

This week in the Russian Revolution

# November 20-26: Bolsheviks expose imperialist carve-up of the Middle East

20 November 2017

With the publication of these secret agreements, the outrage and indignation towards the Bolsheviks in the imperialist capitals reaches new heights. However, among the oppressed masses around the world, the Bolsheviks win incalculable prestige.

## **Kiev November 20 (November 7, O.S.): Ukrainian Rada issues Third Universal, proclaiming the Ukrainian People's Republic**

The Ukrainian Rada, composed for the most part of Ukrainian national and petty bourgeois socialist parties, is terrified by and opposed to the Bolshevik seizure of power in Petrograd. In an attempt to preempt the spread of Soviet power to Ukraine, it issues the Third Universal and proclaims the Ukrainian People's Republic. The Universal states:

In the capitals to the north a bloody civil struggle is raging; the Central Government has collapsed, and anarchy, lawlessness and ruin are spreading throughout the state. Our land is also in danger. Without a single, strong national authority, the Ukraine may also fall into the abyss of civil war, slaughter and ruin. Ukrainian people! You, together with the other fraternal peoples of the Ukraine, have placed us to guard the rights acquired through your struggles, [empowered us] to create order and to build new life on our land; and, we, the Ukrainian Central Rada, by your will, and in the name of establishing order in our country in the name of saving all of Russia, do now proclaim: From this day forth, the Ukraine becomes the Ukrainian People's Republic. Without separating ourselves from the Russian Republic and maintaining its unity, we shall stand firmly on our own soil, in order that our strength may aid all of Russia, so that the whole Russian Republic may become a federation of equal and free peoples.

The territory of the short-lived Ukrainian People's Republic is to encompass Kiev, Podillia, Volhynia, Chernihiv, Poltava, Kharkiv, Katerynoslav Kherson, and Taurus (excluding Crimea). The annexation of further territories is delayed and left to popular referendums.

Under the pressure of the decrees of the new workers' government, which have found huge popular support among the working masses throughout the former Russian Empire and Europe, the Ukrainian Rada proclaims not only the expropriation of all big landed estates without compensation but also an eight-hour work day. It also establishes state control over production in Ukraine "guarding the interests of both the

Ukraine and all of Russia." Moreover, it announces that it will "firmly insist that peace be instituted quickly. To this end, we shall use resolute means to force through the Central Government, both allies and enemies to begin peace negotiations at once." The Russian, Jewish and Polish peoples, as well as other national minorities in Ukraine are assured the right to form their own self-governments in "all matters of national life." The Universal also announces elections to a Ukrainian Constituent Assembly for December 27, 1917 (O.S.) and its convocation for January 9, 1918.

## **November 21 (November 8, O.S.): Yakov Sverdlov elected president of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee**

The Bolshevik Yakov Sverdlov, the chief organizer of the Bolshevik party throughout 1917, is elected the president of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee (VTsIK). In this capacity, Sverdlov plays a crucial role in creating the new governmental bodies of the workers' state. The VTSiK eventually evolves into the the highest legislative, administrative, and revising body of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR).

## **Russia, November 23 (10 O.S.): Soviet government publishes secret treaties**

The Bolshevik-led government proceeds to publish the secret treaties to which the previous Russian governments were party. The November 23 edition of *Izvestia* contains the following statement:

In undertaking the publication of the secret diplomatic documents relating to the foreign diplomacy of the tsarist and the bourgeois coalition governments, ... we fulfill an obligation which our party assumed when it was the party of opposition.

Secret diplomacy is a necessary weapon in the hands of the propertied minority which is compelled to deceive the majority in order to make the latter serve its interests. Imperialism, with its world-wide plans of annexation, its rapacious alliances and machinations, has developed the system of secret diplomacy to the highest degree, ... The Russian people as well as the other peoples of Europe and those of the rest of the world should be given the

documentary evidence of the plans which the financiers and industrialists, together with their parliamentary and diplomatic agents, were secretly scheming ...

Abolition of secret diplomacy is the first essential of an honorable, popular, and really democratic foreign policy. The Soviet Government has undertaken to carry out such a policy, and that is why, having offered to all belligerents an immediate armistice, it at the same time publishes the treaties and agreements which are no longer binding on the Russian workmen, soldiers, and peasants ...

The bourgeois politicians and newspapers of Germany and Austria-Hungary will no doubt seize upon the published documents and will try to represent the diplomatic work of the Central Empires in a favorable light. Such an attempt is foredoomed to failure; and this for two reasons: In the first place, we intend in a short time to present at the bar of public opinion a series of secret documents which amply illustrate the diplomatic methods of the Central Empires. In the second place, and this is most important—the methods of secret diplomacy are as international as those of imperialistic plunder. When the German proletariat, by revolutionary means, gets access to the secrets of the chancelleries of its government it will discover documents in them of just the same character as those we are about to publish. It is to be hoped that this will happen at an early date.

The government of workers and peasants abolished secret diplomacy with its intrigues, ciphers, and lies. We have nothing to hide. Our program expresses the ardent desires of millions of workers, soldiers, and peasants. We desire a speedy peace on the basis of honest relations with and the full co-operation of all nations. We desire a speedy abolition of the supremacy of capital. In revealing to the whole world the work of the governing classes as it is expressed in the secret documents of diplomacy, we offer to the workers the slogan which will always form the basis of our foreign policy: “Proletarians of all countries, unite!”

L. TROTSKY People’s Commissar of Foreign Affairs  
(Accessed here)

The publication of the Sykes-Picot Agreement between London and Paris for the carve-up of the Ottoman Empire shakes the existing international order to its foundations. This 1916 agreement, which Lenin calls an “agreement of the colonial thieves,” was entered into behind the backs of the populations of the warring countries—and behind the backs of the populations of the territories in question. According to this agreement, Russia would gain control over what would later become eastern Turkey, while France would control what would later be southern Turkey, Lebanon, Syria, and northern Iraq. Britain, notwithstanding its fraudulent promises to local leaders, would receive territory in what would later be Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, and Kuwait.

With the publication of these secret agreements, the outrage and indignation towards the Bolsheviks in the imperialist capitals reaches new heights. Among the oppressed masses around the world, the Bolsheviks win incalculable prestige.

#### **Breslau, November 24: Rosa Luxemburg calls Russian Revolution “world historic act whose trace will not perish for eons”**

A few days ago, Rosa Luxemburg received the news in her prison cell in Breslau (Wroclaw) that her lover Hans Diefenbach has died in France—the

same night that the Bolsheviks took power in Petrograd and established a workers’ government. Deeply shaken emotionally, she is sustained by an intense and even more moving exchange of letters on the Russian Revolution with comrades.

She writes to Martha Rosenbaum:

For a week or so my thoughts have of course been in Petersburg. With impatient hands both morning and evening I seize on the newspapers, but unfortunately the news is meagre and confused. Lasting success there is certainly not to be counted on, but in any event the courage to seize power is in itself a punch in the face for Social Democracy here and for the whole slumbering International. However, Kautsky knows nothing better than to statistically prove that Russia’s social relations are not yet ripe for the dictatorship of the proletariat! A worthy ‘theoretician’ of the Independent Social Democratic Party! He has forgotten that ‘statistically’, France in 1789 and 1793 was much less ripe for the rule of the bourgeoisie ... Fortunately, history has long stopped moving according to Kautsky’s theoretical precepts, so we can hope for the best.

And to Louise Kautsky she writes, “Are you happy for the Russians? Of course they won’t be able to hold on in this witches coven—not because the statistics show such a primitive economic development in Russia, as your sage spouse has calculated, but because the Social Democrats in the highly-developed West consist of pathetic cowardly dogs and look on quietly as the Russians bleed. But such a downfall is better than ‘staying alive for the fatherland,’ it is a world historic act whose trace will not perish for eons. I expect many more great things in the coming years, I don’t just want to wonder at world history through these bars...”

#### **Milwaukee, November 24, 1917: Police department bombing kills eleven**

A package detonates at Milwaukee’s central police station, killing nine policemen and two civilians. Italian immigrant anarchists, followers of Luigi Galleani, are suspected; the assumption being that they acted in reprisal for the murder of two Italian immigrants by Milwaukee police earlier in the year.

The anarchist bombings, culminating in the Wall Street Bombing of 1920, which kills 38, are seized on by federal, state, and local authorities to increase repression against all working class political tendencies, socialists and members of the IWW included, and especially immigrant radicals. In the wake of the Milwaukee police bombing, eleven alleged Italian anarchists are swept up and railroaded through the courts into jail.

#### **Russia, November 25 (12 O.S): Elections to the Constituent Assembly go forward**

Having just resolved the internal crisis within the leadership over the question of whether to form a “coalition government” with the Mensheviks and SRs, the Bolshevik Party confronts new disagreements over whether to convene the Constituent Assembly.

During the period from February to October, the Provisional

Government promised to convene a Constituent Assembly to which it would cede power. Over that period, the Bolsheviks frequently denounced the parties in power for their endless postponements and waffling on the question of the Constituent Assembly. However, now that the All-Russian Congress of Soviets has proclaimed a new Bolshevik-led government following the October insurrection, Lenin, Trotsky, and many other Bolshevik leaders oppose convening the Constituent Assembly.

Beginning immediately after the October insurrection, Lenin urges the new government to delay the elections. Trotsky recalls Lenin's approach to the question:

"We must postpone the elections," he declared. "We must enlarge the suffrage by giving it to those who are eighteen years old. We must make possible a new arrangement of the electoral lists. Our own lists are worthless, a crowd of intellectuals who have hastened here, while we need the workmen and peasants. The Kornilov men and the Kadets we must declare outside the law."

The answer was, "Postponement is unfavorable just now. It will be looked upon as a liquidation of the Constituent Assembly the more so because we ourselves reproached the Provisional Government with putting off the Constituent Assembly."

"Ah, that is folly," Lenin replied. "Bring up important facts, not words. As far as the Provisional Government is concerned the Constituent Assembly would have meant a step forward, or at least might have meant it; as far as the Soviet power is concerned, and especially with the present electoral lists, it will unquestionably mean a step backwards. Why is postponement unfavorable now? And if the Constituent Assembly is Kadet, Menshevik Social Revolutionary—is that favorable?"

"But we shall be stronger then," others demurred. "For the moment we are still too weak. In the country they know almost nothing of the Soviet power. And if the news penetrates there now, that we have postponed the Constituent Assembly it would weaken us still more." Sverdlov, who had more connection with the country than any of us, was particularly opposed to a postponement of the elections.

Lenin kept to his position without any support. He shook his head in dissatisfaction and repeated, "It is a mistake, an open mistake, which may cost us very dear! If it only does not cost the revolution its head ..."

A decision is made over Lenin's objections to hold the elections. The Socialist Revolutionaries win 40.4 percent of the vote, the Bolsheviks 24 percent, the Mensheviks 2.6 percent, and the Kadets 4.7 percent. In general, the vote confirms that the SR party enjoys support in the countryside, while the Bolsheviks enjoy overwhelming support in the cities and among sections of soldiers.

Among workers, the Bolsheviks win 86.5 percent of the vote. The party wins 62.6 percent of the vote among soldiers of the Baltic Fleet, 56.1 percent on the Northern Front, and 66.9 percent on the Western Front.

### **Also this week: German workers, Social Democratic leaders react to October Revolution**

The news of the conquest of power by the Bolsheviks and the first decrees of the new government, the Council of People's Commissars, have electrified German workers. In all factories, in the canteens, in front

of public kitchens for the poor, in the long lines of women at the grocery stores, news of the Russian Revolution dominates workers' discussion. A genuine workers' government has taken power in Russia! It has declared a halt to all actions of war with immediate effect! Peace is not only being talked about there, but peace is being made! Big landowners and capitalists have been expropriated! Why don't we do as our class brothers and sisters in Russia have done!

The mood among the masses finds reflection in that of Clara Zetkin in the current Women's edition of the *Leipziger Volkszeitung*. Zetkin unconditionally welcomes "the Russian revolution's work for peace." Zetkin, 60, is a member of the revolutionary Marxist Spartacus League, which is part of the Independent Social Democrats (USPD). A friend of Rosa Luxemburg for many years and of Lenin since 1907, she has been at the head of the principled socialist opposition to the war in Germany since 1914. She now looks to Russia with her comrades in power:

Together with the Peasants' Soviet and with the support of land and naval soldiers, the Petrograd Soviet of Workers and Soldiers have overthrown the provisional coalition government, arrested most ministers ... and placed full government power in the hands of the Congress of Workers and Soldiers' Soviets. The Petrograd Soviet of Workers and Soldiers consists in its overwhelming majority of radical socialists of the Bolshevik Party or maximalists who never compromised with the bourgeois left parties, but represented the view from the outset that the existence and work of the revolution can only be ensured through the dictatorship of the proletariat and the assumption of full government power by the soviets of workers and soldiers.

The success of the revolution was made possible by the Bolsheviks' firm application of revolutionary principles, resulting in the party securing "a following among large masses of the population, particularly from the urban and industrial proletariat, as well as from the peasantry and land and naval army." The representatives of the former government were incapable, she continues, "to continue the work of the revolution ... because on the key question they were representatives of the ruling class, whose interests they respectfully left untouched..."

Among the right-wing Social Democrats in the Majority SPD (MSPD), the mood is one of terror. The social patriots fear that the proletarian revolution in Russia could spread to Germany and spiral out of control. To confuse the masses, they pretend in the daily *Vorwärts* to embrace their bitter enemies, praising the Bolsheviks' peace offering to the skies. While their newspapers have chiefly thus far published celebratory reports written by the Supreme Army Command from the front, positive reports about the events in Russia suddenly appear. The leading Social Democrats are thereby attempting to cover the tracks of their policies: the repeated votes for war credits that have enabled the German imperialists to wage war since 1914.

On November 19, a detailed report appears in the newspaper *Vorwärts* about a meeting in Elberfeld (now Wuppertal) where SPD leader Friedrich Ebert praised the Russian government's peace offer in front of a packed room of 2,000 people, and calls on the German government to immediately accept it. He deceitfully claims that the "readiness for peace of the central powers" has contributed significantly to the Bolshevik offer, pointing to the July Reichstag peace resolution—which in fact only attempted to return to the imperialist status quo ante as it prevailed in 1914.

In fact, Ebert and his MSPD co-thinkers, in their promotion of "peace," are representing the interests of German imperialism. Berlin wants to conclude a separate peace with Russia in order to secure new territory in

the east, deploy the troops freed up to the Western Front, and secure a final victory against the Entente.

### **Also this week: British Labourites denounce October Revolution**

Labour Party MP Philip Snowden, writing in the *Labour Leader* November 15, denounces the October Revolution as “tragic indeed.” Snowden’s bitter opposition to the seizure of power by the working class exposes his brand of Christian socialism and pacifism, so widespread in Labour Party and Fabian Society circles. Confronted with the Bolsheviks’ declaration of an immediate ceasefire and peace negotiations, Snowden places himself on the side of British imperialism.

Just five months ago, Snowden was a featured speaker, alongside Ramsay MacDonald and other prominent Labourites, at the Leeds Convention called to acclaim the February Revolution. While the Leeds Convention and its call for the establishment of workers and soldiers councils met with strong support from British workers keen to see an end to the war and capitalist exploitation, Snowden, et. al. saw the purpose of the gathering as the prevention of a genuine socialist movement.

MacDonald, whose Labour Party continues to hold posts in the British government—a major belligerent in the ongoing bloodbath that has claimed millions of young lives since 1914—has also attacked Lenin as the leader of a party of “thoughtless anarchists... whose minds were filled with violence and hatred.”

Henry Hyndman, the former leader of the Second International-aligned Social Democratic Federation, who has justified the slaughter in the trenches through the promotion of British chauvinism, will write early in 1918 on the October Revolution in an article entitled “Why we must repudiate the Bolsheviks”:

I am proud to state that I can reckon most of the leading revolutionaries of Europe and Asia among my friends. But they, in all their uprisings against abominable tyranny were never guilty of such crimes as those which Lenin and Trotsky and the Bolsheviks generally are committing... Democracy and Socialism are now endangered by their conduct.”

Only a small number of socialists in Britain, including John MacLean, endorse the October Revolution. Responding to Trotsky’s appeal for the release of Russian socialists detained in Britain, Maclean speaks at a number of demonstrations and addresses a letter to *The Call*, the newspaper of the British Socialist Party, which appears in its November 29 edition. MacLean hails the British workers’ “triumphant comrades of Russia.”



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**