

This week in the Russian Revolution

May 22-28: Global class struggle intensifies

22 May 2017

The revolution in Russia gives the signal to workers everywhere. Major strikes take place this week in 1917 in Italy, Austria, France, and even among miners in Peru. But the gathering revolt of workers is met with repression by the capitalist state and treachery by parties and unions claiming to represent workers. Russian Mensheviks promise support for the continuation of the war, in direct opposition to the positions adopted by Bolsheviks earlier.

Petrograd, May 22-25 (May 9-12, O.S.): All-Russian Menshevik Conference expresses support for Provisional Government and continuation of the war

The majority of the 89 delegates at the All-Russian Menshevik Conference, which has started on May 20 (May 7, O.S.), expresses full support for the new coalition government that has assembled with their help a few days earlier. Lining up behind the war effort of the Russian bourgeoisie, the conference calls upon workers and its party members “to facilitate, in any way possible, the strengthening of the fighting capacities of the Russian army for an all-round defense of the country from the dangers it faces.” The conference also resolves that the Mensheviks have to “enter into a close bloc in the Soviets with half-socialists or even parties that only look socialist (the Trudoviks, populist socialists) in the name of purely democratic conquests.” The Mensheviks, furthermore, resolve to prepare for a unification Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Party, which would eventually be held in August 1917.

The Menshevik Conference puts forward positions that diametrically oppose those advanced by the All-Russian Bolshevik Conference earlier. In a series of resolutions, the Bolsheviks rejected any support to the Provisional Government and imperialist war of the Russian bourgeoisie. In one special resolution they declare it “impermissible” to enter any kind of alliance with parties that support the war effort and pursue opportunist policies. (See: Bolsheviks convene all-Russian conference amid government crisis)

The continuous crisis of the Provisional Government and the opportunist line of the Menshevik party foster divisions within the Menshevik party itself. The so-called internationalist wing of the Menshevik party, headed by Julius Martov, rejects the support for both the Provisional Government and the war effort and argues that the Conference had “in many crucial points ... abandoned the principles of the class struggle and internationalism.” Therefore, the 16 delegates of the Menshevik Internationalists refuse to “bear political responsibility” for these decisions and to be bound by the decisions of the conference in their practical work. They also refuse to participate in the elections of the party’s organizational committee at the Conference.

New York City, May 22: Legal advice bureau established to defend war opponents

Eight women socialists, pacifists and suffragettes, meet in the Ginn Building, 70 Fifth Avenue, in New York City and found the New York Bureau of Legal First Aid (later the Bureau of Legal Advice). The organization aims to defend civil liberties and combat the violation of constitutional rights arising from US participation in the first imperialist war.

Jessie Ashley, one of the few women attorneys at the time, is elected treasurer. Frances Witherspoon, a socialist and pacifist, is elected secretary. Ashley is associated with the radical Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), and is best known for her work during the Paterson silk strike in 1913. In June 1913, she helped organize a pageant during which 1,000 striking textile workers traveled from Hoboken, New Jersey to New York City, marched up Fifth Avenue and held an IWW solidarity event in Madison Square Garden to raise funds.

The legal organization commits itself to protect all individuals whose freedom of speech is in jeopardy, to render legal advice to draft-age men, and to intervene on behalf of individuals, especially immigrants (“aliens”), threatened with deportation because of their membership in radical and antiwar groups.

“Moreover,” as one historian later noted, “the Bureau was the only legal aid group in New York City to advise draftees and their families without charging, so they handled thousands of cases for mostly immigrant and working-class people.”

Milan, May 23: Military bloodbath ends antiwar rebellion

On May 23, the Italian army forcibly crushes an upheaval of protesting workers, mainly women, in Milan, the capital of Lombardy. Fifty people are killed, 800 arrested. A few weeks earlier, bread riots had erupted in Turin, and a wave of strikes and demonstrations spread throughout the bigger towns and industrial centers of Italy, with protests in Sestri Ponente, Terni, Piombino, Naples, Livorno, Prato and other cities and towns.

The workers have every reason to protest: long working hours and miserable pay go together with food shortages and inflation. In comparison to pre-war times, the purchasing power of an average working family in Milan has fallen by a third (in Florence -48 percent, in Rome -40 percent, in Naples -51 percent). Since men are enlisted as soldiers, women and children have to work for their survival. Between 1915 and 1918, nearly 200,000 mostly young women and 60,000 children were engaged in war-related work.

As many peasants have been sent to the trenches, reduced agricultural

production aggravates economic scarcity. Taverns are selling bread by thin slices, rationed to no more than 80 grams per person. Malnutrition and hunger are linked to illnesses like tuberculosis, cachexia and “Spanish influenza.” The number of civilian deaths nearly equals the number of war deaths among Italian soldiers.

The discontent turned into open rebellion. The developing protests immediately took on a political character and demand an end to the war, with slogans like “We want peace,” “Lay down your guns,” “Down with the war” and “Leave the trenches.”

In early May, the movement reached the outskirts of Milan, where female textile workers were the first to go on strike. Peasants from nearby Gallarate and Busto Arsizio marched into town, and female farmers joined the industrial workers in calling for an immediate end to the war. To avert a general strike, the right-wing Boselli government declared a state of siege. The next day the army marches into Milan and crushes the rebellion.

Petrograd: Lenin continues intervention on the agrarian question amid rural upheavals

The First All-Russian Congress of Peasants’ Deputies is in session from May 17 to June 10 (May 4-28, O.S.), while open rebellion breaks out in the countryside. The *New York Times* describes the situation with evident alarm on May 24: “The agrarian disorders, wholesale confiscation of property, incendiarism, and other dangerous symptoms of anarchy which followed the overthrow of the old authority ... are becoming more serious. [T]he peasants, defying restraint, have burned or sacked and appropriated Government and private properties, and a general state of anarchy prevails.”

One of the central issues at the Congress of Peasants’ Deputies is the confiscation of the estates of the nobility, known as the “agrarian question.” Proposals are presented at the congress for compensation to be paid to the landlords. Other proposals provide for the redistribution of the land to the peasants as parcels of private property. Lenin explains the position of the Bolsheviks in an article in *Pravda* on June 2 (May 20, O.S.), 1917.

Our Party, the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party of the Bolsheviks, has proposed in a carefully worded resolution that *property* in the land be vested in the people as a whole. Consequently, *we are opposed to any* seizure of land as private property ...

The landed estates must be confiscated *immediately*, that is, private ownership of them must be abolished *immediately* and *without compensation*. And what about the *possession* of these lands? Who is to take immediate possession of them and cultivate them? The local peasants are to do this in an organized way, that is, in accordance with the decision of the majority. That is the advice of our Party. The local peasants are to have the *immediate* use of these lands, which are to become the *property* of the people as a whole.

Lenin is scheduled to address the congress, but his speech is repeatedly put off by the organizers.

Budapest, May 23: Hungarian Prime Minister Tisza resigns

Under pressure from emperor Karl I, Hungarian Prime Minister Istvan Tisza tenders his resignation. The emperor has been attempting to expand voting rights to a larger section of the Hungarian population in a bid to offset growing dissatisfaction among the population. Tisza has held a majority in the Hungarian parliament, which was elected by just 20 percent of Hungary’s population.

Tisza speaks for the interests of the Hungarian elite, which is represented by 407 deputies in the Hungarian parliament. By contrast, only six deputies represent 8 million people of non-Hungarian nationality, out of a total population of 12 million.

Tisza has also been an opponent of any weakening of Hungary’s position in the Austro-Hungarian Dual Monarchy, even going so far as to express doubts about the launching of the war in 1914 for fear that it would result in a larger Slavic population in the empire and thus decrease Hungarian influence. Under pressure from mounting nationalist tensions, Karl and the Austrian ruling elite are now considering making certain limited concessions to the other nationalities.

Among the masses, Tisza is viewed as a representative of the hated war government. After surviving three assassination attempts, he will later be murdered in his home by soldiers in October 1918.

Petrograd, May 23 (May 10, O.S): Lenin attends conference of Mezhraiontsy as a guest

Lenin, Kamenev and Zinoviev attend a conference of the Mezhraiontsy as guests. The Mezhraionka (Inter-district Organization), which numbers about 3,000 members, was founded in November 1913 and includes many of the most outstanding future leaders of the Russian Revolution, most notably Leon Trotsky. Many of the Mezhraiontsy support Trotsky’s conception of the Russian Revolution and the theory of permanent revolution. In stark contrast to the Mensheviks, the Mezhraiontsy take a principled internationalist line on the imperialist war. However, the Mezhraiontsy have supported the idea, rejected by Lenin, of reunifying the Menshevik and Bolshevik factions of the Russian Social Democratic Party.

Lenin speaks at the conference, proposing a unification of all internationalist social-democratic groups on the basis of the resolutions of the Seventh All-Russian Bolshevik Conference. In a meeting with Lenin, Trotsky acknowledges that it is not possible, or desirable, to unite the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks, according to Heinz Abosch. However, according to the notes Lenin took on Trotsky’s two speeches at the Conference, Trotsky rejects an abrupt liquidation of the Mezhraiontsy into the Bolshevik Party. Instead, Trotsky suggests the formation of a new party, merging the Bolsheviks and Mezhraiontsy. Lenin had earlier proposed “a free discussion” on the conditions of the unification. Among the Mezhraiontsy, many still reject the idea of unification with the Bolsheviks. Nevertheless, Lenin’s participation in this conference is among the first steps of the historic collaboration between Lenin and Trotsky, and laid the foundations for the eventual unification of the Mezhraiontsy with the Bolsheviks.

Vienna, May 24: 42,000 workers on strike for reduced hours, higher pay

After expanding in scope over recent days, strikes among workers in the war industries reach their high point in the Austrian capital as 42,000 workers down tools. The main demands of the strikes, which were launched on May 22, are an eight-hour day, the establishment of food kitchens in workers' districts to overcome the chronic lack of food supplies, and pay increases.

Worker unrest has been building in Vienna and throughout Austria since March. With Austria-Hungary's production concentrated on the war industries, the production of wheat and other foodstuffs has declined dramatically, resulting in a sharp increase in food prices. Malnutrition and poverty are widespread among the working class.

A police report on the strike notes that it is so widespread that there "can be said to be a general strike in factories under state protection." In some districts, workers went to other factories to convince colleagues to join the job action. Some 200 workers manage to travel by tram to protest at the war ministry, where they are confronted by the police.

The trade unions seek to limit and shut down the strike.

Petrograd, May 26 (13 O.S.): Trotsky warns of counterrevolutionary dangers

In a speech in the Petrograd Soviet denouncing the entry of the petty-bourgeois, opportunist and populist tendencies into the pro-war capitalist "coalition" government, Trotsky warns of the gathering counterrevolutionary clouds. "Pay attention to the absence of Kerensky in the Soviet and the advertising that is being created around his name in the bourgeois press," Trotsky declares. "Is the press trying to use Kerensky for the purposes of Russian bonapartism?"

Western Front, France, May 27: Mutinies spread in French army

Around 30,000 French soldiers leave their frontline trenches, march to the rear and refuse to follow orders from their officers. Many of the mutineers are experienced soldiers who are no longer prepared to engage in fruitless attacks that cost thousands of lives. They have been inspired by the Russian Revolution to call for peace. Since the beginning of the war, more than 1 million French soldiers have been killed.

The mutineers advance other demands, including more leave, better treatment for soldiers' families and better food for the troops.

The revolt comes just a week after a strike movement gripped Paris, where conditions for workers have deteriorated since the outbreak of the war. Female dressmakers initiated the strike May 11, with demands for the so-called "English week" (a half-day on Saturday), increased wages and reduced working hours. As the movement spread, it culminated May 20 in a demonstration of several thousand women workers, who shouted slogans against the war and the sacrifices being made at the front by their fathers, brothers, husbands and fiancés.

East St. Louis, May 28: Black migrants attacked in riot

A mob estimated at 3,000 attacks black workers in this industrial suburb of St. Louis in downstate Illinois. With local police standing aside, rioters kill several and beat dozens more, destroying homes and businesses, in

violence that continues into the morning hours of May 29. A far more brutal attack will be launched in July.

Most of the black workers are recent migrants from the South, drawn to East St. Louis for its booming munitions and meatpacking industries. They have been driven from "Dixie" by the boll weevil pest, which is destroying the cotton crop year after year, and the ravages of Jim Crow segregation. The northern cities, however, are dominated by factory owners that intentionally pit various racial and immigrant groups against each other, by the "big city machines" of the Democratic Party that dole out patronage by ethnic group, and, where workers are organized, by unions affiliated with the American Federation of Labor (AFL) unions that typically maintain racial exclusion.

All of these ingredients are in place in East St. Louis, where black migrants have been arriving by the thousands since the start of the war in 1914. Here, the local Democratic Party machine, headed by Mayor Fred Mollman, portrays the migration as a Republican Party plot, while trade union officials insist that the workers are "imported" to drive down the wages of white workers.

The riot begins on May 29 after a delegation of some 60 union officials visit the Democratic-controlled city council to demand an end to this "importation."



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