

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

Part 3

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The revolution of February 1917 in Russia was initially sparked by a protest by women over the lack of bread. Their struggle rapidly drew in other sections of the working class. The tsar called in the troops, upon which his regime had relied to defend the capital during the tumultuous events of 1905. But when they refused to fire upon the demonstrations, and joined them instead, the fate of the tsarist autocracy was sealed.

The February Revolution saw the birth of a new order. But in this case, twins arrived. Not one, but two centres of power emerged: the Provisional Government, comprising the bourgeois and peasant parties, and the Soviets or workers' councils, which had been created in the 1905 revolution and were rapidly re-established in the February days. The initial response of all the socialist parties, including the Bolsheviks, was to extend conditional support to the Provisional Government.

Upon his return to Russia at the beginning of April, however, Lenin delivered a political bombshell: he insisted that the Bolshevik Party turn to leading the working class to the conquest of political power. But there was significant resistance to Lenin's perspective within the party leadership. While not explicitly stated by Lenin himself, it was recognised that he was, in fact, adopting Trotsky's perspective.

What had brought about this change? The February Revolution had demonstrated that the peasantry could not play an independent role. The "democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry" had been realised in the form of the Provisional Government, where the bourgeois parties ruled with the support of the peasant parties.

The government initially enjoyed support among the masses, and from the Soviets, where, as yet, the Bolsheviks comprised only a small minority.

But the Provisional Government could not meet the masses' demands. It could not end the war, because the Russian bourgeoisie was tied by a thousand strings to the imperialist powers of the West—and, moreover, harboured its own agenda for conquest. It could not sanction the peasant rebellions against the landlords, tied as the bourgeoisie was to this class, fearing that the overthrow of landed property would call into question all forms of property. And it could not end the national oppression that had characterised tsarist Russia.

In short, the Provisional Government had been placed in power by a movement that it did not prepare, that it did not want, and whose demands it could not meet. Herein lay the objective foundations for the second

revolution, the October Revolution.

The months of February to October were marked by a movement to the left. This accelerated after an attempted coup by General Kornilov in August-September revealed the complicity of the Provisional Government with the counter-revolution. Support in the Soviets for the Bolsheviks steadily grew, as the parties backing the bourgeois Provisional Government became increasingly discredited in the eyes of the working class.

But the Russian situation was not the only motivating factor that led to the October 25 insurrection. In pressing his demands for the seizure of power, Lenin was above all guided by the international situation. The Russian Revolution was not a Russian question, but the opening shot of the world revolution. It was necessary to take power in Russia to show the international working class a way out of the barbarism of the war, and the impasse into which it had been driven by the betrayals of its own leaderships.

The insurrection placed power in the hands of the Soviets. From the outset it was opposed by the bourgeois parties and their chief props, the Mensheviks, by the so-called moderate socialists, and by the right-wing of the peasant based Social Revolutionary Party. According to them, the Bolsheviks were anarchists, putschists, and the seizure of power had no legitimacy.

Once the Provisional Government was overthrown, the attention of all these forces turned to the constituent assembly, which was convened in January 1918. The convening of this body had long been a demand of the socialist and democratic movement. But events had by-passed it. None of the parties insisting that the Constituent Assembly must form the government would recognise the legitimacy of the revolution, and that political power rested in the hands of the Soviets.

Thus the Constituent Assembly could only act as a focus for the organisation of counter-revolution. It was dispersed and disappeared from the scene. As one leading Social Revolutionary later observed, it passed away "as a consequence of the indifference with which the people responded to our dissolution."

We cannot here review the history of the degeneration of the first workers' state and the rise of the Stalinist bureaucracy, except to make the most essential point.

The degeneration was not some inevitable product of Marxism or of Bolshevism, much less a result of the dispersal of the Constituent Assembly. The degeneration was a product of the isolation of the revolution. The perspective of Lenin and Trotsky was that if the revolution did not extend to Western Europe, then there would be no possibility of holding on to power. In the event, the revolution was not

extended, due to the betrayals of the social democratic leaderships of the working class. But neither was the revolution overturned.

The isolation, however, had a terrible impact. It was the chief factor in the degeneration of the workers' state and the usurpation of political power by a cancerous bureaucracy under the leadership of Stalin. This apparatus carried out the murder of all the Bolsheviks who had led the revolution, culminating in the assassination of Leon Trotsky in 1940. The Stalinists were to play the central role in propping up the capitalist order until they handed over to the bourgeoisie in 1991 and restored capitalism.

What of the prospects for socialism in the twenty-first century? Has the Russian Revolution simply passed into history, to be regarded as an interesting experience, but containing no essential lessons for today? To answer, we have to review the historical process itself.

World War I and the Russian Revolution were the outcome of what we can now see, looking back, was the first phase of capitalist globalisation. The vast economic developments that transformed the world in the period of 1871 to 1914 brought to a head all the contradictions of the capitalist mode of production.

The perspective guiding the Bolsheviks ninety years ago was world socialist revolution. But the first attempt to initiate that revolution did not succeed, and humanity paid a terrible price. The next three decades witnessed depression, mass unemployment, fascism, the unspeakable horrors of the Holocaust and tens of millions more killed in a war that culminated in the use of atomic weapons.

What followed was a period of relative stability, even an upswing in the fortunes of capitalism, as a new economic expansion seemed to relegate the problems of the first half of the twentieth century to the past. But by the end of the 1960s, the post-war boom was coming to an end, with the eruption of a series of potentially revolutionary struggles of the working class around the world—from the May-June 1968 general strike in France, to the hot autumn in Italy, the bringing down of the Heath Tory government in Britain in 1973-4, to the collapse of the Salazar regime in Portugal in 1975. But in none of these struggles was the working class able to challenge for political power due to the betrayals of its leaderships.

After utilising these betrayals to stabilise its position, the bourgeoisie embarked on an offensive against the working class. This began in the second half of the 1970s and has continued to this day. Over the past 30 years the working class has suffered a series of defeats and setbacks. The prospect of socialism seems to have receded well into the background, if not altogether beyond the bounds of possibility.

Thirty years is a considerable period of time in the life of an individual. To members of the older generation, it appears that the hopes of their youth have been dashed, while for younger people it seems that there is nothing, at least in the immediate past, on which they can base their desire for change.

Three decades can seem a long time. But weighed on the scales of history, considering the vast changes in economic processes, and social and cultural relationships, it is but a short interlude.

And what changes there have been! The past period has seen a transformation in the very structure of world capitalism. We have been living through the second phase of capitalist globalisation, in which the whole world has become one indivisible economic unit, with each part inseparably connected with every other.

What are the implications for the prospects for socialism? Let us turn to some ABCs of Marxist politics.

Our perspective is grounded on the conception that the objective prerequisites for socialism are to be found in the contradictions of the capitalist system itself. At a certain point these contradictions lead to a breakdown in the capitalist order and an historical crisis of capitalist rule.

Where do we stand today? The answer is clear. The processes of economic globalisation have raised to a new peak of intensity the contradiction between world economy and the nation-state system. In

other words, to refer back to the passage we cited from Marx, the material productive forces of society have come into conflict with the existing relations of production. Just as in the period leading to World War I, that conflict is expressed in the intensification of inter-imperialist rivalries. That is why, suddenly, we find the American president talking about World War III.

Furthermore, the sweeping economic changes of the past thirty years have completely undermined the relative economic strength of the United States, which was such a decisive factor in stabilising world capitalism in the period following World War II. Rather than a force for stability, the US is now the most destabilising factor in world economics and politics. Its increasing resort to militarism is disrupting all the relations among the capitalist powers, while its deepening financial crisis threatens to set off a global economic collapse of catastrophic proportions. In his book *Imperialism* Lenin referred to the growth of parasitism in the period prior to World War I. But the processes to which Lenin pointed pale into insignificance compared to the situation today.

What of the position of the working class—the only social force capable of overthrowing capitalism? The processes of globalisation have resulted in a vast increase in both the size and geographical spread of this social class.

Over the past two decades or so, even less in some cases, millions of peasants and petty producers, in China, in India, in Latin America, in Africa—all over the world—have become wage workers involved in a global process of production. Fifty years ago, many learned—and not so learned—academics claimed that Marx's predictions about the proletarianisation of the majority of the world's people had not been fulfilled, because of the preponderance of the peasantry. History has now caught up to Marx.

There is another, very decisive, effect of globalisation. A study of the complex problems that confronted the Bolsheviks after the October Revolution, reveals the level and intensity of opposition from middle class layers in the state and civil service, and the difficulties this caused. Today, so-called white collar workers, employed either by the state or by large corporations, no longer occupy a privileged social position. They are as likely as any other section of the working class to be downsized, or to have their wages and conditions slashed.

What of the subjective factors, and the all-important question of leadership? A study of the history of the twentieth century shows there has been no lack of opportunities when the working class, armed with a revolutionary leadership, could certainly have repeated the experience of October 1917. It is precisely the absence of such leadership, and the counter-revolutionary role of social democracy and Stalinism, that has allowed the bourgeoisie to remain in the saddle.

But in this case too, history has been doing its work. All over the world the Stalinist and social democratic parties, which once commanded a mass following in the working class, are nothing but empty shells. Writing on the eve of World War II, Trotsky predicted that coming events would leave not one stone upon another of these outlived organisations. That has taken longer than he expected, but taken place it has.

The disgust and hostility felt by millions towards the Labor Party, which has been so apparent in this election campaign, is part of a global political shift against all the old parties and leaderships. Moreover, attempts by the various middle class radical organisations to pump life back into them through so-called regroupments have failed dismally.

What are the implications? They become more apparent if we pose the question: why have there been no socialist revolutions since the Bolsheviks took power ninety years ago? Two main factors have been at work: the treacherous role of the leaderships of the working class, and the ability of United States capitalism to provide a certain stability to the global capitalist order. Today, the old parties and organisations no longer command the mass following they once did, and the US is the most

destabilising factor in world economics and politics.

These profound changes will have far-reaching political consequences. Throughout the world there is a mounting sense of dissatisfaction among ordinary working people and a growing desire for change. But there is still no understanding of how the problems of society can be overcome. In other words, there is a deep-going crisis of perspective.

This is not the result of some organic incapacity of the working class, but of complex historical events. And conditions are rapidly maturing for this crisis of perspective to be overcome.

Herein lies the decisive role of our party, the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement, which has consciously based itself on the traditions of Bolshevism, and on the defence of the principles that animated it, in the ninety years since the Russian Revolution.

The task at hand is the development of socialist consciousness in the working class. This does not mean convincing workers of the need to struggle against capitalism. Such struggles are inevitable. The key question is the transformation of this unconscious movement into a conscious political struggle for the overthrow of capitalism, by advancing, at every stage, a program and perspective based on the political independence of the working class.

It was by this method that the Bolsheviks came to the leadership of the Russian Revolution and led the first assault carried out by the international working class on the citadel of global capital. Now it falls to us to complete the task that they began. We urge you to take up this challenge by joining our party and building it as the new leadership of the international working class.

Concluded

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