

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

Part 2

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26 November 2007

The following is Part 2 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 1 was published on Saturday, November 24, Part 3 will be posted on Tuesday November 27.

The origins of Bolshevism lay not in the attempt of Lenin to fashion a dictatorship, as the various right-wing historians maintain, but in the far-reaching conclusions he drew from the struggle waged in the socialist movement against the conceptions of Bernstein and his followers in the Russian movement, the so-called Economists.

Responding to the growth of the Russian working class and its rising militancy—a product of the industrial boom of the 1890s—the Economists maintained that the task of the party was to organise the economic struggle and, where necessary, give it an immediate political character, in the form of demands for reforms. In other words, the Economists' perspective was to steer the socialist movement in Russia into the channels of trade unionism.

This, however, involved a fundamentally opposed class orientation and perspective, because trade unionism—the struggle of workers against their employers for better wages and conditions, and even for legislation to protect their interests—never goes beyond the framework of capitalist society.

In his book *What is to be Done?* Lenin established that the necessity for the party, and the character of its political tasks, arose from the very structure of capitalist society.

While the working class spontaneously gravitated towards socialism, the ideology of the bourgeoisie nevertheless spontaneously re-imposed itself. This was because that ideology had existed for hundreds of years, because it was sustained by the basic social relations of capitalism, and because the ruling classes held the material foundations of culture in their hands.

Accordingly, Lenin insisted, an organised struggle had to be waged to bring socialism into the working class from without—that is, from outside the immediate conflict between the working class and the employers. In this lay the historic task of the party.

More than 100 years on, there is no conception that draws greater fire from the opponents of Marxism than this. Those who are on the “left”, begin by pointing out that Marx had insisted that the emancipation of the working class was the task of the working class itself. They then go on to assert that Lenin substituted the role of the working class with professional revolutionaries, who exercised a dictatorship over the working class.

In fact, there is no contradiction between Marx and Lenin. The socialist revolution can only be carried out by the working class. But the working

class can only emancipate itself, and the whole of humanity, if it acts as a politically independent force. That political independence is established and re-established through the continuous struggle waged by the revolutionary party against all those political tendencies that try, in one way or another, to subordinate the working class to the capitalist order.

Lenin's opponents within the socialist movement repeatedly attacked him for his “quarrelsome” attitude, “hair-splitting”, “sectarianism” and “dogmatism”—in short all the charges that opportunists have leveled against Marxists ever since.

Lenin's intransigence was based on a definite political conception: that the differences within the socialist movement were not disputes over words, but expressed the pressure of different class forces and tendencies. His conception was to be powerfully vindicated in the course of the explosive events that were to lead to the Russian Revolution.

Bernstein's attack on the Marxist perspective—his denial of any tendency within capitalism towards breakdown, and hence the necessity of socialist revolution—flowed from the upswing in the fortunes of capitalism from the mid-1890s.

But there was another, no less powerful, shift in the structure of world economy and politics that was also to exert a major influence. The last quarter of the nineteenth century saw two interconnected processes: the formation and consolidation of the nation-state system in Western Europe, and the growth of the working class, resulting from the expansion of industrialisation within the new political framework.

Marx had located the origins of the socialist revolution in the conflict between the growth of the productive forces of capitalism and the old social relations within which they had become trapped. While he had emphasised that capitalism developed as a world-historic force, his analysis was increasingly interpreted in a rather mechanical fashion. The starting point became, not the world economy, but the framework of the newly developed national states.

As Trotsky was later to explain, that was how the socialist parties of the Second International conceived of the socialist revolution. The hour of socialism would arrive when the productive forces within each national state had developed to their fullest extent. In this view, the major countries of Europe—Britain, Germany, Italy, France and Russia—were regarded as separate entities, moving towards the same destination, but at different points along the track. Germany was in the lead, the others were following behind, and Russia, still ruled by a feudal aristocracy and awaiting a bourgeois revolution, was a long way back.

The first Russian Revolution in 1905 shattered the foundations of this historical schema. Strikes and demonstrations, the like of which had never been seen, erupted against the tsarist autocracy, signifying the emergence

of a new era. Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution, elaborated in the course of the tumultuous events themselves, provided both an understanding of what was taking place and a perspective for intervening. Like all developments in Marxist theory, his creative response was grounded on a profound historical analysis.

Every Marxist agreed that Russia faced a bourgeois revolution—in other words, that the central political task was to overthrow the tsarist autocracy and establish the democratic freedoms that had been won in the West. But how was this to be carried out? Russia was not the France of 1789, where the revolution was led by the bourgeoisie, at the head of the masses of Paris and the peasantry, and where the working class had not yet come into existence. Nor was it the Germany of 1848, where the emergence of the working class was enough to frighten the bourgeoisie into the camp of reaction, but where the working class was not sufficiently powerful to take power into its own hands.

Russia faced a bourgeois revolution ... but where were the Russian equivalents of the French revolutionists, Danton and Robespierre? They did not exist. And there were no concentrations of artisans and craftsmen, petty producers in the cities, as there had been in Paris. Instead, there were masses of industrial workers.

Plekhanov, the father of Russian Marxism, insisted that Russia's development had to follow the path taken by Western Europe. Accordingly, the working class had to proceed with "tact", so as not to frighten the bourgeoisie and prevent it from carrying out its designated historical task—the bourgeois revolution.

Lenin, while agreeing with Plekhanov on the bourgeois character of the Russian Revolution, penetrated more deeply into its class dynamics. The bourgeoisie, he insisted, was incapable of carrying out the role assigned to it in Plekhanov's schema. The working class would have to take forward the most radical form of the bourgeois democratic revolution.

At the heart of the Russian Revolution was the agrarian question—namely, the overthrow of all the remnants of the feudal state. This meant that the landholdings of the nobility, on which that state rested, had to be expropriated. Lenin argued that the bourgeois-democratic revolution would therefore take the form of the "democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry". The proletariat and the peasantry would share state power and would carry forward the bourgeois-democratic revolution to its fullest extent.

Trotsky's perspective differed with those of Lenin and Plekhanov, and it involved a fundamental shift in perspective. Both Lenin and Plekhanov, notwithstanding the differences between them, shared a common starting point: they assessed the revolution according to the level of development, and the relation of class forces, inside Russia. Trotsky insisted that the revolution had to be assessed from the world situation within which it was unfolding.

Trotsky shared Lenin's assessment of the Russian bourgeoisie and his criticism of Plekhanov on that question. But he went further and pointed to the weakness in Lenin's position. The formulation of the "democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry" did not address the question of which class would play the leading role.

Lenin's perspective was, he noted, a kind of self-denying ordinance: the proletariat having come to power would have to stop at purely democratic measures and not challenge the power of the bourgeoisie. But this schema would be contradicted by the dynamic of the revolution itself. The working class would be compelled, by the logic of its own struggle, to take political power and overthrow the bourgeoisie. That was one of the lessons of the revolution of 1905, when the bourgeoisie resisted purely democratic demands such as the eight-hour day with closures and lockouts. In order to secure such democratic demands the working class would have to wrest political power from the bourgeoisie and initiate socialist measures.

But the question then arose: How could the working class maintain

power when it formed only a minority of Russia's population, and was vastly outnumbered by the peasantry?

Considered from the standpoint of the situation within Russia, Trotsky's perspective was unviable. But that was just the problem ... the revolution could not be correctly conceived from the standpoint of Russia alone, but only within the world context. Then altogether different conclusions followed.

The proponents of the schema advanced by Plekhanov were wont to cite Marx's comments that the development of capitalism in England showed the future of every country—the implication being that Russia had some considerable distance to travel before it would come to the socialist revolution.

Trotsky replied that this was to interpret Marx in a completely mechanical way. The development of English capitalism was not a kind of stereotype that other nations would have to follow. It was necessary to analyse the processes of capitalist development in the spirit of Marx himself. Then it was clear that the development of capitalism in Britain was not some kind of model for other nations, but rather the start of an economic process that had outgrown the framework within which it had initially developed—in Britain—and now embraced the whole world.

In June 1905 Trotsky elaborated his perspective: "Binding all countries together with its mode of production and commerce, capitalism has converted the whole world into a single economic and political organism. Just as modern credit binds thousands of undertakings by invisible ties and gives to capital an incredible mobility which prevents many small bankruptcies but which at the same time is the cause of the unprecedented sweep of general economic crises, so the whole economic and political effort of capitalism, its world trade, its system of monstrous state debts, and the political grouping of nations which draw all the forces of reaction into a kind of world-wide joint-stock company, had not only resisted all individual political crises, but also prepared the basis for a social crisis of unheard-of dimensions. ...

"This immediately gives the events now unfolding an international character, and opens up a wide horizon. The political emancipation of Russia led by the working class will raise that class to a height as yet unknown in history, will transfer to it colossal power and resources, and will make it the initiator of the liquidation of world capitalism, for which history has created all the objective conditions" (Leon Trotsky, *The Permanent Revolution and Results and Prospects*, pp. 239-240).

All the issues of program and perspective that had arisen in the course of the 1905 revolution were to emerge in an even more explosive form in August 1914, when the long simmering tensions among the capitalist great powers erupted in World War I. The outbreak of war marked the end of the historically progressive phase of capitalist development and the opening of a new epoch in which, as Frederick Engels had warned, mankind was faced with the prospect of socialism or barbarism.

It is difficult to convey the scope of the violence, as young men, some little more than boys, were sent over the top, day in day out, to be mown down by machine gun fire. From the cell where she had been imprisoned by the German imperial government, Rosa Luxemburg described the unfolding catastrophe.

"The scene has thoroughly changed. The six weeks' march to Paris has become a world drama. Mass murder has become a monotonous task, and yet the final solution is not one step nearer. Capitalist rule is caught in its own trap, and cannot ban the spirit that it has invoked.

"Gone is the first mad delirium. ...The show is over. The curtain has fallen on trains filled with reservists, as they pull out amid the joyous cries of enthusiastic maidens. We no longer see their laughing faces, smiling cheerily from the train windows upon a war-mad population. Quietly they trot through the streets, with their sacks upon their shoulders. And the public, with a fretful face, goes about its daily task.

"Into the disillusioned atmosphere of pale daylight there rings a

different chorus; the hoarse croak of the hawks and hyenas of the battlefield. ... the cannon fodder that was loaded upon the trains in August and September is rotting on the battlefields of Belgium and the Vosges, while profits are springing, like weeds, from the fields of the dead. ...

“Shamed, dishonoured, wading in blood and dripping with filth, thus capitalist society stands. Not as we usually see it, playing the roles of peace and righteousness, of order, of philosophy, of ethics—[but] as a roaring beast, as an orgy of anarchy, as a pestilent breath, devastating culture and humanity—so it appears in all its hideous nakedness.”

With the outbreak of war, Trotsky deepened the analysis he had advanced in 1905. The war was a result of the eruption of the contradiction between world economy—the growth of capitalism as a world system, with every part tied to the whole—and the division of the world into rival and conflicting nation states. Each of the capitalist great powers sought to resolve this contradiction by establishing itself as a world power, leading to the struggle of each against all. The contradictions of the capitalist economy could only be solved on a progressive basis through the world socialist revolution, not as some distant perspective, but as the only realistic answer to the barbarism of imperialism.

The outbreak of war established the objective significance of the intransigent struggle waged by Lenin inside the Russian social democratic movement against opportunism.

The parties of the Second International—above all the German Social Democratic Party, the largest section of the Second International—betrayed the working class by voting for war credits. This historic betrayal demonstrated that the tendencies Lenin had fought were not some Russian phenomenon, but existed on an international scale.

These tendencies had their roots in the historical development of capitalism. The same processes that had led to the global struggle of the major capitalist powers had also led to the corruption of the leaderships of an upper stratum within the workers’ movement. The resources plundered from the colonies, the development of financial parasitism, formed the material foundations for the creation of a labour aristocracy.

Social chauvinism, the open abandonment of internationalism and the collaboration of the social democratic leaders with their “own” bourgeoisie could not be put down to the individual failings of individual leaders. The betrayal was not an individual, but a social phenomenon. It was necessary to uncover its material roots.

“The bourgeoisie of all the big powers are waging the war to divide and exploit the world, and oppress other nations. A few crumbs of the bourgeoisie’s huge profits may come the way of the small group of labour bureaucrats, labour aristocrats, and petty-bourgeois fellow travellers. Social chauvinism and opportunism have the same class basis, namely, the alliance of a small section of privileged workers with ‘their’ national bourgeoisie *against* the working-class masses; the alliance between the lackeys of the bourgeoisie and the bourgeoisie *against* the class the latter is exploiting” (Lenin, *Collected Works*, Volume 22, p. 112).

The leaders of the Second International had betrayed the working class in supporting the war, and the International could not be revived. It was dead so far as the socialist revolution was concerned. It was necessary to found a new international, the Third International, to re-organise and reorient the international workers’ movement.

Lenin first made this proposal, not in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, but in 1914-15 under conditions of extreme isolation. As Trotsky later explained, it appeared that internationalism had “disappeared at once in the fire and smoke of the international carnage”. And when it did reappear “like a dim flickering light” from separate groups in different countries, it was written off by the various representatives of the bourgeoisie as the dying remains of some kind of Utopian sect.

But the revolutionary internationalists, in contradistinction to all the opportunists of their day—and of ours—did not proceed according to what

appeared to be immediately realisable at the time, or what seemed to command support. They based themselves on the objective logic of events. The masses had been deceived by the bourgeoisie, which had used every foul and reactionary national prejudice in support of its war aims. They had been betrayed by their own leaders. But the bourgeoisie could not meet the needs of the masses, whose disillusionment would soon unleash social and political upheavals on an international scale.

To be continued

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