

This week in the Russian Revolution

August 7-13: Mezhraiontsy unite with the Bolsheviks

7 August 2017

At the Sixth Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party, convened by the Bolsheviks, the 4,000 strong Interdistrict Group (Mezhraiontsy), led by Trotsky and Lunacharsky, formally merges with the 240,000-strong Bolshevik Party, led by Lenin.

Outside the congress, the counter-revolution continues to rage in Russia. Following the collapse of the Kerensky offensive and the repression of the July insurrection, the government asserts unlimited repressive powers, including the power to ban any meeting that undermines national security or the war effort. Leading Bolsheviks are arrested or driven underground, and Bolshevik papers are being attacked and censored. These demands for “order” encounter the full-throated support of the populist and opportunist parties in the Petrograd Soviet. At the Congress, Lenin’s proposal to withdraw the slogan of “power to the soviets” is the subject of deep divisions in the newly elected Bolshevik leadership.

August 8 (July 26 O.S.): Sixth Congress opens with Bolsheviks and Mezhraiontsy united

Ever since his return to Russia in April, Lenin has endorsed in essence the international strategic perspective elaborated by Trotsky following the 1905 revolution. According to Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution, the Russian Revolution’s democratic tasks—the elimination of tsarism, the destruction of agrarian landlordism, and the elimination of national oppression—can only be achieved by the working class wielding state power. The working class, once in power, will then proceed necessarily and rapidly to the socialist reorganization of society, as part of a world socialist revolution.

Meanwhile, upon Trotsky’s arrival in Petrograd, he has acknowledged the correctness of Lenin’s insistence on an organizational break with the opportunist and defensist wing of the social democracy and the formation of a new international. The main issue remaining has been uniting their respective factions.

The numerically smaller *Mezhraiontsy* include many outstanding future leaders of the Russian Revolution, among them Leon Trotsky, Adolf Joffe, Anatoly Lunacharsky, Moisei Uritsky, and David Riazanov, among others. When Trotsky had proposed a merger with the Bolsheviks in May, he found himself in a minority. Now he and Lunacharsky have won sufficient support among the *Mezhraiontsy* to proceed with the merger, which now takes place despite the arrest of the principal leaders and efforts to censor the revolutionary press. *Pravda* proudly announces that Trotsky is joining the editorial board.

Outside the congress, the counter-revolution that followed the July Days

continues to wax triumphant. Three days before the opening of the congress, Trotsky is arrested. Kamenev and Zinoviev remain in prison following their arrests. Lenin is in hiding. During the Congress, the four elected members of the central committee who received the most votes are announced to defiant applause: Lenin, Zinoviev, Kamenev, and Trotsky—none of whom are able to be present.

The congress opens in a private assembly hall in the Vyborg District, and it is attended by around 267 delegates: 157 voting delegates and 110 with advisory votes. These delegates represent 162 party organizations with around 177,000 members (out of some 240,000 members total). Because the Bolsheviks are now a semi-illegal party, the Bolshevik press only announces that a congress is taking place without mentioning the place of the meeting.

The full members of the central committee that are elected at the congress are Vladimir Lenin, Gregory Zinoviev, Leon Trotsky, Joseph Stalin, Lev Kamenev, Yakov Sverdlov, Victor Nogin, Alexei Rykov, Nikolai Bukharin, Andrei Bubnov, Moisei Uritsky, Vladimir Miliutin, Alexandra Kollontai, Fyodor Sergeyev, Nikolai Krestinsky, Felix Dzerzhinsky, Matvei Muranov, Gregory Sokolnikov, Ivar Smilga, Stepan Shaumyan, and Jan Berzin.

In the course of the congress, the Bolsheviks make a number of amendments to their charter. The Articles of Association are amended to expressly state that all party members are bound by the party’s democratically-enacted resolutions. Further, prospective members to the party have to be recommended by two existing members and approved by the party organization. Finally, membership dues are fixed at one percent of wages received.

Glasgow, August 9: Meeting of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Council banned

A regional meeting of the Workers’ and Soldiers’ Council scheduled for August 11 is abruptly outlawed by the Glasgow City Council at the authorization of the Lloyd George government.

The Secretary for Scotland justifies the ban by asserting that disturbances are anticipated that could get out of the control of the authorities. Based on the experiences of the London meeting of the Workers’ and Soldiers’ Council held two weeks ago, any disturbances that are being prepared most likely have the blessing of the police and security forces and are aimed at disrupting any gathering.

The Workers’ and Soldiers’ Council meeting was called by the Leeds conference held in June, which proclaimed its support for the Russian Revolution. The August 11 meeting was to have been an all-Scotland

conference. Not surprisingly, the Labour Party executive has disassociated itself from the meetings, advising its affiliated societies to do the same.

On the 11th, an estimated 8,000 people gather to protest the ban outside St. Mungo Hall. Speakers, including Ramsay MacDonald, E.C. Fairchild and representatives of the Glasgow Trades Council, call for a democratic peace, in line with the defensist position advanced by the Menshevik and Socialist Revolutionary leadership of the Soviet in Petrograd. William Shaw, secretary of the Glasgow Trades Council, moves a resolution condemning the ban and pledging to reschedule the conference. It is passed unanimously. A smaller demonstration occurs in Edinburgh on the same day.

Washington, D.C., August 10: The Food and Fuel Control Act passed

The US government enacts legislation that will allow the White House to fix prices for basic commodities and their distribution and exchange, assert control over the railroad industry to privilege the transport of war material (a power supplemented by the Federal Possession and Control Act or Railroads in War Act), and potentially seize control of factories and mines. A host of other stipulations in the 7,000-word law give greater power of the president over the economy.

This legislation, which became known as the “Lever Act” after its principal backer, South Carolina Democratic legislator Asbury Francis Lever, aims to place the economy on a war footing and contain the power of the insurgent working class. Over the previous year, more than 1 million workers have gone out on strike.

In the following year, Attorney General Palmer will seize on the law in a bid to illegalize a nationwide strike of coal miners. America’s wealthy industrialists and financiers, who have built up dazzling levels of wealth over the previous period and stand to profit even more from the war, largely view the Lever Act as necessary to contain the class struggle and ensure adequate supply and distribution chains for the war effort.

London, August 10: Labour Party votes to send delegates to Stockholm conference

By 1,846,000 votes to 550,000, the Labour Party agrees to accept the invitation of the Russian provisional government to send delegates to the Stockholm conference. The move is recommended to the conference by Labour leader Arthur Henderson, who has been serving as a minister in successive Liberal Party cabinets since 1915. The conference selects Henderson and Ramsay MacDonald, leader of the anti-war wing of the party, to attend.

Labour’s participation in the government since 1915 has confirmed its reliability from the standpoint of the British ruling class. On August 5, 1914, the Labour Party voted in favor of war credits. Henderson’s involvement in the government, together with the pro-war orientation of the trade unions, has resulted in the smothering of strikes and other working-class protests. Recognizing the Labourites’ usefulness in this role, Prime Minister David Lloyd George appointed John Hodge of the steelworkers’ union as Minister of Labour and George Barnes as Minister of Pensions.

Lloyd George sent Henderson as an emissary to meet with Kerensky in Petrograd. He was in Russia during July and visited France subsequently to consult with pro-war socialists on the Stockholm conference agenda. The goal of Henderson and his allies is to misdirect deepening popular

opposition to the war by championing the line of a “democratic peace” in the interests of British and French imperialism, a demand that translates in practice to the continuation of the war.

The vote at the Labour Party conference triggers a negative response from the government. Buoyed by US intervention into the war, Lloyd George has become more hostile to the idea of allowing delegates to travel to Stockholm. The government therefore refuses to issue passports to Henderson and MacDonald.

Henderson resigns from his government post the following day. However, in a demonstration of its loyalty to British imperialism, Labour does not withdraw its other representatives in the government, one of whom, Barnes, assumes Henderson’s vacated post in the powerful war cabinet. Even the right-wing *Spectator* will grudgingly comment later in August on “the goodwill and reasonableness with which Labour is behaving in the admittedly difficult circumstances.”

Petrograd, August 10 (July 28, O.S.): Government authorizes ministers of war and the interior to ban assemblies and congresses that are deemed harmful to the war effort

The Provisional Government takes steps to crack down on the ongoing Bolshevik Congress. A government decree authorizes the ministers of the interior and of war to ban any assemblies or congresses they deem harmful to national security or the war effort.

In response to the decree, which can only be understood as a direct threat to the Bolsheviks, the Bolshevik Congress moves from its previous meeting place in the industrial Vyborg District—a stronghold of Bolshevik influence in Petrograd—to a workers’ club that belongs to the *Mezhraiontsy* and is located in the Narva District, on the outskirts of the capital.

Counter-revolutionaries are seizing every opportunity to strike back at the soviets. Stories are spread of soviets of soldiers debating the orders of their officers rather than deploying the necessary reinforcements to the front. The collapse of the Kerensky offensive is blamed on “German spies,” while the slanders of Bolsheviks accepting “German gold” continue to be repeated. It is claimed that German spies are distributing vodka in the army, encouraging fraternization, and working to undermine the war effort from within. A government edict replaces elected commissioners in the army with government appointees.

Frankfurt am Main, August 11: French air raids kill civilians

On August 11, French aircraft attack the city of Frankfurt am Main. At least four people are killed. In the following months, other West German cities that serve as important transportation hubs or locations for the arms industry are also attacked by French and Italian bombers.

For this reason, there are now “significant restrictions” on street lighting and neon signs in the Rhine-Main. In the Ruhr region, mandatory blackouts have already been in effect since 1916. Shop window lights are forbidden entirely.

Another reason for these measures is the worsening shortage of gas throughout the Reich. The delivery of gas to private households and public agencies is limited to a few hours per day. Even the installation of new gas lines and the fitting of boilers and heaters is prohibited—a clear signal to the population that even the authorities are not convinced by the official displays of confidence in victory.

The shutting off of gas street lights in the cities contributes to a darkening in the mood of the masses. It can no longer be concealed that the unlimited U-boat war is turning out to have been a blunder that in no way secures a German victory. The British sea blockade against the German coasts produces devastating effects on daily life. Ever longer lines form in front of the grocery stores. Exorbitant prices for the masses, and enormous speculative profits for a narrow layer of the rich, embitter ever wider sections of the population and polarize society.

Petrograd, August 12-13 (July 30-31, O.S.): Bolshevik Congress discusses the slogan "All Power to the Soviets"

The main resolution to be discussed at the Bolshevik Congress, which was most likely written by Lenin, contains his proposal to withdraw the slogan, "All Power to the Soviets." The Bolsheviks currently hold about half of the seats in the workers' section of the Petrograd Soviet, and about a quarter of the soldiers' section. In the recent municipal elections, the Bolsheviks received 20 percent of the vote. The leading tendencies in the soviets, the Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks, are supporting the Kerensky government as it implements counter-revolutionary and authoritarian measures and cracks down on opposition.

Given the absence of Lenin, Kamenev, Zinoviev, Trotsky, and many other leaders, either because they are in hiding or in prison, the main report on the resolution is given by Stalin. The main report was originally scheduled to be given by Trotsky, but another speaker had to be found on short notice after Trotsky was arrested.

Lenin's supporters come to the meeting fully prepared, with Kronstadt Bolsheviks distributing copies of his pamphlet "On Slogans" to all participants at the congress before the discussion opens. Since Lenin is not able to be present due to the government crackdown, Lenin's supporters spare no efforts to ensure that his position is adequately presented and defended, especially since Stalin had previously taken a much more conciliatory position on the soviets than Lenin.

The draft resolution states: "At the decisive points, namely at the front and in Petersburg, state power is in the hands of the counterrevolutionary bourgeoisie, supported by the military clique of the army high command." The resolution points to the acquiescence of the leaderships of the existing soviets to the counter-revolution, urging the party to withdraw the slogan "All Power to the Soviets" and prepare instead to "take the state power into their hands and, in alliance with the revolutionary proletariat of the advanced countries, direct it towards peace and towards the socialist reconstruction of society."

Discussion of the report centers on the attitude toward the soviets. A leading member of the *Mezhraiontsy*, Yurenev, who had previously argued against the merger with the Bolsheviks, questions Lenin's proposal. He argues that this course would "be disastrous for our revolutionary gains. ... If we adopt it, we will be headed in the direction of isolating the proletariat from the peasantry and the broad masses of the population."

Other delegates, like Volodarsky, propose not to dismiss Lenin's suggestions entirely, but to modify them to soften the denunciations of the existing soviets. Of the 15 delegates who take the floor, eight are in favor of retaining the slogan "All Power to the Soviets," and only six agree with the resolution. Grigory Sokolnikov argues in support of the resolution, explaining that the Soviets "stopped being revolutionary organs the moment artillery was deployed against the working class."

Sokolnikov is echoed by Ivar Smilga, who extensively quotes from Lenin's work "On Slogans" to substantiate his views: "[P]ower is in the hands of a military clique. In order for power to come into the hands of

those classes which will work for the expansion of the revolution, it is necessary to overthrow the existing government." He states that the Soviets had "committed suicide" when refusing the power which had been handed to them in the February Revolution and insists that the Bolsheviks are obliged to take the initiative. "Comrade Yurenev talks of caution," he says, responding with the words of Danton: "In revolution, one needs boldness, boldness, and more boldness!"

In light of the divisions over whether or not to change the slogan and position on the soviets, in the afternoon of August 13 (July 31, O.S.), the delegates decide not to vote upon the resolution. Instead, they elect a resolutions committee that is tasked with preparing a new draft resolution.

Spain, August 12: General strike bloodily crushed by government

The Spanish government declares martial law to brutally put down a general strike called by the General Workers Trade Union (UGT). The strike, which broke out August 10 after a mining company refused to rehire 100 workers following a local job action, has been strongly observed in Barcelona and the Asturias mining districts.

Revolutionary calls to overthrow the government accompany the general strike. Unrest has been mounting across society in recent months, as shown by the formation of councils led by dissident officers in the military.

The government sends reservists with machine guns into the streets of Barcelona, where workers have put up barricades. At least 70 people are killed across the country as the insurrection is ruthlessly suppressed.

A neutral during World War I, Spanish capitalism has profited substantially from the slaughter on the Western Front. Large amounts of orders have poured into the country's industrial factories, especially from France. This has resulted in prices for basic foodstuffs and other items skyrocketing while wages have declined. At the same time, the economy has rapidly industrialized, bringing together a larger working class. For the first time in history, industrial production makes up more than 50 percent of economic output in Catalonia, Spain's most industrialized region.

Signs of militancy have been mounting for months. In December 1916, the UGT and anarcho-syndicalist CNT union struck a joint agreement that led to a one-day general strike. That same month, the Spanish government showed its fear that the presence of a well-known Russian revolutionary in the country could trigger social unrest by arresting Leon Trotsky after he crossed the border from France, transporting him to Cadiz and forcing him to board a steamer for New York.

Washington, August 12: Ohio Senator Harding calls for dictatorship in the US

In a lengthy interview published in the *New York Times*, Ohio's Republican Senator Warren Harding calls for the creation of a presidential dictatorship during the war under Woodrow Wilson. Harding will succeed Wilson as president in 1921.

Overheard at a Senate lunch saying a dictatorship is needed in reaction to legislative bickering over the Food and Fuel Act, Harding amplifies his position in the *Times*, which favorably reports the senator's remarks.

"Not only does this country need such a dictator," Harding insists, "it is sure to have one before the war goes much further." Asked if this position is "un-American," Harding responds that "it will be made American ...

The sooner it comes the better for all of us.”

Harding calls for the suspension of representative bourgeois democracy, what he calls “the system of legislation as it exists today,” which he holds is “not adapted for wartime purposes.” Asked if his proposal “does not mean the total abandonment of democracy,” Harding responds, “Call it what you will; it is the only way to win the war.”

Berlin, August 13: German government seeks to ban the wearing of mourning clothes

Two days after the bombing of Frankfurt, the German press publishes a demand by the imperial government that mourning clothes no longer be worn. They argue that the sight of black clothing could have a negative effect on the mood of the public. The reason for this demand is, first of all, the fact that mourners of those killed in action increasingly come to dominate the street scene. Secondly, there are numerous reports coming out of the army from police spies and authorities throughout the Reich, in which anxiety is expressed over increasingly rebellious sentiments among the population.

In content, the government’s appeal is a true masterpiece of bureaucratic wisdom and caution. These officials in the imperial government are actually convinced that the sentiments of the population can be controlled by such a superficial demand. In reality, it can only transform more quickly the grief of those who have lost fathers, brother or sons in the war into bitterness and anger.

Also this week: Emergency currency with anti-war images enters circulation in Germany

Several German cities this week issue emergency paper currency, as copper and silver coins have vanished from the market throughout the country. They are hoarded in private households for the post-war period. In the small town of Niederlahnstein on the Rhine, 25 and 50-pfennig notes are issued. Mayor Theodor Rody uses them for “war propaganda in the style of the Rhineland.”

The front of the 25-pfennig note features a design dutifully loyal to the government: a soldier and a factory worker extend their hands to one another. On the back, however, the voice of the people is depicted: the note is decorated with a border of barbed wire. Toward the left a guardian of the law is seen on horseback. He has a weapon in hand and it his duty to maintain “peace and order” on the “home front,” to ensure compliance with orders and pricing regulations. Above his head, it is written in tiny letters: “To distribute property causes much concern.” His horse is sniffing around in an inkwell, apparently looking for new regulations. On the right is a well-fed hamster. It symbolizes the war profiteers, speculators and black-market dealers who have raked in millions despite regulations. Loaded down with a full rucksack, it climbs a staircase with difficulty. Above it are the words: “If only I had recovered the loot.”

On the 50-pfennig note is pictured a splendid, tender ham and three rutabagas. This is an allusion to the so-called turnip winter, in which the population was called upon to eat white cabbage and turnip cabbage due to a shortage of potatoes. Above the ham are the words: “Tender yearning, sweet hopes,” and above the rutabagas, “Thus we live, thus we live in 1917.”

The bureaucrats of the Prussian government react immediately: the responsible district administrator in St. Goarshausen is outraged over the

defiant illustrations and inscription. They seem to him “little compatible with the seriousness of the times.” He alerts the district president, the representative of the Prussian government in Wiesbaden, sending him as *corpus delicti* (evidence of the crime), an example of the “defiant” emergency notes. The district president intervenes immediately with the magistrate of Niederlahnstein, but the emergency currency has already been printed in a run of 100,000 units and put into circulation. Mayor Theodor Rody defends himself with the comment: “This kind of humour is very German and especially true to the spirit of the Rhineland.”



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