 1905 and 1917.

By October 25, the workers of Pecs had established the first revolutionary committee. A workers council was set up in the Miskolc factory. That same afternoon, the workers formulated their demands and submitted them to the government. Prisoners were released from jails and labor camps.

A national strike began on October 26. Fighting spread rapidly to the provinces. Revolutionary committees and workers' councils began organizing political and social life independently of the party and government. As in Russia in 1917, a situation of dual power arose.

Isolated from the masses, the party leadership floundered helplessly. The Central Committee of the Communist Party of Hungary eventually agreed to the formation of a new national government. It also promised to renegotiate Hungary's relations with the Soviet government, on condition that the acts of resistance cease.

Although Imre Nagy managed to restrain the party's military committee from attacking Corvin Alley, a center of armed workers' resistance, sections of the ruling Stalinist bureaucracy were intent on crushing the rebellion by force. All over the country there were bloody clashes, with numerous fatalities.

The Stalinist "reformers" show their true face

On October 28, Nagy and Yuri Andropov, the Soviet ambassador, held talks in the presence of a representative of the Kremlin bureaucracy, Anastas Mikoyan. The most discredited members of the Hungarian party leadership retreated to the Soviet Union for their own safety. A new group of six Central Committee members—including both Janos Kadar and Imre Nagy—took over political leadership.

It seemed as though the new government had received the go-ahead from Moscow and could now act with greater independence. Nagy recognized the councils as legitimate workers' organs and even promised to build a republic based on them. He ordered a cease-fire and in a radio speech announced the immediate withdrawal of the Soviet troops and the liquidation of the AVH, the hated Hungarian secret police.

Behind the scenes, however, the party's military committee was drawing up plans for a military dictatorship and making the appropriate preparations.

On October 29, the withdrawal of Soviet troops began in earnest. There were only sporadic armed clashes. Most Hungarians believed that their revolution had triumphed over the Kremlin bureaucracy.

At this point reactionary movements were founded with the aim of shifting the revolution in a different direction. Anti-Semitic slogans began appearing sporadically on Budapest walls. Released from detention, the Catholic cardinal, József Mindszenty, was glorified by the Western media as the real hero of the resistance. Such developments were later used by the Kremlin bureaucracy to claim that the Hungarian uprising was a fascist counterrevolution.

On October 31, Nagy made a speech in Kossuth square in which he announced the beginning of talks with the Soviet Union and plans for Hungary's withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact. He promised that October 23 would be a new national holiday.

On the very same day, as most Hungarians were still celebrating the victory of their revolution, the Kremlin leadership met to consider the crisis. Recently released documents confirm that after heated factional conflicts the Kremlin agreed it could no longer tolerate political experiments or reforms in Hungary. It decided to restore the old order by force. The Moscow bureaucracy had every reason to fear that the revolution would spread, threatening its own rule.

On November 1, two members of the Hungarian party leadership, Ferenc Muennich and Janos Kadar, went to the Soviet embassy. For the next two days no member of the leadership was able to contact either of them. They were receiving their orders from Moscow. Both were to play a central part in crushing the workers' councils.

The Soviet leadership under Khrushchev had discussed the matter with the Chinese party leadership and obtained its consent for a military intervention in Hungary. Zhou Enlai traveled to Budapest to make clear his government's approval of the plan. Fresh troops from the most remote regions of the Soviet Union started to move towards Hungary. To prevent the recurrence of fraternization with the Hungarian workers, the bureaucracy selected troops who barely spoke Russian.

Tito's Yugoslav government, which at first indicated support for the uprising in Hungary, also made clear that its "anti-Stalinism" should not be misconstrued as support for the workers' conquest of power. It was far too interested in securing its own bureaucratic rule for that. Tito even declared to Moscow's envoy that the Kremlin should "get the matter out of the way quickly and thoroughly."

Western powers give Moscow the go-ahead

The US and its Western allies exploited the Hungarian rebellion for their own purposes. Radio Free Europe launched an anticommunist propaganda crusade, giving every impression that the West would intervene on the side of the Hungarians in the event of a Soviet attack. Through the channels of secret diplomacy, however, the US government signaled Moscow that it recognized Hungary as part of the Soviet sphere of influence. The message was clear: the Kremlin could act as it saw fit.

On the evening that Soviet troops marched back into Hungary, US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles declared that Moscow's action was completely legal under the terms of the Warsaw Pact. "From the standpoint of international law and the honoring of agreements," he said, "I do not think that one can claim that it is a breach of contract."

The US government understood that the victory of the Hungarian workers could spark rebellions by the working class in the other Eastern European countries and eventually in Western Europe. It clearly recognized Stalinism's suppression of the working class as a mainstay of its own rule and a bulwark against revolutionary upheavals.

The other Western powers backed Washington's agreement with Moscow. England and France were at that moment embroiled in a military adventure in another part of the world. Egypt had nationalized the Suez Canal and in so doing expropriated its former French and British owners. Israel, France and Great Britain attacked Egypt on October 29. The Soviet Union signaled that it would not intervene to support Egypt. Under pressure from Washington, the British, French and Israeli troops arranged a cease-fire. Although Egypt kept the canal, a large part of its territory was occupied by the Israelis.

In light of the Kremlin's cooperation in the Middle East, the Western powers saw no reason to cancel the Potsdam and Yalta treaties. Even after November 1, when the Nagy government announced its decision to withdraw from the Warsaw Pact, establish Hungarian neutrality and seek the protection of the four powers, the West showed no desire to intervene. The imperialist powers placed their trust in the Kremlin bureaucracy and its powerful apparatus. They feared that the Nagy government would be unable to keep the workers under control and prevent the revolution from spreading.

Nevertheless, Nagy and his advisors refused to believe in an imminent military intervention by the Kremlin with the tacit backing of the Western governments.

On November 3, Nagy established a new government, including ministers from the Small Peasants Party and the Social Democrats. The same day a Hungarian delegation under the leadership of the minister of defense, Colonel Pál Maléter, went to the Soviet headquarters in Toekoel to negotiate the final withdrawal of the Soviet troops. General Serov, leader of the KGB, had them arrested immediately.

The next day the Soviet army's invasion began. Nagy was warned, and with 43 of his co-workers was able to escape to the Yugoslav embassy, where they were granted asylum. Later it was revealed that the Yugoslav role had been arranged in advance between Tito and Khrushchev. When they left the embassy sometime later, with the assurance of safe conduct, they were arrested. Nagy and some of his closest collaborators were hanged in 1958.

A new government was set up under Kadar, who immediately requested that the UN secretary general remove the Hungarian question from the agenda of the Security Council.

The Hungarian workers renewed their military struggle for a free and truly socialist society. In a number of places armed resistance broke out against the Soviet troops. During fighting in Budapest more than 160 people were killed on November 6 alone. Hundreds of Hungarians were arrested and deported to Soviet gulags. The revolution was drowned in blood.

But the workers did not give up. Lightly armed and with Molotov cocktails, they fought with all their might to defend their factories and homes.

Workers' councils organize resistance

That the Hungarian Revolution was anything but a counterrevolutionary rebellion for the restoration of the capitalist order is shown, above all, in the role played by the workers' councils. The Kadar government had a hard time pushing through the policies decided by Moscow. The workers' councils, which were the backbone of the armed resistance, still largely controlled political and economic life throughout the country.

The first workers' council was elected as early as October 24 in the Eggesult Izzo lamp factory, one of the biggest factories in Budapest, with 10,000 workers. This decision was taken as Soviet tanks rolled into the city for the first time.

The workers' council demanded the dismissal of the factory directors appointed by the bureaucracy and their replacement by workers' committees at all levels of production. "Let us demonstrate that we can settle matters better than our blind, tyrannical bosses," read the council's 10-point declaration.

In the days that followed, workers' councils were set up in the steel mills, the shipyards of the Danube, the mines and many factories all over Hungary. They tried to enforce their political demands, which coincided to a great extent with those of the students, with a general strike. A meeting of the delegates of the workers' councils from the biggest factories in Budapest agreed upon a program, which began with the statement: "The factories belong to the workers."

When Soviet troops and tanks invaded on November 4, the Nagy government collapsed and all of the Hungarian party's "reformers" capitulated to the Kremlin bureaucracy. This demonstrated that the working class and its councils were the real driving force of the Hungarian Revolution.

From the beginning of the revolution, the power of the Nagy government was hardly felt outside the walls of the government building. The regime went further and further to the right the more the situation came to a head. It could not and would not rest upon the workers. Instead, it called for support from the imperialists and the UN.

The students' and workers' combat groups were hardly a military match for the Soviet tanks. Nonetheless, the workers continued to fight in the councils and in the factories. They organized another political general strike, this time against the new Soviet-installed government of Kadar. In the face of Soviet occupation and Stalinist repression, the strikers held out for a whole month.

In the working class areas of Budapest and in the industrial suburbs and towns, the occupying forces of the Stalinists met fierce resistance. In Dunapentele, a town which had been built around huge iron and steel works, the workers' council produced a statement during the siege which read: "Dunapentele is the leading socialist town in Hungary. In this town, all inhabitants are workers and they have the power here.... The town's population is armed. It will not give up because it has built the factories and the houses with its own hands.... The workers will defend the town against fascism—as well as against the Soviet troops."

The Budapest workers also defended the factories they had occupied against the tanks. The hospitals reported that the majority of the dead and wounded were young workers, whereas the well-to-do villa areas of Budapest, where the upper-middle class lived, were hardly touched.

On November 9, the government outlawed the Budapest workers'

central council and arrested the majority of its members after the council had renewed its call for a strike. But even then the workers refused to be intimidated. They extended their strikes on December 11 and 12. Even the Communist Party's newspaper *Nepszabadsag* was forced to concede that the strike was the "biggest in the history of the Hungarian workers movement."

In response, the government declared a state of emergency, giving itself the power to ban all meetings and demonstrations and to imprison people without trial. Even so, the workers continued their struggle. In the iron and steel mills of Csepel, workers staged a sit-down strike. They demanded the release of their leaders.

A speaker declared: "We think that this is the only reasonable thing we can do at the moment. We have come to the factory because we need our wages and because we are together here. If we stayed at home, the factory doors would be closed and it would be much easier for the government to pick us off individually than here in the factory where we are united."

Similar occupations spread to many other big factories. When the AVH and the Soviet troops were eventually called in to take over the factories, fighting broke out.

Even after the last armed resistance in "Red Csepel" ended on November 11, the workers remained organized in councils in the factories, regions and towns and on a national level. And the strike continued.

The strikers stipulated to Moscow and the Hungarian government that they would go back to work only if political prisoners were released and Soviet troops withdrawn. Their aim was to keep the factories under workers' control and strengthen the councils' power.

A meeting was called in Budapest on November 21 for the purpose of forming a national workers' council. When the workers arrived at the meeting place, they found that the police and the army had bolted the entrances to the building. Despite the massive threat of repression, the delegates reconvened at another site and held their meeting. Many workers in the factories went on protest strikes, fearing that their delegates had been arrested.

Only after weeks of repression did the workers' resolve weaken, making it possible for the Kadar government to consolidate its power over the councils. Lacking an independent political leadership, the delegates of the workers' councils were unable to take power. Instead, they negotiated endlessly with the Kadar government. Finally, in most of the councils, a majority voted to return to work. But only a fourth of the workers returned.

In January, the Kadar government felt strong enough to move in for the kill. It issued a decree banning strikes or the call for strikes, threatening violators with the death penalty. The workers' councils were barred from making any more political decisions and all resolutions concerning the factories were required to have the approval of a political commissar of the Stalinist party.

The last thing the workers wanted was councils that functioned as instruments of the bureaucracy. They decided to dissolve the bodies.

Hungary and the Fourth International

As a member of the Nagy government, Kadar had enjoyed a degree of confidence among some layers of the population (mainly the farmers and the middle class of the towns). This is one reason why the Kremlin chose him to head the new government installed by force of Soviet arms.

The Kremlin left it to Kadar to enter into a round of talks with the workers, during which he made false promises in order to persuade them to give up their struggle.

Moscow's plan was eventually successful, but not because workers supported Kadar. What the workers lacked was a Marxist understanding of Stalinism and the necessity for a political revolution to overthrow the bureaucracy.

Only the Trotskyists organised in the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) warned the Hungarian workers against any confidence in the various "reform wings" of the bureaucracy and against allowing their fate to be decided by the Western powers or the UN.

The ICFI called for the unification of the workers of Hungary, the rest of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in a struggle to overthrow the Stalinist bureaucracy. It based itself on the analysis of Stalinism made by Leon Trotsky, who had already concluded in the 1930s that the bureaucracy was a counterrevolutionary force that could defend its power and privileges against the working class only through increasingly close cooperation with the imperialist bourgeoisie. The social conquests of the October Revolution could be defended and the path to socialism opened up only through a political struggle by the working class to overthrow the bureaucracy and unite with workers in the West on the basis of the program of world socialist revolution.

This perspective was central to the establishment of the Fourth International in 1938. The founding program of the Fourth International states: "Either the bureaucracy, becoming ever more the organ of the world bourgeoisie in the workers state, will overthrow the new forms of property and plunge the country back to capitalism, or the working class will crush the bureaucracy and open the way to socialism."

But in 1956, Hungarian workers were cut off from this perspective as a result of Stalinist purges and repression. There existed no section of the Fourth International in Hungary. The Stalinist bureaucracy had carried out a ruthless campaign of political genocide against its socialist opponents, including the Moscow Trials of the 1930s. The most important Trotskyist cadres, as well as other left opponents of Stalinism, were murdered, not just in the Soviet Union, but in many other parts of the world. The principal target of the purges and mass executions were the supporters of Leon Trotsky, who was assassinated in Mexico on Stalin's orders in 1940.

An additional and critical factor in the postwar period was the emergence of an opportunist tendency within the Fourth International itself, which challenged Trotsky's assessment of the counterrevolutionary role of Stalinism. Basing themselves on the nationalizations carried out by the Stalinist bureaucracy at the end of the 1940s in Eastern Europe, Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel concluded that under pressure from the working class, the bureaucracy could be forced to the left and compelled to play an historically progressive role. This repudiation of Trotskyism meant, in practice, the liquidation of independent Marxist parties of the Fourth International.

The supporters of Pablo and Mandel glorified Yugoslav leader Tito and other alleged "reformers" within the Stalinist bureaucracy—such as Nagy in Hungary and Gomulka in Poland. They proclaimed Khrushchev to be an "anti- Stalinist" following his secret speech to the 20th Party Congress. All of this served to politically disarm the workers in Hungary.

Nagy's role in politically subordinating the Hungarian workers to Stalinism and the bloody suppression of their rebellion by Khrushchev's tanks not only revealed the true face of the Stalinist "reformers," but also the political character of Pabloism as an appendage and prop for the counterrevolutionary bureaucracy.

The International Committee had been created three years before to defend the revolutionary perspectives of Trotskyism against Pabloite opportunism. Lacking forces in Hungary in 1956, it nevertheless did all in its power to support the workers politically. It published all of the reports of the Hungarian Revolution which had been suppressed by the Stalinist and capitalist media.

The British section of the International Committee, in particular, used the lessons of the Hungarian rebellion to undertake an offensive against Stalinism. It turned to workers, young people and intellectuals who

belonged to the Communist Party or stood close to it, but were angered and repelled by the Kremlin's actions in Hungary. It explained that the Hungarian events vindicated Trotsky's analysis and the historic struggle of the Fourth International against Stalinism.

Through such a political offensive, the British section was able to win the best members of the old Communist parties, assist them in breaking from Stalinism and win them to the Fourth International. This strengthened the authority of the section in the working class and assisted in the building of new sections.

The role of the bureaucracy was further exposed in the subsequent years of Kadar's regime. His "reforms" of the 1960s—carried out with the approval of the Kremlin bureaucracy—were aimed at the partial introduction of "free market" forms of exploitation. In 1980 he began to agitate vehemently against so-called social "equalisation," under conditions where workers were increasingly angered by the growing economic and social differentiation between the working masses and middle-class elements in and around the bureaucratic state and party apparatus.

Kadar's successors at the head of the Stalinist party and its successor organizations, such as Gyula Horn and the country's current prime minister, Ferenc Gyurcsany, went even further in paving the way for the reintroduction of capitalism.

Contrary to bourgeois propaganda about the Hungarian Revolution, it was the Stalinist bureaucracy which steered the country towards capitalist restoration, not the working class. In 1956, the working class fought for genuine socialism. The bloody suppression of the Hungarian workers was a decisive precondition for further steps by the Stalinist bureaucracy toward the final liquidation of the gains of the Russian Revolution and the restoration of capitalist market relations in Russia and Eastern Europe—with all of its attendant catastrophic consequences for the Hungarian, East European and Russian working class.

Concluded