

New Zealand “left” commentator Chris Trotter slanders the Russian Revolution

John Braddock
14 November 2017

On November 7, the 100th anniversary of the Russian Revolution, New Zealand’s self-appointed “left” media commentator Chris Trotter published a falsification of this seminal event, the first conquest of power by the working class and establishment of a workers’ state committed to the perspective of international socialism.

Trotter’s piece was syndicated by Fairfax Media. The *Dominion Post* amplified the lies involved by printing the infamous photo of Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin addressing a crowd of workers, from which the image of his co-leader, Leon Trotsky, was excised on the orders of Stalin. The paper used the same doctored photo a week earlier, accompanying an equally dishonest commentary republished from the *Washington Post*.

As David North, chairman of the International Editorial Board of the *World Socialist Web Site*, has noted, the Russian Revolution “ranks among the greatest and most progressive events in world history. It is part of the chain of world-historical events—such as the Reformation, the American Revolution and the French Revolution—that rank as great milestones in the development of human civilisation.”

The revolution signified the beginning of a still unfinished epoch. The overthrow of the outmoded system of global capitalism remains the immediate and practical task facing the working class in every country.

With the spectre of the 1917 revolution again haunting the ruling elites, Trotter rehashed the litany of historical fabrications that is the hallmark of right-wing historians such as Richard Pipes, Sean McMeekin and Robert Service. His essay is a brew of anti-communist propaganda served up in the name of defending “democracy.”

Trotter’s target is the Bolsheviks. According to him, the Russian Revolution “deserves to be remembered for what it was—a joyous eruption of ‘people power,’” which the Bolsheviks “not so much made, as destroyed.” He condemns their seizure of power on November 7 as “blatantly unconstitutional” and “a carefully-planned and ruthlessly executed coup d’état.”

The “regime,” Trotter contends, could only ever be one of “rifles and bayonets,” maintained by a “terroristic secret police.” Trotter concludes that while socialism did not make

Stalin “inevitable,” the Bolsheviks, with their “utter refusal to share power with any of the other participants in the Russian Revolution most certainly did.”

This is a travesty on every count.

The revolution was not an amorphous expression of “peoples’ power.” It was the confirmation of the strategic perspective of permanent revolution, developed by Trotsky and taken up by Lenin, that the overthrow of the 300-year-old Romanov dynasty would only be accomplished under the leadership of the working class. The democratic revolution, with the working class leading the opposition to the capitalist class, developed rapidly from February 1917, as Trotsky envisaged, into socialist revolution.

Any objective study of this history proves that the presence of the Bolshevik Party, armed with the leadership of Lenin and Trotsky, was the decisive factor in securing the victory of the revolution. Without the Marxist movement patiently preparing the Russian working class theoretically and politically over decades before 1917, there would have been no revolutionary movement based on the working class.

It is a standard trope of reactionary historians that the revolution was a coup led by Lenin and a handful of co-conspirators. They are depicted as cynically exploiting the war-weary and starving masses to seize power, using the iron discipline imposed by a dictatorial party leadership.

This fictitious and tendentious narrative has been demolished by serious historical scholarship. In his book *The Bolsheviks Come to Power*, Alexander Rabinowitch reveals that in 1917 the Bolshevik Party’s internal functioning was characterised by broad discussion and democratic decision-making. The Bolsheviks gained widespread support from the masses of workers who became increasingly radicalised.

The party did not create the revolutionary situation, but transformed it by leading the insurrection that took power. In his lecture posted on the WSWWS, Tom Carter describes how in August–September, despite repressive measures by the bourgeois Provisional Government, the Bolsheviks experienced massive growth, based on popular support for their demand for power to the Soviets (workers’ councils) and the working class. The development of a nationwide network of rank-and-file factory committees provided a critical base for deepening

Bolshevik influence.

The revolution was not, as Trotter maintains, a contest between a legitimate constitutional democracy, exemplified by the Constituent Assembly, and treacherous Bolshevism. The ruling class was always prepared to abandon its phony reforms and attempt to crush the working class by force. The decision by General Kornilov to march his troops on Petrograd in August was intended to inflict a bloodbath far greater in scale than the massacre of the Paris Communards in 1871.

The workers and soldiers of Petrograd, organised and led by the Bolsheviks, rose up and prevented Kornilov from entering the capital. All the parties that had supported compromise with the bourgeoisie including the Mensheviks, the Cadets and the Socialist Revolutionaries, were fatally discredited.

The choice was clearly between a brutal counter-revolutionary dictatorship, backed by imperialism, and workers' power. In the wake of Kornilov's failed putsch, the Bolsheviks won majorities among the Soviets. Trotsky, on his release from prison, was elected chairman of the Petrograd Soviet. The door was thus opened to the seizure of power by the working class.

Trotter's repudiation of this history leads him to endorse the great lie that Lenin and the Bolsheviks were responsible for Stalinism and all its crimes. Those who advance this proposition, however, fail to answer the most fundamental question: why did the Stalinist bureaucracy find it necessary to murder tens of thousands of Lenin's comrades and the general staff of the revolution?

The real continuity of the October Revolution lies not with Stalinism, but with those who fought and opposed it, beginning with the Left Opposition founded by Trotsky and embodied, since 1938, in the Fourth International.

Those who took power in 1917 never looked on the Russian Revolution as a purely Russian event, but the first shot in the opening of the world socialist revolution. In opposition to the Stalinist theory of "socialism in one country," the fate of socialism has always been bound up with the victory of the international working class. That is the task facing the workers and oppressed masses around the world today.

Trotter's denunciations are motivated by contemporary political concerns. There is growing interest in socialism worldwide, particularly among young people. Capitalism has discredited itself; it has produced record inequality, the impoverishment of billions of people, and the danger of a third world war.

With a new revolutionary period opening up, the opportunist middle-class forces that Trotter speaks for are determined to prevent the emergence of an independent and conscious socialist alternative. Trotter is one of several pundits, grouped around the trade union-funded *Daily Blog*, seeking to revive illusions in the Labour Party.

Labour has historically served as the major obstacle to socialism in New Zealand. It was founded in 1916 and

supported NZ's participation in World War I, seeking to divert mass opposition to war behind a narrow campaign against conscription.

Following the war, Labour's leaders feigned sympathy for the Russian Revolution, while making clear that they opposed the Bolsheviks' perspective of world socialist revolution—and, above all, any fight for it in New Zealand. Labour sought to divide workers by promoting nationalism, including a racist "white New Zealand" immigration policy.

The new Labour-led government of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, which includes the right-wing anti-immigrant New Zealand First as a coalition partner, is part of a global lurch to the right by the ruling elite. It advances a program of nationalism, anti-Chinese xenophobia and the defence of New Zealand imperialism's aggressive alliance with the United States. The government is strengthening the police and boosting the military in preparation to suppress working class struggles against austerity and war.

Trotter's aim, in slandering the Russian Revolution, is to attempt to derail the growing attraction to socialism among workers and young people, in New Zealand as much as elsewhere in the world.

Those who want to discuss the truth about the Bolshevik Party and the Russian Revolution, and its lessons for building a new international socialist movement, are invited to the public meeting being held in Auckland on November 25 by the Socialist Equality Group (New Zealand).

Meeting Details:

100 years on: The significance of the 1917 Russian Revolution for today

Saturday, November 25, 2:15 p.m.

Yates Room

Onehunga Community Centre

83 Church Street Onehunga, Auckland

Tickets: \$5/\$3 concession



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact