

This week in the Russian Revolution

October 16-22: Trotsky leads Bolsheviks out of Pre-Parliament

16 October 2017

Lenin takes his campaign for an insurrection beyond the Central Committee

As the Bolshevik party leadership continues to hotly debate Lenin's calls for an armed insurrection, Lenin forcefully continues his campaign to orient the party toward the seizure of power. He writes a number of letters to different Bolshevik delegations and party committees, in this way circumventing the Central Committee and reaching toward the working class.

In a letter to the Petrograd City Conference from October 20 (October 7, O.S.), which was to be read in closed session, Lenin urges:

We must admit that unless the Kerensky government is overthrown by the proletariat and the soldiers in the near future the revolution is ruined. The question of an uprising is on the order of the day.

We must mobilize all forces to convince the workers and soldiers that it is absolutely imperative to wage a last, desperate and decisive fight for the overthrow of the Kerensky government.

In two other letters, dated October 21 (October 8, O.S.), for the Congress of Northern Soviets, which is scheduled to convene on October 23 (October 10, O.S.), Lenin makes similar points. Emphasizing the international significance of the seizure of power in Russia, Lenin writes in his letters to Bolshevik comrades attending the Congress:

Our revolution is passing through a highly critical period. This crisis coincides with the great crisis—the growth of the world socialist revolution and the struggle waged against it by world imperialism. A gigantic task is being presented to the responsible leaders of our Party, and failure to perform it will involve the danger of a complete collapse of the internationalist proletarian movement. The situation is such that, in truth, delay would be fatal.

Lenin, basing himself on the international situation, points to the general strike in Turin, strikes by Czech workers, and emphasizes, in particular, the significance of the revolt in the German navy.

While our chauvinists, who are advocating Germany's defeat,

demand a revolt of the German workers immediately, we Russian revolutionary internationalists know from the experience of 1905-17 that a more impressive sign of the growth of revolution than a revolt among the troops cannot be imagined.

Just think what our position is now in the eyes of the German revolutionaries. They can say to us: We have only Liebknecht who openly called for a revolution. His voice has been stifled in a convict prison. We have not a single newspaper which openly explains the necessity for a revolution; we have not got freedom of assembly. We have not a single Soviet of Workers' or Soldiers' Deputies. Our voice barely reaches the real, broad mass of people. Yet we made an attempt at revolt, although our chance was only one in a hundred. But you Russian revolutionary internationalists have behind you a half-year of free agitation, you have a score of newspapers, you have a number of Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, you have gained the upper hand in the Soviets of Petrograd and Moscow, you have on your side the entire Baltic fleet and all the Russian troops in Finland. And still you do not respond to our call for an uprising, you do not overthrow your imperialist, Kerensky, although the chances are a hundred to one that your uprising will be successful.

Yes, we shall be real traitors to the International if, at such a moment and under such favourable conditions, we respond to this call from the German revolutionaries with ... mere resolutions. Add to this, as we all perfectly well know, that the plotting and conspiracy of the international imperialists against the Russian revolution are rapidly growing. International imperialism is coming closer to the idea of stifling the revolution at all costs, stifling it both by military measures and by a peace made at the expense of Russia. It is this that is making the crisis in the world socialist revolution so acute, and is rendering our delay of the uprising particularly dangerous—I would almost say criminal.

Explaining further that the peasant revolt is growing across the country, and that the most militant sections of workers become apathetic precisely because of a lack of action of their revolutionary leadership, Lenin continues:

The slogan 'All Power to the Soviets' is nothing but a call for insurrection. And the blame will be wholly and undoubtedly ours, if we, who for months have been calling upon the people to revolt and repudiate compromise, fail to lead them to revolt on the eve of the revolution's collapse, after the people have expressed their confidence in us.

Petrograd, October 16-18: Bolshevik Party organs respond to Lenin's call for insurrection

Lenin's letters demanding that the party prepare for an insurrection provoke sharp disagreements in two of the party's principal organs—the Central Committee, which is the Bolshevik's top leadership body, and the Petersburg Committee, which directs the Bolsheviks' work in Petrograd.

After attempting to suppress a discussion of Lenin's positions, the Central Committee hears a report on October 16 from a Bolshevik representative from the Moscow area, Georgy Lomov. Lomov demands that the party make preparations for the seizure of power. There is an increasingly insurrectionary mood among the masses, he insists, which the party is falling behind. The Central Committee listens but does not discuss Lomov's report.

Simultaneously, news of Lenin's calls for the overthrow of the Kerensky government reaches the Petersburg Committee, which is outraged that the Central Committee has sought to conceal from it Lenin's views.

Two days later, on October 18, the Petersburg Committee convenes to discuss the situation, with the majority advocating a militant course. Speaking against two comrades, Volodarsky and Lashevich, who insisted that food shortages, the crisis in transportation, and the need to wait for a revolution in the West meant that it was too soon to seize power, the revolutionary Rakhia declares, "I thought all of us were revolutionaries, but when I heard Volodarsky and Lashevich I began to wonder."

While it stops short of adopting a proposed resolution on preparing for an uprising, the Executive Commission of the Petersburg Committee, the organization's leadership, starts working to prepare local organs for action. Word of what is taking place gets back to the Central Committee, which on the same day votes by a narrow majority to boycott the pre-Parliament. Seeing the Executive Commission's actions as a sign that Lenin's views are touching off an explosive, radical reaction in lower-party organs, the Central Committee attempts for a period of time to contain these moves.

Springfield, Illinois, October 16: Coal miners' wildcat strikes shake Wilson administration

In defiance of an agreement between the United Mine Workers (UMW), the Wilson administration and coal mine owners, a growing movement of wildcat strikes emerges among the nation's miners.

In the Washington Agreement, concluded on October 6, the UMW has imposed a no-strike pledge on coal miners in exchange for promises of wage increases. But paltry rate increases for miners have been more than gobbled up by rising costs, and anger is growing among the bituminous coal miners, whose numbers approach a half a million.

The wildcat strike movement is centered in Illinois, where over 40,000 miners have walked off the job over the past three months, including in a general strike in support of striking streetcar workers in the state capital of Springfield. It is estimated that 12,000 coal miners are currently on strike in the state.

The ongoing strikes bring a rebuke from Federal Fuel Administration head Harry Garfield, who, tellingly, issues his October 16 telegram directly to Illinois locals, bypassing the national and state UMW bureaucracies and imploring coal miners to "remember the national situation and the great task imposed on President Wilson."

Illinois UMW head Frank Farrington, mortified at his inability to control

the state's socialist-minded miners, also writes to the locals:

Our country is at war. Forced into a conflict that could no longer be avoided...America's Allies are now badly crippled by a shortage of coal... it is insisted that it shall be made clear to you that the practice of shutting down mines in violation of our agreement to force some desired condition, and of suspending work under every conceivable pretext, must be stopped.

October 20: German attack in Baltic threatens Petrograd

Russian forces evacuate their positions on Muhu (Moon) Island today, and Russia's naval forces withdraw from Suur Strait in the face of a German joint naval-army attack called Operation Albion, which aims to occupy the West Estonian Archipelago and pave the way for the capture of Petrograd. During Operation Albion, Germany takes some 20,000 Russians prisoner.

The capture of the islands plays an important role in revolutionary developments in the Russian capital. Exploiting the worsening strategic situation for the Russian forces, the Kerensky government is calling for the removal of revolutionary army units from the Petrograd garrison to the front. Rank-and-file soldiers and Petrograd's workers have bitterly resisted because they suspect it presages an attack on the Revolution, a conviction drawn from the experience of General Kornilov's attempt to capture the capital and crush the workers only weeks earlier, as well as comments from bourgeois figures who see the forfeiture of Petrograd to Germany as a means of ridding Russia of its militant workers. Rodzianko, president of the State Duma, captured these ruling class sentiments:

A fear was expressed in Petrograd lest the central institutions (that is the soviets, etc.) will be destroyed. To this I answered that I would be very glad if those institutions were destroyed, for they have brought nothing whatever but evil to Russia.

The Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries attempt to whip up patriotic fervor by warning of the loss of Petrograd. On October 22 (October 9, O.S.), they introduce a resolution in the Petrograd Soviet to establish a Committee for Revolutionary Defence. The Bolsheviks, which under Lenin and Trotsky's leadership are now beginning to make preparations to take power, support the committee's creation, seeing in it an opportunity to begin preparing for the uprising under the cover of a defensive committee. Soon afterwards, it will be renamed the Military Revolutionary Committee.

As Trotsky would later write, the questions of leading the working class to power in an insurrection and defending Petrograd were increasingly connected:

The Executive Committee of the Petrograd Soviet designated for the future military body such tasks as the following: To get in touch with the Northern front and with the headquarters of the Petrograd district, with Centrobalt and the regional soviet of Finland, in order to ascertain the military situation and take the necessary measures: to take a census of the personnel composition of the garrison of Petrograd and its environs, also of the ammunition and military supplies; to take measures for the

preservation of discipline in the soldier and worker masses. The formula were all-inclusive and at the same time ambiguous: they almost all balanced on a fine line between defense of the capital and armed insurrection. However, these two tasks, heretofore mutually exclusive, were now in actual fact growing into one. Having seized the power, the Soviet would be compelled to undertake the military defense of Petrograd. The element of defense-camouflage was not, therefore, violently dragged in, but flowed to some extent from the conditions preceding the insurrection.

Petrograd, October 20: Trotsky leads Bolshevik walkout of Pre-Parliament

Trotsky, head of the Petrograd Soviet and now the second most prominent figure in the Bolshevik Party after Lenin, delivers a speech to the newly-formed Pre-Parliament, before leading the Bolshevik faction in a dramatic walkout from the assembly of “democratic forces” gathered at Mariinsky Palace.

The evening’s gathering begins with speeches by Kerensky and other prominent figures consisting largely of “patriotic declarations and appeals to law and order,” in the words of historian Alexander Rabinowitch.

As the session nears its close, Trotsky demands the floor for an emergency announcement. Ascending the platform, Trotsky issues an uncompromising denunciation of the Provisional Government, warning that it is an instrument of the counterrevolution.

Rabinowitch writes, “Obviously choosing his words more for the benefit of Petrograd workers and soldiers than for his immediate audience”—a gathering of approximately 500 delegates from throughout Russia representing pro-capitalist parties like the Kadets as well as the compromising tendencies of the Socialist Revolutionary and Menshevik parties, along with journalists and diplomats representing the leading Allied Powers—Trotsky states that the government is plotting to abort the long-promised Constituent Assembly, abandon Petrograd, and crush the revolution.

Trotsky’s voice rises above the din of jeers and epithets:

Petrograd is in danger! The revolution and the people are in danger! The government is intensifying this threat and the ruling parties are helping it! Only the people can save themselves and the country! We turn to the people! All power to the soviets! All land to the people!

As the Bolsheviks walk out under a hail of vitriol, the majority left behind “heaved a happy sigh of relief,” Trotsky later recalls. “Only the Bolsheviks went out. The flower of the nation remained at their posts” in the Mariinsky Palace’s elegant hall, where imperial symbols have only recently been draped with red bunting.

Trotsky, like Lenin, has been opposed to the participation in the Pre-Parliament from the very beginning. Both advocated a boycott. However, their position was defeated in a democratic vote and, even though Lenin denounced it as an “obvious error and a deviation from the proletarian revolutionary path”, Trotsky and Lenin had to temporarily bow to the majority decision. However, the Central Committee revises its position on October 20 (October 7, O.S.), now advocating a boycott, with only Kamenev voting against.

The Bolshevik walkout from Mariinsky, denounced by the Minister of

Foreign Affairs Tereschenko as “a scandal,” is widely understood, by the Bolsheviks’ sympathizers as well as their enemies, as a step in the direction of insurrection. The Bolsheviks are now the most powerful force in the country, controlling the Petrograd and Moscow soviets as well as a majority of other soviets. Trotsky’s walkout from the Pre-Parliament can only mean that the Bolsheviks are planning to form their own government. It marks, in Trotsky’s words, the “historic break between the proletariat and the state mechanism of the bourgeoisie” in the revolution.

Würzburg, October 14-20: SPD reaffirms pro-war policies amid deepening party crisis

At its Party Congress, held in the southern German city of Würzburg, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) reaffirms its unconditional support for the war effort of German imperialism, which has been unwavering since the war’s outbreak in the summer of 1914. In a vote, 265 of the 283 delegates back the political line of the SPD faction to support multi-billion marks of war credits. Only 14 delegates vote against it.

The mood at the Congress, however, is gloomy. The party is in deep crisis, with a large wing of left-wing social democrats having formed the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD) just a few months earlier.

In his opening report, Friedrich Ebert justifies the party’s pro-war policies but also must acknowledge an extraordinary decline in the party’s membership since the beginning of the war. From a membership of over one million before the war, it has declined to some 243,061 in March 1917. Some historians estimate that by the fall of 1917, it has shrunk further to only some 150,000.

At the end of the Congress Friedrich Ebert is reelected party chairman, with Philipp Scheidemann serving as his deputy. One year later, both are to play key roles in the bloody suppression of the revolution of German workers and soldiers.

Greater Syria, October 22: 1,000 dying daily due to famine

A report in the *New York Times* notes that a thousand people are starving to death daily in Ottoman Empire-controlled areas in Syria and Lebanon. A grim outcome of the Great War, some 1.2 million people face food shortages in what becomes known as the Great Famine of Mount Lebanon.

Food shortages began breaking out in Beirut almost as soon as the Ottoman Empire joined the war in October 1914. The Ottoman rulers have sequestered railways for the transportation of military personnel and equipment throughout the empire, curtailing food shipments. Grain and other food dispatches are prioritized for the army. At the same time, an outbreak of locusts has destroyed much of the remaining food crops, and a severe drought has worsened the harvest.

Under these conditions, the blockade imposed on the Ottoman Empire by the Allies proves devastating. British and French ships block shipments throughout the entire Eastern Mediterranean, and the Turkish government responds by blocking grain shipments to Mount Lebanon so as to use their dwindling resources to continue the war. Workers and poor sections of the population are hit worst of all. Food continues to be available in most cities, but is priced so high that it is unaffordable for the vast majority of the population.

People rapidly become desperate, eating cats, rats and other rodents. Reports of cannibalism also begin to emerge.

Edward Nickoley, an employee at the Syrian Protestant College, describes the scene in Beirut in 1917 in his diary:

Starving people lying about everywhere; at any time children moaning and weeping, women and children clawing over rubbish piles and ravenously eating anything that they can find. When the agonized cry of famishing people in the street becomes too bitter to bear, people get up and close the windows tight in the hope of shutting out the sound. Mere babies amuse themselves by imitating the cries that they hear in the streets or at the doors.

By the time the famine ends in 1918, some 200,000 of Lebanon's 400,000 population will be dead. This is the highest death rate as a percentage of the population for any country in the world during the war.



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