

Leon Trotsky and revolutionary strategy in the 20th and 21st centuries

David North**21 October 2022**

Exactly 100 years ago, on October 20, 1922, Leon Trotsky delivered one of his great political speeches before the membership of the Moscow organization of the Russian Communist Party. It was presented in anticipation of the opening of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International, which began two weeks later on November 5, 1922.

The Congress coincided with the fifth anniversary of the 1917 October Revolution, the conquest of power by the working class led by the Bolshevik Party, which transferred power to the workers' councils (Soviets) and created the first workers' state in history. The Bolshevik victory provided an immense impulse for the creation of the Communist (Third) International, which held its first Congress in March 1919. At that point the Bolshevik regime was under siege, fighting against counterrevolutionary armies backed by world imperialism to strangle the revolution. But by 1922, the counterrevolutionary forces had been defeated by the Red Army, whose principal commander was Leon Trotsky, whose political authority and prestige within the Soviet Union was exceeded only by Lenin.

The workers' state had survived, but the Bolshevik regime confronted the consequences of the economic devastation of the three years of the World War that had preceded the October Revolution and the additional three years of civil war. Moreover, the Soviet regime had been established not in an advanced capitalist country—such as France, Germany, Britain and the United States—but in economically and culturally backward Russia.

The possibility of the working class coming to power in a backward country had been foreseen by Trotsky in his elaboration of the Theory of Permanent Revolution more than a decade before the 1917 October Revolution. But neither Trotsky nor Lenin and the Bolshevik Party had believed that socialism could be constructed within the confines of a single national state, let alone one that was economically and socially backward.

Even as they organized the overthrow of capitalism in

Russia, Lenin and Trotsky insisted that the fate of the socialist revolution in Russia depended on the conquest of power by the working class in one or more of the advanced capitalist countries. The centrality of world socialist revolution in the political calculations of the Bolsheviks was not an expression of utopian daydreaming. The World War of 1914-1918, which had emerged out of the contradictions of capitalism as a world system, accelerated and intensified the economic crisis and social conflicts that generated a massive wave of militant and overtly revolutionary working class struggles that swept across Western and Central Europe.

But the ruling classes of Germany, Italy and other countries fought back viciously against the revolutionary tide; and the Soviet Union remained an isolated workers' state. This compelled the Bolshevik regime to adopt the New Economic Policy within the USSR, which involved accepting the limited revival of capitalist activity in order to stabilize the Soviet economy.

At the Third Congress of the Communist International in 1921, the Russian delegation—with Lenin and Trotsky playing the leading roles—had fought to redirect the newly founded European Communist parties toward a protracted struggle to establish their authority in the working class. This process of reorientation and political education was to continue at the Fourth Congress.

Trotsky's speech on October 20 was an extraordinary analysis of the challenges confronting the new Communist International. Many of the issues dealt with in this address were further developed in the monumental three-hour report that Trotsky delivered little more than three weeks later before the Fourth Congress. On that one day, November 14, 1922, Trotsky spoke for nine hours, delivering his report first in German, then French and, finally, in Russian.

Trotsky examined the contradictory development of the world socialist revolution, which had achieved its first great victory in backward Russia rather than in the advanced centers of world imperialism.

He noted a basic difference in the revolutionary process in

Russia, compared to that in an advanced country such as the United States. In the former, the great problem was not the seizure of power but in holding it in the aftermath of the overthrow of the capitalist state.

In the advanced countries, attaining power would be more difficult because “the bourgeoisie is far better organized and more experienced, because there the petty-bourgeoisie has graduated from the school of the big bourgeoisie and is, in consequence, also far more powerful and experienced...”

Trotsky warned, prophetically, that having witnessed with horror the overthrow of the Russian ruling class, the bourgeoisie in the advanced countries were arming “counterrevolutionary gangs” to destroy the revolutionary socialist movement.

Explaining the significance of Mussolini’s rise in Italy, Trotsky described fascism as “the revenge, the vengeance exacted by the bourgeoisie for the dread it had experienced during the 1920 September days,” when massive strikes swept the country.

But why did the revolutionary movement fail and lead to the upsurge of fascism? Answering the question, “What was lacking?” Trotsky stated: “Lacking was the political premise, the subjective premise, i.e., cognizance of the situation by the proletariat.

“Lacking was an organization at the head of the proletariat, capable of utilizing the situation for nothing else but the direct organizational and technical preparation of an uprising, of the overturn, the seizure of power, and so forth. This is what was lacking.”

Trotsky rejected mechanical formalism that insisted on the inevitable and fully predictable outcome of great socio-economic and historical processes. In the “dialectic of historical forces,” the action by the working class, influenced and led by the Marxist party, is decisive.

The Fourth Congress of the Communist International (also known as the Comintern) was the last attended by Lenin, who had already suffered the first of a series of strokes that were soon to bring his political activity to an end. Only a month later, in December 1922, the political conflict within the leadership of the Russian Communist Party that was to lead to the founding of the Left Opposition in October 1923 began to emerge. The process of bureaucratization and political reaction exemplified by the rise of Stalin led to a repudiation of the strategy of permanent revolution and the perspective of world socialist revolution and to the adoption of the anti-Marxist nationalist program of “socialism in one country.”

This nationalist overthrow of socialist internationalism had devastating consequences for the Communist International, the international working class and the Soviet Union itself. The dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991 was

the final devastating confirmation of the counterrevolutionary essence of Stalinism and all related conceptions of a nationalist path to socialism.

Nevertheless, the heritage of the great theoretical work of Trotsky was continued by the Fourth International, which he founded in 1938, and which is represented today by the International Committee of the Fourth International.

Trotsky remains the towering figure in the history of revolutionary socialism in the 20th century. The speech of October 20, 1922 exemplifies the outstanding relevance of his political thought. This speech, delivered a century ago, has barely aged. It is hardly even necessary to consult a glossary. Trotsky is dealing with economic, political and social issues that are comprehensible in fully modern terms. The essential significance of revolutionary leadership, the dynamic of world capitalist crisis, the political significance of fascism and the relation of objective and subjective factors in the revolutionary transition from capitalism to socialism are all dealt with in Trotsky’s report.

And, in what might appear as a remarkable coincidence, Trotsky even calls attention to the implications of British Prime Minister David Lloyd George’s sudden fall from power on October 19, 1922, exactly a century before the precipitous collapse of Liz Truss’ ill-fated premiership. Of course, the six-year leadership of Lloyd George cannot be compared to the six-week farce of Liz Truss. But it is not difficult to imagine that Trotsky would have interpreted the Trussian farce as a symptom of the imminent breakdown of bourgeois rule in Britain and the development of a revolutionary crisis. Trotsky would have seen in this crisis an immense opportunity for Marxists to expand their authority within the working class and overcome the influence of the reactionary Labour Party and trade union organizations.

The careful study of Trotsky’s writings is essential for the elaboration of the strategy and tactics of socialist revolution in the epoch of imperialism’s death agony. Trotskyism is the Marxism of the 21st century.



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