

This week in the Russian Revolution

# November 27-December 3: Soviet government steps up call for end to war

27 November 2017

*The new government of Soviet Russia issues a call to “the peoples of the belligerent governments” to put an end to the imperialist slaughter. With negotiations on an armistice with Germany set to begin at Brest-Litovsk, Lenin and Trotsky are calling on the Russian Revolution’s greatest ally: the international working class.*

## **Petrograd, November 27 (November 14, O.S.): Decree on Workers’ Control**

After prolonged discussions, the Central Executive Committee (VTsIK) approves a decree establishing workers’ control in factories with more than five workers. The decree states:

(1) For the purpose of planned regulation of the national economy in all industrial, commercial, banking, agricultural, transport, co-operative production societies and other undertakings which employ wage labor or give out work to be done at home, workers’ control is to be introduced over production, over buying and selling of products and raw materials, over their storing and also over the finances of the undertakings.

(2) Workers’ control will be exercised by all the workers in the particular enterprises through their elected organs such as works committees, factory committees, and so forth, representatives of the employees and technicians having to belong to these bodies.

(3) A local Council of Workers’ Control will be created in each large town, in each province or industrial district, which as an organ of the Soviets of Workers’, Soldiers’, and Peasants’ Deputies will be composed of representatives of the trade unions, of the works and factory committees and of other workers’ committees and workers’ co-operatives...

The decree also provides for the establishment of Workers’ Control Committees which

have the right of controlling the whole business correspondence of the enterprise, the employers being held legally responsible for any concealment of correspondence. Secrecy in business is abolished. The owners are under obligation to lay before the Workers’ Control all books and accounts for the current year and for past business years...

Furthermore, the decree establishes that the employers and the workers’ representatives are “responsible to the State for the strictest order and discipline and for the upkeep of property.”

An All-Russian Council of Workers’ Control is created as the “highest authority for all affairs connected with workers’ control.” It is tasked with working out “general plans of control and instructions, ... binding decisions” and the regulation of the mutual relations between the District Council of Workers’ Control.

(Quoted from: Rex A. Wade (ed.): *Documents of Soviet History, Vol. 1: The Triumph of Bolshevism 1917-1919*, p. 48.)

## **Petrograd, November 27-30 (November 14, O.S.): Soviet government issues appeals for peace**

Only the German government has thus far accepted the Soviet government’s appeal for an armistice. On November 27, the Soviet government issues an “Appeal to the peoples of all belligerent countries” to begin peace negotiations on December 1. It addresses itself to the governments of France, Great Britain, Italy, the United States, Belgium, Serbia, Romania, Japan and China, but above all to the working masses of the warring countries.

The appeal states:

The victorious Workers’ and Peasants’ Revolution in Russia brought the question of peace into the forefront of world attention. The period of vacillations, delays and red-tape agreements is over. Now all Governments, all classes, all parties in all the belligerent countries are called upon to give a plain answer to the question; “Do you agree to join us on December 1st in negotiations for an immediate armistice and general peace?” The avoidance by the workers in field and factory of another winter campaign, with all its horrors and disasters, or the continuance of bloodshed in Europe, hangs upon their answer to this question. ... We, the Council of People’s Commissars, appeal to the toiling masses in Germany, Austria-Hungary, Turkey and Bulgaria. The peace which we propose must be a people’s peace. It must be an honest agreement, guaranteeing to each nation freedom for economic and cultural development. Such a peace can only be concluded by means of a direct and courageous struggle of the revolutionary masses against all imperialist plans and aggressive aspirations. The Workers’ and Peasants’ Revolution has already declared its peace program. We have published the secret agreements of the Tsar and

the bourgeoisie with the allies and have declared them not binding for the Russian people. We proposed to all nations openly to conclude a new agreement on the principles of consent and cooperation. The official and semi-official representatives of the ruling classes in the allied countries replied to our proposal by a refusal to recognize the Soviet Government and enter into an agreement with it for peace negotiations. The Government of the victorious revolution does not require recognition from the professional representatives of capitalist diplomacy, but we do ask the people: "Does reactionary diplomacy express your ideas and aspirations? Do the people agree to allow the diplomats to let the great opportunity for peace offered by the Russian Revolution slip through their fingers?" The answer to these questions must be given without delay, and it must be an answer in deeds and not merely in words. The Russian army and the Russian people cannot and will not wait longer. On December 1st we shall begin peace negotiations. If the Allied nations do not send their representatives, we shall carry on negotiations with the Germans alone. ... No more winter campaign! No more war! Long live peace and the fraternity of nations! (Quoted from: Rex A. Wade (ed.): *Documents of Soviet History, Vol. 1: The Triumph of Bolshevism 1917-1919*, pp. 49-50.)

A few days later, the Sovnarkom issues a separate appeal "To the German soldiers!" Lenin signs it by November 30, at the latest. It says:

Soldiers, brothers!

On October 25 (Old Style) the St. Petersburg workers and soldiers have overthrown the Kerensky government and placed the entire state power into the hands of the Soviets of Workers', Soldiers' and Peasants' Deputies. ... Soldiers, brothers! We urge you to support us in this struggle for an immediate peace and socialism! Only socialism can guarantee a just and permanent peace to the workers of all countries and heal the wounds, which humanity has suffered through the current, most damaging of all wars. Brothers, German soldiers! The great example of your comrade Karl Liebknecht, the most outstanding leader of international socialism; the stubborn and prolonged struggle, which you have waged against the war by issuing newsletters and leaflets, and with numerous demonstrations and strikes; the struggle, for which your government has thrown hundreds and thousands of your comrades into prison; finally, the heroic insurrection of your navy sailors—all these struggles show us that broad layers of workers of your nation are already prepared for a decisive struggle for peace. Brothers, help us! If you do so, there is no doubt that within a matter of days the cause of peace will, at least on the European continent, gain the upper hand, that the quickest and most just peace will be made... If you will help us with our tasks ... then your capacity to organize, your experience, your pioneering work in the creation of workers' mass organizations will infallibly enable us to achieve the transition to socialism...

Down with the bloodshed!

Long live the peace!

Long live the brotherly union of the workers of all countries!

Long live the international socialist revolution!

The chair of the Council of Peoples' Commissariats

Vladimir Ulyanov (Lenin)

(Translated from the German in: W.I. Lenin, *Über Deutschland und die deutsche Arbeiterbewegung*, (On Germany and the

German Workers' Movement), Berlin: Dietz Verlag 1957, pp. 414-416.)

### **London, November 29: Fearing revolution, *Daily Telegraph* publishes letter calling for peace with Germany**

The right-wing *Daily Telegraph* prints a letter from Henry Petty-Fitzmaurice, Marquess of Lansdown, a member of the House of Lords, calling for a peace agreement to be concluded with Germany so as to avoid "ruin for the civilised world."

Although the proposal from Lansdown—who has previously served as Governor-General of Canada, Viceroy of India, Secretary of State for War, Foreign Secretary, and head of the Conservative Party—has been discussed in ruling circles for around a year, its publication at this time is highly revealing and sends shock waves through the Allied capitals. Coming just three weeks after the Bolsheviks took power in Petrograd, it demonstrates the fear gripping sections of the British ruling class over the prospect of a revolutionary upsurge in Britain, across Europe, and in the colonial lands in Asia and Africa if the war continues—as well as the prospect that a British "victory" will see London reduced to a mere adjunct of American imperialism.

As Lansdown writes, "We do not desire the annihilation of Germany as a great power. We do not seek to impose upon her people any form of government other than that of their own choice. ... We have no desire to deny Germany her place among the great commercial communities of the world."

Another concern motivating Lansdown's letter is that the war is undermining British imperialism's empire, currently the largest in the world. He therefore urges a peace treaty to be negotiated that imposes the *status quo ante* prior to the war and appeals for the recognition of the freedom of the seas, a measure guaranteeing the dominance of the Royal Navy.

However, Lansdown's letter is rejected by the majority of the British ruling class, which concludes that Germany will be defeated with American assistance in the near future. Chancellor of the Exchequer Bona Law "formally and emphatically" rejects Lansdown's views on November 30, and gives his backing to Prime Minister Lloyd George to continue the war.

### **Petrograd, November 29 (November 16, O.S.): Sovnarkom formally dissolves Petrograd City Duma**

The Sovnarkom issues a decree to shut down the Petrograd City Duma. Dominated by Kadets, SRs and Mensheviks, the Petrograd City Duma is, in the words of historian Alexander Rabinowitch, "a national center for resistance to Soviet power and for support of the Constituent Assembly."

The City Duma is one of the main channels through which the sabotage of the Soviet government is financed. Ever since the Soviets assumed power, the overwhelming majority of civil servants working in the ministries and other key agencies have been on strike or have tried to sabotage government orders from within. According to historian T.H. Rigby, the "prime purpose" of the funds channeled through the Petrograd City Duma and a few other bodies

was to enable officials to be paid a month or two in advance, so

that their income for this period would not be jeopardised by threat of sacking by the Soviet regime. The hope was that a few weeks of non-cooperation might be sufficient to bring the Bolsheviks down, since the brute force of bayonets could bring them to power but could not enable them to govern.

In response to the Sovnarkom's decree, the City Duma passes a joint SR-Kadet resolution rejecting the authority of the Soviet government. For days, the City Duma continues its activities in open defiance of the new government.

On December 2 (November 19, O.S.), the Sovnarkom recommends the commissariats to study their ministry accounts to determine whether salaries have been paid to January 1. According to Rigby, "Officials were to be told either to return the money or start work immediately otherwise they would be tried for misappropriating state property."

One day later, on December 3 (November 20, O.S.), the government sends armed sailors and Red Guards to prevent yet another meeting by City Duma deputies. When the deputies nevertheless push their way in and proceed with their agenda, they are forcibly dispersed. But the confrontation continues. The deputies find another location to hold their session and declare November 28, the opening day of the Constituent Assembly, a national holiday. That same night, the Military Revolutionary Council searches the apartments of opposition duma leaders, and arrests several of them. With two exceptions, all those detained are soon released.

While the City Duma will continue to meet in underground locations until at least mid-January of 1918, the arrest of senior officials has, in the words of Rigby, "decapitated the resistance movement in several ministries and ... a markedly intimidating effect on their juniors." Nevertheless, the confrontation of the Soviet government with the remnants of the old regime will continue through the next weeks and months.

Sources:

Alexander Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks in Power*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2007, p. 70.

T.H. Rigby, *Lenin's Government: Sovnarkom 1917-1922*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2010, pp. 44-47.

### **London and Petrograd, November 29 (November 16, O.S.): Trotsky secures the release of Russian political prisoners held in Britain**

On November 27, Trotsky issues a formal demand to the British government, through the ambassador to Russia, Buchanan, that it release two political prisoners being held in Britain, Georgy Chicherin and Peter Petrov.

The British government does not recognize Soviet Russia and initially refuses to respond. Trotsky, himself a recent prisoner in a British internment camp in Canada, ups the ante on November 29, by stating that no British subjects, including diplomats, will be allowed to leave Russia until Chicherin and Petrov are released. Now Buchanan wires London, advising the government of Lloyd George to comply. Trotsky explains:

People's Soviet power is responsible for the interests of all its citizens; wherever each one may find himself he is under its protection. Kerensky may have addressed the allies like a steward to his master, but we have to show them that we can live with them only on an equal footing. We are here stating once and for all that whoever wishes to count on the support and friendship of the free

and independent Russian people must treat its human dignity with respect.

Chicherin, the son of an extremely wealthy landowner, uses his money to support revolutionary causes. He opposes the Great War and is arrested by British authorities and jailed at Brixton. Soon after his return to Russia in 1918, he joins Trotsky in the Brest-Litovsk negotiations. He will succeed Trotsky as Foreign Commissar.

### **Versailles, December 1: Allied Supreme War Council meets for first time**

The allied Supreme War Council, composed of representatives from the British, French and Italian governments, meets for the first time in Versailles. Japan and Russia are excluded from the meetings.

The initiative to form the council was taken by British Prime Minister Lloyd George and reflects a deepening concern about the course of the conflict. The failure of the Nivelle offensive, the mutinies in the French army, the bloody slaughter of Passchendaele, and the disastrous Italian defeat at Caporetto have made 1917 a disappointing year for the Allied leaders.

With the council, Lloyd George hopes to circumvent William Robertson, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, and Douglas Hague, the British Expeditionary Force's commander. The prime minister has lost trust in Robertson and Hague following the high casualties at the Somme and Passchendaele. At the same time, British and French military commanders are fearful that Italy will be forced out of the war. The United States, although not formally part of the Allied organization, sends a permanent military representative to consult with the body.

The council focuses chiefly on preparing plans and conducting research for future allied attacks. It also reviews German intelligence.

The council establishes a number of subsidiary bodies to deal with areas including transport, food supplies and naval transportation. The latter is a response to Germany's total submarine warfare, which has led to the destruction of large numbers of allied ships since the beginning of 1917.

### **Dyersburg, Tennessee, December 2: African American man, accused of rape, brutally lynched**

A 24-year old farmhand, Lation Scott, is tortured and burnt alive in front of a crowd numbering in the thousands in the public square of Dyersburg, Tennessee. The lynching unfolds on this Sunday over several hours, literally in the shadow of the two leading churches of the town, described by one contemporary account as "prosperous" and "a representative community of the better class."

The *Crisis*, a publication of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) describes the gruesome scene:

The Negro was seated on the ground and a buggy-axle driven into the ground between his legs. His feet were chained together, with logging chains, and he was tied with wire. A fire was built. Pokers and flat-irons were procured and heated in the fire... [the] Negro's clothes and skin were ripped from his body simultaneously with a knife. His self-appointed executioners

burned his eye-balls with red-hot irons. When he opened his mouth to cry for mercy a red-hot poker was rammed down his gullet. In the same subtle way he was robbed of his sexual organs. Red-hot irons were placed on his feet, back and body, until a hideous stench of burning flesh filled the Sabbath air of Dyersburg, Tenn.

As is so often the case in many of the thousands of lynchings that have taken place in recent decades, Scott's "crime" is the mere and unsubstantiated allegation of sexual impropriety toward a white woman—in this case, the wife of his employer. As is also often the case in lynchings, he is turned over to his killers by the lawmen responsible for taking him to jail.

### **Brest-Litovsk, December 3 (November 20, O.S.): Soviet-German peace negotiations begin**

With no other government having accepted the Bolshevik government's appeal for peace negotiations, the Soviet and German delegation begin their negotiations over a truce in Brest-Litovsk, a city in German-occupied Poland, where the German headquarters are located. Two days later, on December 5, they will agree on a 10-day armistice.

### **Tanzania, December 3: Germany loses last overseas colony**

"East Africa has been completely cleared of the enemy," reads a telegraph dispatch from General Vandeventer, commander of British colonial forces in East Africa. With these words the last, and the richest, of the German Empire's overseas colonies has been claimed by Allied forces.

Just two months before war began in 1914, Germany had opened a 700-mile-long railroad running through the territory from the Indian Ocean to Lake Tanganyika, where it promised to open to German domination the mineral riches of central Africa.

Dividing up the booty from the hoped-for German defeat has been a central preoccupation of the Allied powers. At stake are over 1 million square miles in African colonies, a number of islands in the Pacific including German Samoa and New Guinea, as well as its lucrative Chinese concession at Kiautschou Bay.

### **Also this week: 50,000 engineers on strike in Britain for higher pay and bargaining rights**

A strike of some 50,000 workers breaks out in Coventry's manufacturing facilities, with demands for higher wages and the recognition of shop stewards as bargaining representatives at the center of the struggle. Coventry is an important industrial hub in Britain, producing about one-quarter of all military aircraft.

The city has seen a major population influx during the war, leading to overcrowding and poor social conditions. Workers are forced to work long hours for low pay.

The authorities respond furiously, with a national press campaign slandering the workers as murderers and accusing them of endangering

the war effort. A debate is held in parliament, demonstrating the concern that the halt to production will block the supply of aircraft to the front at a critical time of the conflict.

The most radical elements involved in the struggle are organized in the Coventry Workers Committee, which includes socialists and members of the Industrial Workers of the World. Although the committee is not as powerful as the Clyde Workers Committee in Glasgow, where socialists such as John MacLean play a major role, it poses a direct challenge to the craft-based unions which have suppressed workers' strikes since the outbreak of the war and lined up with the capitalists to support the slaughter.

Although union leaders seek to stress the moderate aims of the strike, hoping to gain control over the shop stewards elected by rank-and-file workers for their own ends, workers want a more radical solution. Throughout 1917, strikes have taken place in the city's munitions factories over the question of the recognition of shop stewards as bargaining agents, rather than union appointees. This is bound up with broader demands, such as lower food prices.

For their part, local trade union representatives tell the employers after the strike that the "Shop Stewards' Rules were prepared to enable them to deal with an outside movement which threatened to get out of their control."

The strike is brought to a conclusion on December 3 and 4 amid massive pressure from the government. The Ministry of Munitions insists on stronger trade union control over the rank-and-file in a bid to avoid future unrest, not only in Coventry, but also in other industrial centers. Some strike leaders will be sacked in the coming months.

### **Also this week: Repression across the US**

The crackdown on immigrants, radicals, artists, intellectuals, and core democratic rights in the US—including those guaranteed in the Bill of Rights—continues unabated this week.

\* Federal agents arrest more than 100 Italian immigrants, mainly miners and shipyard workers on November 27 in Tacoma, Spokane, Seattle, and Portland. Legal charges are not clear, but the Italian workers are allegedly members of an anarchist organization, that, according to the *New York Times*, "plotted to help Germany in the war by fomenting revolution in Italy to overthrow King Victor Emmanuel."

\* Fritz Kreisler, the world-renowned Austrian violinist, announces the cancellation of his American tour, effective November 27, after a number of cities and towns, including Pittsburgh, have prohibited scheduled appearances, or have threatened to do so, over allegations that his war sympathies lie with the Central Powers.

\* Leonidas Whipple, professor of journalism at the University of Virginia, is fired on November 27 over allegedly "disloyal" remarks he has made while giving a speech at Sweet Briar College.

\* A Minnesota couple, E.B. and Elizabeth Ford, are sentenced on November 30 to one year in prison and \$1,000 in fines under the Espionage Act for publishing anti-war articles in a small-town newspaper, the *Faribault Referendum*.

\* The school district of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania on December 2 orders the removal of German language textbooks allegedly sympathetic to Kaiser Wilhelm. Books will be substituted by a committee headed by Superintendent Davidson.

### **Also this month: October Revolution fuels class struggle in Germany**

The industrial truce, which has been used by trade union leaders and the Social Democratic Party (SPD) to suppress the class struggle during the war, is breaking down. Despite a new strict regulation of the rights to association and assembly, strikes and protests have been erupting in industrial areas and major cities throughout the Reich over recent weeks. The establishment of a workers' government in Russia by the Bolsheviks further encourages the workers' fighting spirit.

\* On November 10-12, 500 workers strike at the aircraft and telegraph firm Dr. Huth in Berlin.

\* On November 12, 2,000 workers at Thyssen & Co. take strike action in Mülheim at the Ruhr.

\* On November 18, large demonstrations for peace take place in several major cities.

\* On November 19-22, around 900 workers go on strike at the Argus motor factory.

\* On November 25, huge demonstrations occur in Berlin, Leipzig, Mannheim and Stettin for an immediate end to the war.

\* On November 29, a strike breaks out at a textile factory in Crimmitschau after the owner refuses to pay out an inflation premium.

The number of workers involved in strikes throughout 1917 reaches 650,000. This is more than in 1905, the year of the first Russian Revolution and the year with the highest number of striking workers to that point in German history.

The somewhat premature hope of the generals, as well as trade union and SPD leaders, that a peace agreement with the new revolutionary government in Russia will strengthen Germany militarily and secure victory on the Western Front, is now quickly replaced by panic and fear of a general strike and revolutionary developments in Germany itself. Even a modest spread of the strikes would result in the collapse of the already inadequate supplies of weapons, munitions and food rations to the front, thus creating a military catastrophe.

Facing this critical situation, General Ludendorff and his arch-reactionary adviser, General Max Bauer, declare their readiness to accept SPD members into the government who support the Supreme Army Command and their waging of the war. Bauer telegraphs to the party and parliamentary leader of the National Liberals, Gustav Stresemann, on November 12, "Make sure that the Social Democrats hold the line. We cannot even manage a partial strike of eight days, since with the continuation of the Battle of Ypres we are not well supplied with munitions." General Ludendorff backs Stresemann on the issue of accepting the right-wing SPD politician Eduard David into the War Ministry "if peace can thereby be achieved."

But collaboration with the generals only makes sense if the trade unions and SPD have not lost all credibility in the working class. Therefore, the trade union executives aligned in the general commission agree to a reform program at a conference on November 22-24, the so called "Socio-political labor program." It demands the unrestricted right to form unions, the eight-hour working day, the legal recognition of collective agreements, the establishment of a labor court staffed by a balance of employer and trade union representatives, labor protection regulations, and the nationalization of the coal and potash industries.



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