

Ninety years since the Russian Revolution: The prospects for socialism in the twenty-first century

Part 1

Nick Beams

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The following is Part 1 of a lecture delivered by Nick Beams, Socialist Equality Party national secretary and Senate candidate for NSW, to SEP election meetings in Sydney on November 18, Perth on November 20 and Melbourne on November 21. Part 2 will be published on Monday November 26 and Part 3 on Tuesday November 27.

Ninety years ago on November 7, 1917 (October 25 according to the Russian calendar of the time), there took place the greatest event of the twentieth century. The Russian Revolution did not merely shake the world, it shaped all the politics and history that followed.

Its enduring significance lies in the fact that it was the first time in human history that the working masses, upon whose labour human civilisation has rested down through the ages, seized political power and consciously undertook the task of remaking society in Russia, and on an international scale.

Ninety years on we are, in many ways, removed from the society out of which the Russian Revolution erupted. But in a profound sense, we live in the epoch of the Russian Revolution.

Much has changed in the past nine decades. The productive forces, the fruit of man's labour, of science and its application, have expanded on a vast scale. But the social relations of capitalist society remain. Production is still carried out according to the dictates of the market, whose driving force is the struggle for profit by privately-owned corporations. Notwithstanding the global character of all aspects of economic and social life, the world remains divided by the nation-state system, giving rise to rivalries and conflicts among the capitalist great powers and the threat of war.

Much has changed. But mankind is confronted with the same historical problems that propelled the Russian working class on to the road of revolution, and which saw tens of millions of workers, youth and socialist-minded intellectuals take that road in the years that followed.

From the first day after the Russian Revolution, the ruling classes all over the world recognised it as a threat, fearing the spread of what they called the "Bolshevik infection". It was necessary, Winston Churchill proclaimed—speaking on behalf of all of them—to "strangle the Bolshevik baby in its cradle." And they attempted to do just that, sending over the next months some 14 armies to try to overthrow the first workers' state.

From the outset the ruling classes and their spokesmen waged a political and ideological war against the Russian Revolution. The revolution was a coup, a putsch, a conspiracy, launched by the fanatic Lenin to set up a totalitarian regime. Democracy was just about to flower in Russia when it was crushed by the Bolsheviks.

From 1917 until today, it has proved impossible for the ideologues of the ruling classes to acknowledge the simple truth: that the Russian

Revolution was the outcome of the entry of the masses into the historical process, and that the great social force of the working class was the power that drove it forward.

In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, this ideological offensive has become ever-more strident, with all concern for historical truth swept aside.

The reason the Soviet Union collapsed, it is claimed, had nothing to do with the isolation of the revolution, its failure to spread to the advanced capitalist countries of western Europe and the terrible degeneration which that isolation produced in the form of Stalinism. Rather, it was the inevitable outcome of the October Revolution itself, a criminal enterprise that had its origins in the totalitarian conceptions of Bolshevism. Above all, the end of the Soviet Union meant the definitive end of Marxism and the socialist project, if not of history itself.

Such assertions are based on a false identity of Marxism, and its perspective of world socialist revolution, with the history and fate of the Soviet Union. The Marxist movement anticipated the Russian Revolution, prepared it and led it. But what subsequently took place in the Soviet Union and Marxism are by no means identical. In fact, the turning point in the historical development of the Soviet Union was the suppression and then extirpation of Marxism by Stalinism.

More than seven decades ago, when the bourgeois liberals and academics were worshipping before the accomplished fact of the Soviet Union, the Marxist movement, the Fourth International led by Leon Trotsky, explained that if the Stalinist bureaucracy were not overthrown by the working class, it would lead to the liquidation of the USSR and the restoration of capitalism.

But none of the contemporary right-wing historians can undertake a serious examination of Trotsky's analysis because it would shatter their assertions that the degeneration was inherent in the revolution itself—because it violated fundamental laws of man's social existence.

According to the historian Richard Pipes, the attempt to end private ownership of the means of production was bound to fail—and all such attempts will fail in the future—because private ownership is "not a transient phenomenon but a permanent feature of social life and as such indestructible." Therefore, socialism had to assume a dictatorial form. It was an attempt to violate the essential characteristics of mankind, and consequently had to be imposed by force. Lenin knew this, and this was why, from the very origins of the Bolshevik Party in 1903, he sought to impose a dictatorial regime.

The historian Martin Malia insisted that the suppression of private property was an "effort to suppress the real world, and this is something that cannot succeed in the long run."

In other words, the revolution did not succeed because a non-capitalist society is intrinsically impossible. In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Francis Fukuyama drew the inevitable conclusion from this outlook when he proclaimed the “end of history”, meaning that mankind’s historical evolution had come to an end with the capitalist market.

Such an outlook implies the “end of history” in another sense as well. If private property in the means of production is inherent in human civilisation itself, then how are we to explain the historical development of human society. How is one to account for the millennia of human existence where there was no such thing as “property”? And how can one explain the transformation of property forms throughout history—from slavery, feudalism, the various forms of Asiatic despotism and finally to the emergence of capitalism itself in the last 500 years?

Capitalist property forms are no more lodged in the essence of mankind than were those corresponding to slavery and feudalism. The reactionary historians who denounce socialist revolution as a crime against human nature and the essence of man, are the modern-day equivalent of the priests of an earlier period, who sanctified feudal society by claiming that it was in accordance with the will of God.

But notwithstanding the blessings of the Church, feudal society and its property forms were overthrown and replaced by capitalism, just as earlier forms of society had been replaced by feudalism.

How then are we to explain the historical process itself? Here we come to one of two great discoveries of Marx—the law of development of human history.

In 1859, the same year that Darwin published his *Origin of Species*, and cleared the way for man to study his own biological origins, Marx formulated the laws governing the historical development of human society.

“In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness.... At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or—this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms—with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution. The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure” (Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, 1859).

The Russian Revolution did not take place in defiance of the laws of history, as the reactionaries try to maintain, but in accordance with them. It was anticipated, prepared and led by Marxists, who were grounded on a scientific and historical understanding of class relations and who based themselves on the objective logic of events.

With the Russian Revolution, mankind reaches a new stage in its historical development. Here, for the first time, we have a struggle to make history on the basis of consciousness of its laws of development, in which the active participants, making a scientific analysis of social and political processes as they unfold, undertake practical initiatives on the basis of that analysis to change the course of events.

Let us examine the processes that led to this new stage.

I referred earlier to the fact that Marx made two great discoveries. He not only uncovered the general laws of historical development, but he also revealed the law of motion of capitalist society—how the system of private ownership of the means of production and free wage labour led to the

greatest development of the productive forces seen in human history and, at the same time, prepared the way for the breakdown of this mode of production and its replacement by socialism.

All previous industrial modes of production have been characterised by conservatism. In capitalist society it is the reverse.

“Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones,” Marx wrote in the *Communist Manifesto*, 1848.

But it is this very dynamic development, driving the capitalist class all over world, which lays the basis for the overthrow of capitalism itself. The growth of the productive forces, driven on by the inexorable logic of the profit system, comes into conflict with the social relations based on private ownership of the means of production. The very growth of the productivity of labour leads to a breakdown in capitalist society itself, and the emergence of a revolutionary crisis.

In the years immediately following Marx’s death in 1883, this perspective seemed to receive confirmation in the “great depression” in prices and profits that characterised capitalism in the two decades following the financial crisis of 1873. However, in the mid-1890s there was a marked shift. A new phase of capitalist development—a springtide—was clearly underway.

This development was to find expression in the theories developed by Eduard Bernstein, a central leader of the Social Democratic Party of Germany, the leading party of the international Marxist movement. According to Bernstein, developments within capitalism itself had cast their verdict on Marx’s “breakdown” theory.

There was no inherent tendency to crisis, and consequently socialism would not come about through the revolutionary conquest of political power. Rather, it would take place through the gradual accumulation of social reforms and the gains won by the trade union movement.

Bernstein’s perspective was an attack on the very foundations of the Marxist perspective and the revolutionary party itself. If there was no inherent tendency within capitalism to breakdown, then it followed that there was no historic necessity for socialism. As Rosa Luxemburg drew out, socialism then became anything you wanted to call it—a kind of utopia, a nice ideal—but no longer the outcome of the material development of capitalist society.

If that were the case, then on what was the struggle for socialism to be based? Luxemburg explained: “We thus quite happily return to the principle of justice, to the old war horse on which the reformers of the earth have rocked for ages, for the lack of surer means of historic transportation. We return to that lamentable Rosinante on which the Don Quixotes of history have galloped towards the great reform of the earth, always to come home with their eyes blackened.”

To be continued

Authorised by N. Beams, 100B Sydenham Rd, Marrickville, NSW
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