

# The Russian Socialist Movement—a political trap for the working class

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The Soviet Union collapsed two decades ago in large measure because the working class, having spontaneously entered into struggle against the Stalinist bureaucracy during the late 1980s and early 1990s, was unable in a timely fashion to put forward its own leadership and create a party to clearly formulate its own independent revolutionary-internationalist program, analogous to that which the Bolsheviks advanced in 1917.

Over the two decades of capitalist restoration in the former Soviet Union, the task of creating such a political avant-garde, oriented to the perspective of revolutionary international socialism, has remained the central axis around which the efforts of any honest socialist-minded worker, intellectual, or youth must be concentrated.

The historical conditions determining today's situation are bound up with the fact that Soviet Stalinism consolidated its hold on power as the grave-digger of the revolution, as its counter-revolutionary antipode. The Great Terror of 1937-1938 not only physically destroyed several generations of socialist workers and intellectuals, but also tore out the roots of Marxist culture and socialist consciousness in Soviet society.

The question that arises is the historical task of returning Marxism to the former USSR. This means a deliberate, conscious assimilation of the lessons of the fight for a socialist perspective in the twentieth century—embodied in the history and political heritage of the Fourth International, founded by Leon Trotsky in 1938 in the struggle against the Stalinist degeneration of the Bolshevik Party, the Soviet state and the Communist International.

The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) is the sole international political tendency which has consistently struggled to maintain the historical continuity of Trotsky's perspective in founding the Fourth International. It has fought to mobilize the working class against capitalism, independently of all forms of left-radical adaptations to capitalism and to the social-democratic, trade union, and Stalinist bureaucracy.

The return of Marxism to the former USSR in the broadest sense is identical to the construction of sections of the ICFI in Russia and in other former Soviet republics or sections.

In contrast, the Russian Socialist Movement (RSM), created at the beginning of this March, is trying to establish in Russia the culture of pseudo-left opportunism, completely hostile to the working class and aimed at preventing it from developing its own class consciousness.

In Europe, representatives of this tendency include the French New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA) and the German Left Party, toward which the RSM has close ties. In Russia, one of the main "importers" of these politics has been the head of the Institute of Globalization and Social Movements, Boris Kagarlitsky. He functioned from the very beginning as one of the RSM's political mentors.

The RSM's statements, the character of the tendencies active inside it and of their current policies, as well as the character of the RSM's international affiliations, all indicate that the RSM was formed to defend Russia's ruling oligarchic-bureaucratic regime. This regime is quickly

losing its authority in the eyes of the population. This process has gained speed particularly under the influence of the spreading world economic crisis, the Arab revolutions, and the growth of mass protests in the West, including the "Occupy Wall Street" movement.

Its name notwithstanding, the RSM has nothing to do with a struggle for socialism and to overthrow illegitimate Russian capitalism to build a revolutionary workers' government. It aims to give the existing regime a somewhat more "democratic" appearance, promoting illusions that it can be reformed. The RSM claims that it wants to mobilize the masses from above, on the basis of vague slogans, while it simultaneously promotes the bankrupt perspective of "modernizing" the institutions of the Kremlin and the Russian capitalist oligarchy.

## Pessimism in relation to the working class

A prevailing line consistently advanced in the RSM's documents and publications is the claim that there is no independent place for the working class in "actual" political life.

The movement's inaugural manifesto, "On the construction of an organization of anti-capitalist leftists," states: "The confrontation between the government and the liberal opposition remains the fundamental vector of opposition in actual domestic politics...On the other hand...the ultra-right, the nationalists are also building up their mobilizing resources...In the end, those political forces (alas, not necessarily left ones) that are able to make their agenda the agenda of the broad masses, and their organization the center of social mobilization, can determine the further development of the situation."

The essence of this statement is that the decisive factor in Russian socio-political life is not the class struggle, but differences of opinion inside the ruling elite. In the RSM's manifesto there is, it is true, a stipulation that "from the point of view of the interests of the working majority this conflict [between the government and the liberal opposition] is, to a large degree, of a minimal character." However, this stipulation has a purely ritualistic character, as it changes absolutely nothing in the RSM's class orientation.

The degree of political maturity of the working class, its "actual" participation in political life, is determined not only, or even primarily, by the scale of spontaneous struggles, no matter how significant they might be, but by the degree of influence that a revolutionary party has over these struggles. Without this, the working class can be politically disarmed and becomes the target of manipulation by hostile class forces. But the RSM acts precisely against the creation of such a revolutionary vanguard—thereby helping to ensure that some fraction of the ruling elite makes "their agenda the agenda of the broad masses," in the RSM's words.

A July 3 article published on the site *Rabkor.ru* by Budraitskis, titled “The Pablo Escobar of Russian Politics,” expresses this profound pessimism in relation to the working class. Written in relation to the choosing of Mikhail Prokhorov as the leader of the liberal party Right Cause, this article reads like a political panegyric to the acumen and “populism” of one of Russia’s odious billionaires.

In his article Budraitskis predicts that “in December Prokhorov’s party will become a major 2011-election sensation,” going so far as to refer to “the predictable victory of Right Cause” in this election. From where does this confidence in Prokhorov’s success come? It comes from the fact that, in Budraitskis’ opinion, masses of Russian workers are hopelessly poisoned by petty-bourgeois illusions.

“The strength of Russian social regression,” Budraitskis argued, “has cultivated a new person: the stern pioneer of capitalist survival, whose political preferences vacillate between cynical disbelief in any forms of struggle for collective interests, hatred towards the parasitic state, and a radical engagement, of varying degrees, with the ‘Russian question.’ This person will not be a political activist, because he has grown accustomed to working only for himself and does not like to fill his head with superfluous information. But he is prepared to vote for anyone who appears to look like himself, or for anyone whom he would like to become. This sinewy and sullen person of the Third World is the future mass elector of Mikhail Prokhorov.”

Not three months passed before Prokhorov in mid-September was thrown out of Right Cause by the Kremlin, when it decided that it could not fully trust him. Since then, Right Cause has gone into a deep coma, obtaining an insignificant percentage of votes in the parliamentary elections on 4 December.

#### A “democratic revolution,” not a socialist revolution

The perspective toward which the RSM orients itself is a democratic revolution, which is supposedly possible in capitalist Russia based on a broad coalition of “opposition” forces, including everyone from liberals to nationalists. Within such an objectively right-wing coalition, the working class cannot put forth its own revolutionary and internationalist program. It can only play the role of junior partner controlled by others.

This orientation is diametrically opposite to Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution, according to which the modern capitalist class, as represented by all sorts of political tendencies and their respective factions, is incapable of struggling for democracy because its class interests are incompatible with the interests of the masses. The task of struggling for democracy falls to the working class, leading the other oppressed classes in an international, socialist revolution.

Examples of the type of democratic revolution promoted by the RSM include the “color revolutions” in the former Soviet Union in 2003-2004. These brought pro-American regimes to power in Georgia and Ukraine, which promptly undertook a fierce assault on the rights and living standards of the working class.

Many of the political groups that joined the RSM, and Budraitskis’s group in particular, actively participated in the Ukrainian Orange Revolution, functioning as accessories of imperialism and of venal cliques of the national bourgeoisie.

The perspective of a democratic revolution, to which the RSM is oriented, was theoretically articulated in the article “When Putin Steps Down,” published on July 1 on the RSM’s website *Anticapitalist.ru*. The article states that, “Notwithstanding its apparent distinctiveness from so-called ‘Western democracy,’ notwithstanding the authoritarian streak that began in the 2000s, Putin’s state turned out to be much closer to actual

RSM bourgeois democracy than Yeltsin’s state had been. In any case, a political liberalization that simply did not occur in the 1990s has now become technically possible.”

This striking conclusion—that authoritarianism is the way to democracy!—could be seen as a new discovery of the RSM in the field of political science, if it were not a direct borrowing from the arsenal of the most aggressive anti-communists, who at least since the rule of Pinochet have insisted that authoritarianism can help build a prosperous democracy.

According to the RSM, even though Putin has busied himself for a decade with tearing up the fictions of bourgeois parliamentarianism installed by Yeltsin after the Soviet collapse, he in reality paved the way for the blossoming of a “true bourgeois democracy!” In essence, the RSM’s position is little more than apologetics for Putin’s “historical mission,” a key element in official Kremlin ideology as propagated by figures like Vyacheslav Surkov.

The Kremlin attempts to justify its authoritarianism by suggesting that it is a more progressive stage of capitalism than the so-called “initial accumulation” of the “roaring 1990s,” and promises a democratization “from above” within the near future. In particular, Medvedev was promoted as a nominal spokesman for “modernizing” tendencies within the power elite, for the purpose of carrying through this deception.

The RSM accepted this entire web of deceit as good coin and promoted the perspective of awaiting reforms from above, thereby fully accommodating itself to the regime’s “agenda” as it had been formulated up until 24 September of this year—when Putin, rather than Medvedev, was declared the Kremlin’s presidential candidate in the upcoming elections.

Another RSM text, the “Manifesto of the Team of Analysts,” copied from the website *Sensus Novus*, declares that “certain people in power are coming to understand ever more distinctly that modernization ‘from above’ is necessary in order to prevent a rupture occurring, sooner or later, ‘from below.’” Then, the document declares as its principal goal “a positive program of change capable of finally turning Russia from a bureaucratic dinosaur into a modern democratic state.”

This construction of a “modern democratic” capitalist state constitutes the RSM’s real program.

This perspective is all the more bankrupt in that, in the Western countries where parliamentary rule first emerged, democracy is not flowering but deeply decayed. The contemporary period has seen a relentless assault on democratic rights and on the living standards of the working class. In all these countries, cuts to wages and social spending have gone hand in hand with the spread of police powers under the “war on terror”—in which these regimes have invaded Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya in brutal imperialist wars.

The socioeconomic and political perspective of the RSM found its most blatant expression in the conference “The Social Crisis and The Future of Left Forces,” held on July 9-10 by Boris Kagarlitsky’s Institute of Globalization and Social Movements (IGSO), a member organization of the RSM, together with the German Rosa Luxemburg Fund (affiliated in Germany with the pro-government Left Party, the successor to the Stalinist Socialist Unity Party of Germany).

IGSO representative Vasily Koltashov gave one of the reports at the conference. He emphasized that the program he proposes cannot be called “socialist,” and he does not consider it as such.

Koltashov added that, “in all likelihood those countries that have fallen victim to the global economic calamity await bourgeois democratic, as opposed to socialist, revolutions.”

Another speaker was the well-known liberal philosopher and journalist Boris Mezhyuev. He spoke of the need for a democratic coalition, while correctly noting that the Russian bourgeoisie “cannot realize and declare the demands of democracy.”

He insisted, “In conditions when the Russian bourgeoisie is incapable of

becoming the leading democratic force and providing the necessary minimum of democratic rights and freedoms to the people, it is the left that must become the leading democratic force.” None of the conference’s participants disputed Mezhyuev’s position on this matter

The conference’s concluding document declared the necessity of a “turn toward a new welfare state. . . . This turn will require not only that destructive measures in the fields of education and public health be halted, but also that the state’s involvement in the economy be expanded, possibly to include the nationalization of the energy sector and natural resource monopolies.”

Once again, the program of the Russian Socialist Movement, as expressed up until the fall of this year, could be formulated in general terms as follows: the “left” must help Russian capitalism save itself, including, if necessary, through a policy of nationalization. This only leaves out the essential: due to their subordination to the “liberals” and the Kremlin oligarchs, the forces around the RSM could only press for such a policy to the extent that the oligarchy itself decided it was in its interests to carry out such a policy. But then it would not be a progressive nationalization, but merely a redistribution of resources among the oligarchs who rule the state apparatus.

The RSM seeks to organize the masses, but in such a way so that the masses do not openly declare their class interests in any way, but voluntarily restrict themselves to “grass-roots,” i.e. apolitical organizing. Thus mobilized, the masses should support certain layers of the ruling elite—thereby enabling these layers to force the rest of the establishment to undertake essentially cosmetic reforms. The purpose of this plan is to preempt the development of an independent struggle of the working class, and avert the threat of socialist revolution.

### The historical degeneration of “lefts” internationally

The RSM was formed as a coalition of pseudo-left, Stalinist, liberal and anarchist groups, trade union organizations and social movements. Its name emerged from long discussions and was selected to avoid a clear identification with Marxism. The RSM seemingly talks about socialism, but in actual fact it leaves the door open not only for liberals, for whom any intervention by the state in the economy is already socialism, and for anarchists, for whom a party organization of the proletariat is unacceptable, and for many other forces who have nothing in common with either Marxism or working class politics.

The RSM wants to maneuver between liberal, Stalinist and nationalist forces, without undermining their domination of political life. While adapting to this movement, it wants to seek “points of contact” with bourgeois politicians, instead of a principled demarcation. It wants to condemn revolutionary socialists for “sectarianism,” and to stifle class issues under the guise of “urgent” unity over goals [being pursued]. In the final analysis, it wants to be a weapon in the hands of reactionary forces, including the Russian oligarchs and Western imperialism, hostile to the working class.

Its flirtation with liberals is expressed, for instance, in its attitude toward the academician A. Sakharov. Instead of an honest evaluation of the right-wing implications of his liberal-anti-communist politics in the 1970s and 1980s, the representatives of the RSM repeat hackneyed phrases about “Sakharov’s moral authority.”

Their flirtation with Stalinists emerges in their refusal to unconditionally condemn Stalinist repression, the Stalinist liquidation of the USSR, and to declare a ruthless struggle against the heritage of Stalinism. In the RSM’s founding manifesto, in the section devoted to the political history of Russia in the post-Soviet period, it notes approvingly that, insofar as, in

the first half of the 1990s, “Stalinism and revanchism were . . . the dominant force,” then “radical lefts, one way or another, acting in the framework of this broad movement, tried to struggle from within for its internationalist and democratic component.”

The RSM proclaims as its closest political partners the movement called “Left Front”, formed around the Stalinist RKRП [Russian Communist Workers Party]. The public leader of the “Left Front”, Sergei Udaltsov, served for a time as one of the organizers of protest actions of the liberal-nationalist “non-system” opposition. The main apparatchik of the “Left Front”, Anatoly Baranov, has long played the role of leading ideologist and media-specialist in the leadership of Ziuganov’s KPRF [Communist Party of the Russian Federation].

The formal pretext for the formation of the RSM was the unification of two former pseudo-Trotskyist groups—the Socialist movement “Forward”, headed by Budraitskis, and the Socialist Resistance of Ovsiannikov. Both groups at one time were part of the Committee for the Workers International—a Pabloite tendency based on the British “Militant.”

Pabloism is a tendency of anti-Trotskyist revisionism that arose inside the Trotskyist movement at the end of the 1940s and aimed to liquidate the Fourth International as an independent political force. Named after Michel Pablo, this tendency rejected the independent political mobilization of the working class, while seeing the Soviet bureaucracy—as well as national-bourgeois movements and various reformist trade union and social-democratic bureaucracies—as capable of acting as a surrogate for the Fourth International leading the working class in the struggle for socialism. It rapidly sought to liquidate the sections of the Fourth International into various Stalinist or bourgeois-national movements.

The treachery of Pabloism was condemned by the revolutionary wing of the world Trotskyist movement, which united in 1953 in the ICFI, which since that time represents the sole international tendency consistently fighting for the perspective of revolutionary socialism.

The Soviet bureaucracy’s capitulation to world imperialism in the years of Gorbachev’s *perestroika*, and the ensuing liquidation of the Soviet Union led the Pabloite organizations throughout the world to an even greater shift to the right. During the last two decades, they have renounced, step by step, all their revolutionary pretensions. By now they have become direct instruments of influence by the ruling elites over the working class.

This was precisely the evolution of the French Pabloite group now acting under the name of the New Anti-Capitalist Party, which is closely tied to France’s big-business Socialist Party and has supported the Libyan war. One of its representatives attended the founding conference of the RSM as an honored guest and delivered greetings.

The RSM openly expresses its solidarity with this right-wing bourgeois party, as well as with its analogue in Germany—the Left Party, who for many years participated in government coalitions at the level of federal *Länder* in Germany and who bear direct responsibility for the social destruction carried out by the German bourgeoisie.

This complete degeneration of Pabloites and other left radicals is no accident. The objective roots of this process are bound up with the historical crisis of the world profit system and with the exhaustion of any possibility of reforms within the framework of existing society.

Throughout the world, workers confront the necessity of developing a unified international program of revolutionary struggle for socialism, without which there can be no struggle today even for minimal guarantees of labor, social and democratic rights. In Russia this means that any hopes for democratization and self-reform of the ruling oligarchic-bureaucratic regime are in vain. The task of the day is to prepare the working class for revolutionary struggle against the profit system both at home and throughout the world. The RSM is an obstacle along this path.



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