

From the archives of the Russian Revolution

Speech at a session of the Petrograd Soviet

Leon Trotsky
19 May 2017

This is a new translation of an abridged version of Trotsky's speech before the Petrograd Soviet on May 18, 1917 (May 5 O.S.), in which Trotsky opposed the new coalition government formed with the support of the Mensheviks and the Socialist Revolutionaries. It was originally published in Izvestiia, No. 60, 7(20) May 1917 and was republished in Trotsky's Sochineniia (Works). [1]

News of the Russian Revolution reached us in New York, far beyond the ocean, but even there, in that mighty country where the bourgeoisie reigns like nowhere else, the Russian Revolution has had an effect. The American working class has acquired a bad reputation. People say that it does not support the revolution. But if you were to see the American workers in February, you would be doubly proud of your revolution. You would understand that it has shaken not only Russia, and not only Europe, but America as well. And it would become clear to you, as it did to me, that it opens a new epoch, an epoch of blood and iron, but one in struggle not of nations against nations, but of the suffering and oppressed class against the ruling classes. (Stormy applause.) At meetings everywhere, workers asked me to transmit to you their great enthusiasm. (Stormy applause.)

But I must also tell you something about the Germans, too. I had the opportunity to come into close proximity with a group of German proletarians. You ask, "Where?" In a prisoner-of-war camp. The British bourgeois government arrested us, as enemies, and interned us in Canada in a camp for prisoners of war. (Shouts: Shame!) There were one hundred officers there, and eight hundred German sailors. They asked us how we, Russian citizens, had fallen prisoner with the British. And when we told them that we had fallen prisoner not as Russian citizens, but as socialists, they

began to tell us that they were slaves of their own government, of their own Wilhelm.

We became very friendly with the German proletarians. This did not please the imprisoned officers, and they complained to the British commandant, claiming that we were undermining the sailors' loyalty to their Kaiser. Then a British captain, protecting the loyalty of the German soldiers to the Kaiser, forbid me from giving speeches. The sailors made an indignant protest to the commandant in this regard. When we were leaving, the sailors accompanied us with music and cried out: "Down with Wilhelm, down with the bourgeoisie, long live the international unity of the proletariat!" (Stormy applause.)

What occurred in the minds of the German sailors is now happening in every country. The Russian Revolution is the prologue to the world revolution. But I cannot hide that I do not agree with much that is now happening. I think that it is dangerous to enter into a ministry. I do not believe in a miracle that a ministry can perform from above. Earlier we had dual power which originated in the contradiction between two classes. A coalition ministry does not free us from dual power, but only transfers it into the ministry. But the revolution will not perish from the coalition ministry. We must only remember three commandments: (1) distrust of the bourgeoisie, (2) control over our own leaders and (3) faith in our own revolutionary power.

What, then, do we recommend? I think that your next step will be transfer of all power into the hands of the workers' and soldiers' deputies. Only unified power (*edinovlastie*) will save Russia. Long live the Russian Revolution, as prologue to the world revolution! (Applause.)

[1] Note from the editors of Trotsky's Sochineniia (Works):

This speech was comrade Trotsky's first in Soviet organizations upon his return to Russia. His sharp opposition to the coalition that had just been brought into the world alarmed the "Soviet" leaders. The newly appointed ministers speaking after Trotsky devoted their speeches primarily to a polemic with him. Sukhanov provides a rather witty depiction:

"Peshekhonov and Tsereteli were pale. Desperately showing off, Chernov danced about the stage, begging and beseeching that he not be taken prisoner. The demonic Skobelev pronounced his sacramental formula about 'a flaming heart and cold reason'" (Book 3, p. 442).

In his polemic, Tsereteli even went so far as to argue:

"Is it possible that Trotsky, having just returned yesterday to revolutionary Russia, can claim that when we take power that everyone will support us? After all, the bourgeoisie is not isolated: behind it stands part of the army and peasantry, and they have stepped back from the revolutionary movement. We need the effort of all the living forces in the country. Without this we cannot save the country."

Trotsky's speech is given as reported in *Izvestiia*. Since no transcript has been found, and the text is obviously incomplete, we asked L.D. Trotsky to comment on the account of his speech and received the following reply:

"This speech has been greatly abridged in the second half. The narrative about the concentration camp in Canada is described more or less completely, but the critical part of the speech, where I spoke against the entry of socialists into the coalition government, is reduced to a few sentences that are hardly connected to each other; as for the 'three commandments,' as far as I recall, they served as a leitmotiv in many of my speeches at that time: first of all, don't believe the bourgeoisie; secondly, keep track of the leaders; thirdly, believe in your own revolutionary strength."



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