

This week in the Russian Revolution

September 18 – 24: Bolsheviks obtain majorities in Moscow and Petrograd soviets

18 September 2017

Following the Kornilov affair, support for the Bolsheviks surges, and they win control of the Moscow and Petrograd soviets, followed one by one by provincial soviets. The crisis of the newly formed Kerensky dictatorship deepens. All the while, the war rages on, and mass hunger and deprivation fuel working-class rebellions around the world.

Moscow, September 18 (September 5, O.S.): Bolsheviks achieve a majority in the Moscow Soviet

Since the February Revolution, the Bolsheviks have been a minority in the system of soviets that were established during the overthrow of tsarism. Following his return to Russia, in the April Theses, Lenin insisted that the Bolsheviks recognize that they constituted a minority, “so far a small minority,” and that they set themselves up in opposition to the “bloc of all the petty-bourgeois opportunist elements” in the soviets, including the Mensheviks and the Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs).

The Bolshevik Party, in opposition to the Mensheviks and SRs, opposes the war and refuses to offer any support to the Kerensky regime. With its close connections to factory workers, soldiers, and sailors of the Baltic Fleet, the party gains a reputation—among allies as well as enemies—as the voice of the most far-reaching aspirations of workers for political power, radical social reorganization, and an end to imperialist war. The party advances the demand for a new international, consisting of parties in all countries oriented to world socialist revolution.

The positions of the Bolsheviks have earned them the hostility of the entire political establishment and all its supporters. Throughout the period following the February Revolution, and intensifying during the Kerensky offensive and the July Days, the Bolsheviks have been constantly slandered in all the mainstream newspapers. They are accused on all sides of having accepted “German gold.” Lenin is accused of being a paid agent of the German Kaiser, and nearly every day there is a new allegation that Bolsheviks are plotting with “dark forces” to bring about some or other betrayal or catastrophe for the country.

“But political retribution is not slow in coming,” Trotsky writes from prison at the end of August (“With Blood and Iron”). “Hunted, persecuted, slandered, our party has never grown as quickly as of late. And this process will not be slow to spill over from the capital to the provinces, from the cities into the country and army. The peasants can see and hear that it is those very authorities, for the very same reasons, that are crushing the land committees and are persecuting the Bolsheviks. The soldiers can observe the wild hallooing directed at the Bolsheviks and at the same time sense the counterrevolutionary noose growing ever tighter around their neck. All the working masses of the country will learn from

their new experiences to tie their fate to the fate of our party. Without for one minute ceasing to be the class organization of the proletariat, but, on the contrary, completely fulfilling this role only now, our party will in the fire of repression become the true leader, the support and hope of all oppressed, crushed, deceived and persecuted masses.”

Following the victory of the Petrograd working class over Kornilov (see: September 4 – 10: The Kornilov affair), the Bolsheviks win majorities not only in the Petrograd Soviet, but in the Moscow Soviet and provincial soviets as well. “The growth of the influence and strength of the Bolsheviks was undoubted, and it had now received an irresistible impetus,” Trotsky writes. “The Bolsheviks had warned against the Coalition, against the July offensive, and had foretold the Kornilov rebellion. The popular masses could now see that we had been right.”

The Bolsheviks are quickly being transformed into the most powerful force on the political stage. Tremendous organizational efforts are required for the party to keep pace with the increase in membership and support, but the Bolsheviks have been preparing for and anticipating this shift all along. “What distinguished our party almost from the very first stage of the Revolution was the firm conviction that the logic of events would eventually place it in power,” Trotsky later writes in *The History of the Russian Revolution to Brest-Litovsk* (1918).

Northern Italy, September 16-18: Popular insurgency seizes several cities, borders sealed

Beginning September 17, the Italian military seals the borders not only to the hostile Austria but also to neutral Switzerland. Neither post nor rail traffic can cross. This is in response to an insurgency that has seized several cities in industrially developed northern Italy. The Italian government wants to prevent the “infiltration” of revolutionaries living in exile in Switzerland and block letters with news from Russia.

The Italian government finds it increasingly difficult to get a grip on the food situation. From the beginning of September, a series of measures has been planned for the rationing of important food supplies and raw materials. The state also moves to monopolize the shoe industry and limit private ownership of automobiles. Exceptions will be allowed only for state officials and diplomats. Bread will be rationed.

In Turin, where there was already a general strike in August, the issuing of bread rationing cards is announced for October 1.

The *Corriere de la Sera* reports on September 16 that the Cabinet has gathered the night before in an extraordinary session because a serious domestic crisis has broken out. Five ministers who already departed for the weekend are called back. Due to the food problems, the council of

ministers comes to severe disagreements.

On the same day, armed conflict breaks out between workers and soldiers in the city of Parma over poor supply conditions. Martial law is declared. The social democratic newspaper *Vorwärts* reports, basing itself on a story in the Bund newspaper from Bern, that there are “riots in the streets.”

Also on September 16, there are press reports of acts of sabotage by workers. Protesting the war, dockworkers in Civita Vecchia refuse to unload shipments of grain that have reached the ports after they have repeatedly escaped the pursuit of U-boats while in transit.

Sydney, September 19: Australian “Great Strike” betrayed by union bureaucracy

On September 19, ironworkers and engineers in the Sydney railways return to work. The next day, 300 boilermakers end industrial action, returning to the Eveleigh rail workshop in Sydney’s inner-city. They are among the last workers to have resisted the sell-out of the “Great Strike.”

The general stoppage throughout the east coast transport sector and related industries involves around 100,000 workers between early August and September 9, when the union officialdom agrees to end the action without any demands having been won.

From the outset, the union officialdom is fearful that the strike will develop into a broader political movement. In many sectors, union bureaucrats only declare that their members are on strike after workers leave the job. The stoppage is prompted by widespread hostility to the introduction of time-cards and other measures aimed at boosting productivity in the railways and among tram workers. It intersects with mounting opposition to the imperialist world war and is heavily influenced by socialist and anti-war activists.

The Nationalist government of Billy Hughes and state governments in Victoria and New South Wales respond with repression, laying charges against individual union leaders and moving for the deregistration and effective illegalization of entire unions. Politically allied to the Labor Party and hostile to socialism, the union officialdom is unwilling and unable to put up any opposition.

On September 9, the strike’s Defence Committee, headed by senior union leaders, signs a deal with the authorities ending all strike action. The sell-out agreement does not win any concessions and includes a clause providing the Railway Commissioner with “discretion in filling all vacancies.” The wording of the deal leaves all the strikers effectively unemployed, forcing them to reapply for their job and creating the conditions for widespread victimization.

Significant sections of workers resist the betrayal. An article in the *Daily Telegraph* reports on a meeting of 600 to 700 railway workers, called to discuss the terms of the “settlement.” It states, “Almost to a man they expressed bitter resentment at the Strike Committee’s action, and more than one angrily exclaimed, ‘We have been sold out.’... [O]ne member declared, amidst approval, that if a satisfactory explanation was not forthcoming they ought to ‘sack’ their Defence Committee and select another in its place.”

However, in the absence of an alternative perspective and facing significant repression, the strike movement is unable to counteract the betrayal. None of the issues facing the working class are resolved, and on September 21 food riots erupt in the central business district of Melbourne. Newspaper accounts report hundreds of working class women marching through the city, smashing windows, before demanding at Federal Parliament that the government restrict the export of foodstuffs.

Washington D.C., September 20: Wilson orders use of chemical weapons and flamethrowers

The War Department, based on instructions from US President Woodrow Wilson, orders the Army to develop and use chemical weapons and flamethrowers in combat against Germany and the Central Powers. A *New York Times* article on the order comments that the “use of such methods by the enemy forces the United States to retaliate with similar measures.” In fact, it demonstrates that the “methods” of the “democratic” United States are no different than those of “German Kaiserism,” so frequently denounced in the *Times*. The use of “poison or poisoned weapons” is expressly banned by the 1899 Hague Declaration Concerning Asphyxiating Gases and the 1907 Hague Convention on Land Warfare. While signed by all belligerents, these agreements are cast aside in the Great War, which has seen tens of thousands of soldiers killed and maimed by poisons, including mustard gas and chlorine.

American soldier Stull Holt, in a letter sent home this month, describes the sensation of being hit by a mustard gas shell. “I got several breathes [sic] of the strong solution right from the shell before it got diluted with much air. If it hadn’t been for the fellow with me I probably wouldn’t be writing this letter because I couldn’t see, my eyes were running water and burning, so was my nose and I could hardly breathe. I gasped, choked and felt the extreme terror of the man who goes under in the water and will clutch at a straw.”

Russia, September 20 (September 7, O.S.): Transcaucasia declared an independent federal republic

Kerensky’s sudden and unilateral declaration of Russia as a republic only accelerates the centrifugal forces that are tearing the former tsarist empire apart. In Transcaucasia (roughly modern-day Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan), a Council of Transcaucasian Peoples, consisting in substantial part of former members of the tsarist Duma, is formed to declare the region an independent federal republic. A provisional government is constituted for the region.

However, the bourgeois leaders that comprise this new regime are at odds with each other over the basic composition and structure of the new government. The rise of national aspirations is accompanied by intensifying internecine tensions in a region that has been home to many different nationalities, ethnicities and religions throughout history.

Ypres, September 20: Horrific losses continue to accumulate in Flanders

With Britain’s initial attempts to gain ground following the launch of the Third Battle of Ypres July 31 having proved a costly failure, commanders alter their tactics by increasing firepower at the front and setting more modest goals for advancing troops. The number of heavy artillery pieces at the disposal of the British has been doubled, allowing British forces to advance close to one mile on the first day of the Battle of the Menin Road Ridge.

The main objective of the attack is to capture the Gheluvelt Plateau, which has been used as an important defensive base by the Germans throughout August.

While the British Army command trumpets the limited advances as a

great success, they come at a terrible price. Between September 20 and 25, British forces suffer over 20,000 casualties, including 3,148 deaths. The 19th Division alone lost 1,933 men. Similar numbers of German defenders were killed, including during huge artillery barrages described by observers as creating a wall of fire 1,000 yards deep.

A subsequent British attack, known as the Battle of Polygon Wood, on September 26 results in a further 15,000 casualties on the British side, including over 1,200 deaths. Two Australian divisions, the 4th and 5th, experience extremely heavy losses, with 1,717 and 5,471 dead or wounded between September 26 and 28. There are 13,000 German casualties between September 21 and 30.

German soldiers launch repeated counter-attacks, recapturing some of the territory at the southern end of the British advance. Territory in the area changes hands frequently over a two-week period as German troops launch 24 counter-attacks between September 26 and October 3. The German defenders rely increasingly on poison gas.

Washington D.C., September 20: Wilson creates commission to quell strike wave

President Wilson orders the formation of a federal mediation commission, the aim of which is to stop the national strike wave that has seen hundreds of thousands of workers walk off the job across the US this year, and to assist the various state and local agencies attempting to quash the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and the growing influence of radicalism among American workers.

The President's Mediation Commission will be headed up by Secretary of Labor William B. Wilson, and will include representatives of big business and the American Federation of Labor, as well as the jurist Felix Frankfurter, who is named commission secretary.

Even as the White House announces Wilson's executive order, the strike wave gains pace. A strike of some 25,000 workers at San Francisco shipyards and machine shops has spread to facilities in Seattle. In Pittsburgh, 5,000 steelworkers have struck the Jones and Laughlin Plant, after 400 workers walked out last week. A strike of 6,500 longshoremen in New York City and Hoboken, New Jersey ends after several days, under threat that the Wilson administration might declare both areas military ports. In Lynn, Massachusetts, 12,000 striking shoe workers are expected to return to work this week. They have been on strike since April.

Russia, September 21 (September 8, O.S.): Resignation of army chief deepens crisis of Provisional Government

General Alekseev, Commander in Chief of the Russian Army, resigns. Formerly the Kadet candidate for prime minister, Alekseev is a reactionary who loyally served the tsar. He accepts the position of head of the military with the aim of easing the fate of the arrested Kornilov and his supporters. Just 10 days prior, when officers in the Petrograd Military District were trying to subvert the struggle against Kornilov by undermining the military readiness of troops directed to defend the city, Kerensky considered stepping aside in favor of Alekseev.

The tsarist general's departure is an indication that the Provisional Government's efforts to contain the consequences of the Kornilov affair and protect the right-wing forces unleashed are collapsing. As Alekseev is pushed out, War Minister Verkhovskiy announces that all higher officers

within the military are also being cashiered—on the grounds that whether or not they were involved in the Kornilov affair, they knew of it. By these standards, Kerensky should have removed himself from office.

Verkhovskiy declares a new regime in the military, one in which order is maintained through “right, justice, and firm discipline,” not with “whips and machine guns.” His words are unconvincing. The working masses and the soldiers are moving rapidly to the left. The Baltic Fleet, the crown jewel of the Russian naval forces, is now flying the red battle flag. The newspaper of the Kronstadt Soviet declares, “We have had quite enough compromise! All power to the working people.”

Recalling the new War Minister's statements, Trotsky later writes in *The History of the Russian Revolution* that they “sounded quite like the spring days of the revolution. But it was September outdoors, and the autumn was coming.”

Finland, September 19-22 (September 6-9, O.S.): Lenin writes three articles on strategy

From hiding in Finland, Lenin writes three important articles addressing the question of what strategy the Bolshevik Party should adopt in the wake of the Kornilov affair: “The Tasks of the Revolution,” “The Russian Revolution and Civil War,” and “One of the Fundamental Questions of the Revolution.” These articles will be published in Bolshevik newspapers in subsequent weeks.

In an earlier letter dated September 16 (September 3, O.S.) and published September 19, entitled “On Compromises,” Lenin examines whether it would be possible to build a new government founded on the soviets on the basis of a compromise with the Mensheviks and SRs. These parties were, after all, compelled during the Kornilov affair to support the mobilization of the working class against the threat of counter-revolution. Such a course, which is favored by figures such as Kamenev and Zinoviev, “could in all probability secure the peaceful advance of the whole revolution, and provide exceptionally good chances for great strides in the world movement towards peace and the victory of socialism,” Lenin writes.

However, when news arrives that Kerensky has formed a dictatorship consisting of a “directory” dominated by advocates of war and repression—which the Mensheviks and SRs continue to support—Lenin adds a postscript: “After reading today's papers, I say to myself: perhaps it is already too late to offer a compromise. .. Yes, to all appearances, the day when by chance the path of peaceful development became possible has already passed.” In *Tasks of the Revolution*, Lenin writes:

Let us. .. not harbor any illusions about the Socialist-Revolutionary and Menshevik parties; let us stick firmly to the path of our proletarian class. The poverty of the poor peasants, the horrors of the war, the horrors of hunger—all these are showing the masses more and more clearly the correctness of the proletarian path, the need to support the proletarian revolution.

The “peaceful” hopes of the petty bourgeoisie that there might be a “coalition” with the bourgeoisie and agreements with them, that it will be possible to wait “calmly” for the “speedy” convocation of the Constituent Assembly, etc., have been mercilessly, cruelly, implacably destroyed by the course of the revolution. The Kornilov revolt was the last cruel lesson, a lesson on a grand scale, supplementing thousands upon thousands of small lessons in which workers and peasants were deceived by local capitalists and landowners, in which soldiers were deceived

by the officers etc., etc.

Lenin calls upon the Bolsheviks to take their program “to those down below, to the masses, to the office employees, to the workers, to the peasants, not only to our supporters, but particularly to those who follow the Socialist-Revolutionaries, to the non-party elements, to the ignorant. Let us lift them up so that they can pass an independent judgment, make their own decisions... Experience teaches us that the Bolshevik program and tactics are correct. So little time passed, so much happened from April 20 to the Kornilov revolt.”

Lenin continues: “The experience of the masses, the experience of oppressed classes taught them very, very much in that time; the leaders of the Socialist-Revolutionaries and Mensheviks have completely cut adrift from the masses. This will most certainly be revealed in the discussion of our concrete program insofar as we are able to bring it to the notice of the masses.” (Quotes and translations of "On Compromises" from Alexander Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks Come to Power*, Haymarket Books 2009, p. 170).

Also this week: Bloody stalemate persists on Southern Front

The Austro-Hungarian and Italian armies have fought each other to a bloody stalemate on the Southern Front. Following last week's conclusion of the 11th Battle of Isonzo, Italy's armed forces, confronted with mutinies and high casualty rates, are incapable of launching further attacks. Austria-Hungary's army is fairing little better and is on the verge of collapse.

To prevent this, increased numbers of German soldiers and officers, freed up by the failure of Kerensky's offensive on the Eastern Front, have been arriving on the Italian Front. The 14th Army, initially established as a German-only force, will later become a combined Austro-Hungarian-German unit, under the command of Otto von Below. Poison gas experts, including the scientist Otto Hahn, who is responsible for leading the work on the production of German gas shells, have also been drafted to help plan a new attack. Concluding that the Austro-Hungarian troops cannot withstand a further assault by the Italians, the Austro-Hungarian army command has decided to take the offensive with German assistance.

The nine battles of Isonzo waged prior to 1917 cost the lives of some 70,000 Italians, while the two Isonzo battles this year have claimed a further 76,000. On the Austro-Hungarian side, incomplete figures suggest that at least 40,986 soldiers and 1,323 officers will have died on the Italian front by year's end. The fighting on the Italian front is considered among the bitterest in the war, with mountains torn to pieces by mines and shells, and hand-to-hand combat occurring with bayonets and axes.

The bitter warfare is having profound consequences on the civilian population. Food shortages among the populations in both countries and the death tolls at the front are leading to more strikes and anti-war protests. There are 60,000 desertions among the Italian soldiers.

Also this month: Käthe Kollwitz works on memorial for her fallen son

In September 1917, the painter and sculptor Käthe Kollwitz works on a memorial for her son Peter who was killed in the First Battle of Ypres. She has been working on it since 1914, but stops frequently.

Immediately after the beginning of the war, the 18-year-old Peter wanted to volunteer for military service but needed the consent of his father. His father was against the war and initially declined. An older son, Hans, was already drafted. Käthe Kollwitz was against it at first but finally changed her mind. She writes in her memoirs in 1943: “How it came to be that I underwent this change is not entirely clear to me. I cursed the war, I knew that it would mean the greatest hardship. That I did not resist is probably due to the fact that I was unable to be entirely one with the boy in these times.”

It is clear from the entries in her diary that the character of the war was not really clear to her at this time. She and her husband were both members of the Social Democratic Party, which did everything it could to justify the vote for war credits to its followers, presenting the war as a defensive one. She let herself be carried away by Peter's war fever and helped him change his father's mind. On October 13, 1914, the young volunteer, poorly trained with a barely healed knee injury, went to war. “Hard day, very hard day,” Kollwitz wrote in her diary. Ten days later he was dead. “It is a wound in our lives that will never heal and is not meant to,” she wrote.

In the following years, she criticized the war and attempted to cope with her pain by working on the memorial for her son. She initially began by sculpting Peter's head. Then she designed a relief: mourning parents embracing each other with heads bowed. During this time, she also created one of her most important sculptures, Pietà, a barely 40-centimeter tall bronze statue. (A copy four times its size is placed in the Neue Wache in Berlin, the “Central Memorial of the Federal Republic of Germany for the Victims of War and Dictatorship.”)

In September, she writes in her diary: “Worked this week ... good. I see more clearly that this path leads to my goal, but also, that the goal is still so far away that years will pass before I am finished with Peter's work ... If I do this really well, there will be in this work much other work that would otherwise have to be expressed separately ... with unending slowness I discover what this should be.” She will take a total of 18 years before completing the memorial. (It stands today in the Vladslo German war cemetery in Belgium.)

Kollwitz's grief over her son and the experience of the war go hand-in-hand with increasingly strong partisanship for the poor and oppressed and their artistic representation. She takes part in peace rallies. Attentively and full of hope, she follows the developments of the revolution in Russia. She writes on November 8: “In Russia the tremendously important revolutions. The revolutionary socialists are in the government. They want to organize Russia socialistically, communistically. Max Wertheimer [a friend] expects the same spirit in Russia to spread throughout Europe. He believes in a vast moral uprising.” At the end of the year, she writes: “Russia has given us new prospects. Something new has now come into the world, something which seems to me definitely good.”

What she began in 1897 with her cycle on the “Weaver's Revolt” and in 1908 with the “Peasant War,” she continues in a new form after the war with etchings and her famous charcoal drawings like “Bread,” “Killed in Action,” and “Never Again War.” After the murder of Karl Liebknecht, she dedicates a woodcut to him.



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