

1917-70TH ANNIVERSARY OF RUSSIAN REVOLUTION



1987- SIGNPOST FOR THE IRISH REVOLUTION

A PAMPHLET OF

50 PENCE

AN REABHLOID

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INTRODUCTION

70 years ago, in October 1917, the world's first workers government took power in Russia. Those who had been exploited and oppressed and treated with brutality and contempt by their capitalist and imperialist masters rose up in one historic moment to take control of their own destiny and establish true freedom.

The program of the first workers government showed a breathtaking extension of human and democratic rights which even today would put all of the so-called democracies to shame. Today, despite the attacks of capitalism and imperialism, and the degeneration of the revolution under Stalin, that defeat of capitalism still stands as a major gain of 20th century. Peoples Democracy believes that it should be commemorated by workers everywhere. More importantly we believe that it holds valuable lessons for us today.

LESSONS

1. The revolution showed that there is no peaceful and constitutional road to freedom and socialism. The exploited and oppressed face an enemy armed to the teeth and prepared to defend its power and privileges to the end. Only force can defeat this enemy. It is dangerous nonsense for those on the left such as the Communist party and Militant to talk of taking power peacefully. This does not mean we seek violence but as Trotsky put it: in order to make the revolution as peaceful as possible it is necessary to be armed and prepared for war. It will not however be they with the greatest number of guns which will decide who wins, for on this score imperialism will always win. October 1917 proved that it is the political mobilisation of the mass of the exploited which will settle any armed conflict.

2. The revolution proved that a socialist revolution was actually possible. The cynics, the skeptics and the 'realists' who were unable to imagine real change were all confounded. Today there is still no shortage of those people who 'know better' Even revolutionaries like Gerry Adams tell us that socialism is not on the agenda in Ireland today. In fact, not only is it possible - it is inevitable. Real democratic advance in Ireland as in Russia is not possible without the working class taking state power. In the past workers have always gone beyond the fight for national freedom to seek their own

economic freedom. This is what is inevitable. It is not for revolutionaries to tell them that it is not on. It is their duty to extend and lead that struggle. For while socialist revolution is inevitable success is not.

3. The revolution showed that success depends on a revolutionary party determined to lead the struggles of the working class to the conquest of state power. To do this it must always seek to represent and be part of the most advanced sections of the working class. It must never pander, or limit itself or its programme to the consciousness of the average or, worse still, the prejudiced. Whether it be the struggle against multi-nationals or the struggle against imperialism, the revolutionary party will only be built by being part of the vanguard of all these struggles.

4. Both the success and the strangulation of the revolution showed that a socialist revolution can only be international or it will fail. In the last analysis the degeneration of the Russian revolution was the product of its isolation and imprisonment. It was on this basis that Stalin's bureaucracy rose to power. Here in Ireland we are fond of quoting Marx: that British workers will never be free while Irish workers are in chains. The reverse is also true. A United, Independent and Socialist Ireland will never be created or survive if British and European workers fail to overthrow their capitalist masters. Belief in the possibility of Irish socialism is belief also in the possibility of British socialism.

This pamphlet explores these and other features and lessons of the Russian revolution. It is produced by Peoples Democracy because the reality of the Russian revolution is alive today as much as 70 years ago. It is alive in the world-wide crisis of capitalism which we are witnessing at the moment and alive in the debates which occurred in the Russian revolutionary movement and which continue today in the Irish revolutionary movement, whether many realise it or not. Of course the Russian revolution did not answer every question facing revolutionaries - but we will not succeed in answering these if we do not learn the lessons it did answer.

THE SOVIET UNION TODAY

IS GORBACHOV MAKING A NEW REVOLUTION?

Seventy years ago the Soviet Union inspired hope and admiration among millions of workers around the world. Many communist parties were created in many countries with tens and later hundreds of thousands of members. Today 'Go back to Russia!' is a remark heard by many socialists. The Soviet Union no longer inspires admiration and instead has become an argument against socialism used successfully time and time again by imperialist politicians.

In Ireland we are less susceptible to their arguments. The rhetoric about defending western democracy rings hollow in a country long dominated by British imperialism where the democratic right to national self-determination is today being trampled underfoot by an army of occupation in the North and a capitalist government in the South which prefers to kill workers through health cuts in order to spend money in propping up a border it is not supposed to recognise.

Nevertheless, the argument is still strong even here and the reality of the Soviet Union certainly inspires very few as an example to follow. In fact the majority of Irish workers are not wrong. The Soviet Union is a bureaucratic dictatorship in which workers have fewer political rights than they do here.

This is why it is so wrong for some republicans and those on the left to support, or at best stay neutral, in relation to the Kremlin bureaucracy. The attitude of 'if Thatcher and Reagan are opposed to it then somehow we must be in favour of it' is no basis for developing a programme for the sort of socialist Ireland that will win the allegiance of Irish workers. We should not confuse what gains still remain from the 1917 Revolution with the bureaucracy that has been responsible for the betrayal of many of its original promises. Even today, as we shall see, the bureaucracy threatens the remaining achievements of the Revolution.

CRISIS AND CONTRADICTION

Gorbachev's public relations has undoubtedly increased illusions in the bureaucracy but in fact he only highlights the crisis and contradiction which the bureaucratic system is in - contradictions which are truly enormous. The Soviet Union can put satellites into space (something the Americans are having trouble doing) but they can't keep their shops stocked with even basic foodstuffs. It produces one quarter of the world's science graduates and almost one half of its engineers yet technologically the economy lags years behind the West. Its political regime brutally suppresses those

who try to organise independent trade unions yet it has also subsidised the living standards of the working class.

The crisis which afflicts the system is no less clear. Average growth in national income has declined from over 11% in 1951-55 to 3-1/2% in 1981-85. Consumer spending has slowed down even more. The most graphic evidence of a crisis is the dependence on massive imports of agricultural products from capitalist countries and the crisis reflects itself right through society. The appearance of more than 30 million 'new poor' living below the breadline, the growth in crime and the black economy are all indicators. The Soviet Union is the only industrialised country which has seen a fall in average life expectancy.

BASIC PROBLEM

The problems with the economy have been well enough identified by Gorbachev and the bureaucracy themselves: technological backwardness, the low quality of many industrial products, low productivity, low return on excessive and often uncompleted investment, unbalanced planning and a chronic waste of energy and raw materials. Andropov summed it up by saying that one third of paid work hours in the USSR are wasted.

The precise nature of the problem is best illustrated by taking the USSR's backwardness in computers. Less than one third of big enterprises in the Soviet Union have a computer (a third generation one at that) while the comparable figure in America and Japan is almost 100% (fourth generation). While there are technical problems in introducing widespread computerisation, the main problems are political. The widespread use of computers presupposes honest and unimpeded flows of information. The Soviet economy on the other hand works largely with bureaucrats who produce wrong information as everyone recognises. Managers of enterprises understate their inputs and exaggerate their production in order to boost their own income and fulfil the plan. The whole planning mechanism rests on a multitude of lies and deception. Computerisation will not solve this problem. Kicking out the bureaucracy and instituting democratic workers' control would. But this is precisely what Gorbachev and the KGB would like to avoid and the widespread acquisition of personal computers with the possibility of printers linked to them would be a nightmare for the KGB in their efforts to stamp out Samizdat or illegal publications.

The lies and deception about the economy produce a society where corruption,

frustration and cynicism are rampant. This produces social problems such as alcoholism which currently affects over 40 million people and is fast becoming a scourge affecting the whole of society. Tackling this was Gorbachev's first 'radical' move but it only serves to expose the limits which bureaucratic solutions can have.

The measures taken were of an administrative and repressive nature: a ban on serving alcohol in cafes, canteens and restaurants before 2 p.m. and after 8 p.m.; steep price rises; increased production of mineral water and fruit juice; a massive reduction in future production of vodka and heavier punishment for drunken driving, absenteeism caused by drink and home production. It is, however, an elementary rule of marxism that 40 million drunkards are not simply 40 million individual psychological cases. They are also 40 million proofs that there is a fundamental social problem which the bureaucracy, even 'liberals' like Gorbachev, can't point the finger at because that finger would be pointing at themselves.

This fact applies equally to Gorbachev's other initial reform - the attack on corruption. Soviet papers have been full of cases of individual bureaucrats being caught and severely punished for corruption. However, in truth, the whole bureaucracy, including Gorbachev, is the most outstanding manifestation of corruption. The whole host of privileges, from special shops to special rooms in hospitals and special schools for the children of bureaucrats is evidence of corruption. To expect the bureaucracy to clean up this is asking it to commit suicide.

ECONOMIC REFORMS



Gorbachev however has moved forward to economic reforms. In late June the Central Committee of the Communist Party announced plans to partially dismantle central economic planning and radically modify the subsidised pricing system. The goal of these measures according to economists closely allied to Gorbachev is to increase productivity by promoting inter-factory competition, unemployment and market pricing mechanisms.

According to the new law, which will go into effect in January, the country's 48,000 state enterprises must henceforth fund their operations from their own profits. If they are 'unprofitable' they will no longer receive government subsidies to keep them afloat and will go bankrupt. It is estimated that 13% of factories ran a deficit in 1986. If all these plants are closed high levels of unemployment will inevitably result. In addition, workers are to get pay rises or cuts based on performance. In his speech to the Central Committee Gorbachev stated: 'It is particularly important that the actual pay of every worker be closely linked to his personal contribution to the end result and that no limit be set'.

This measure is bound to increase social inequalities in a nation where bureaucratic privileges already set millions of Party functionaries apart from the rest of society.

Another aspect of the new law is the decision to lift retail price controls on food, clothing and housing. At present Government subsidies on such items run to 114 billion US dollars a year. According to leading Soviet economists the cost of living for the average workers will increase sharply within two or three years as the subsidies are gradually phased out.

Leonid I. Abalkin, a Soviet economist who helped draft the new economic guidelines, conceded in an interview with the New York Times (July 4th 1987) that 'the idea of market prices goes against the sentiment of the Soviet people'. He noted that persuading them to give up their job security and low

cost subsidised housing and food will be 'a most formidable problem'.

Already there are signs that workers are uneasy about Gorbachev's plans. A woman in a working class housing block near Moscow is quoted in Time magazine (July 27th 1987) as saying:

'Whenever meat is available, the price is too high. If they raise the rent on this apartment we will not be able to afford it. The authorities cannot raise prices because the people would have even less.'

A 63 year old teacher from the Ukraine is quoted as follows:

'I don't want life to turn into a race for roubles. How can they call that communism? This democratisation smells like capitalism to me'.

But the reforms go further. One decree, adopted in September 1986, granted 20 industrial ministries and 70 large-scale enterprises the chance to directly trade with capitalist countries. This measure opened the first significant breach in the state monopoly of foreign trade. Another decree

authorised joint ventures with US corporations, thereby opening the country up to imperialist investment capital. Time magazine predictably supports these moves:

'Gorbachev may represent the West's last chance, at least in this century, of better integrating the Soviet Union into the world economy. There it could come under pressure to behave like a western country, competing for capital and markets, lowering the barriers to foreign investment and even making its currency convertible.'

POLITICAL REFORMS

Obviously then the question of the Soviet Union moving back to capitalism is posed, but resistance is expected not just from the working class which risks losing the last remaining major gain of the Revolution, full employment. Precisely because the Soviet Union is not capitalist, nor state capitalist, resistance will also come from the bureaucracy. The whole state administration includes 18 million functionaries. Together with the apparatus of the Communist Party, trade unions and other organisations it totals around 25-30 million. Many of them will gain nothing out of Gorbachev's proposed reforms and they represent a formidable block to any reform.

It is not that Gorbachev wants to overthrow the bureaucracy. The difference between him and his conservative opponents within the bureaucracy is that the latter seriously underestimate the severity of the crisis facing them. For Gorbachev radical reforms are necessary in order to save the bureaucracy.

Thus Gorbachev strongly defends the one-party system and the bureaucratic centralist way it is run, also praising the KGB as an institution.

One important indication of his desire to defend the fundamentals of the bureaucratic dictatorship is his attitude to the national question inside the Soviet Union. The USSR is in reality a state with many nationalities in which the Russians dominate while comprising only 50% of the population. Thus the print run of daily newspapers in the Russian language is 3 1/2 that of other languages. Of the books published only 18% are in non-Russian languages. This means that for example in the Ukraine 70% of books and pamphlets are published in Russian while only 20% of the population have Russian as their native language. In this situation for Gorbachev to emphasise the struggle against the 'bourgeois nationalism' of the non-Russian nationalities and not against greater Russian nationalism is profoundly reactionary. It is like the so-called marxists of the Workers Party or Militant variety who resolutely condemn Irish nationalism while completely ignoring British imperialism.

In order to accept tougher discipline at work, possible unemployment and cuts in living standards, Gorbachev is promising certain compensation at the level of political institutions. These include: the selection of several candidates for each post for local and regional soviet elections, secret ballots for party officials and the establishment of new mechanisms of workers participation in plant management.

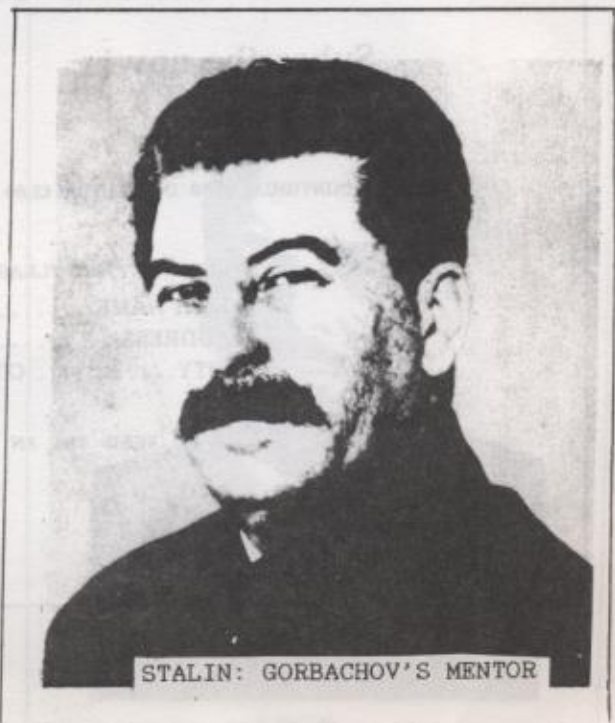
These reforms are vague and without the demands we have outlined not very meaningful. In particular to give them real meaning would require the legalisation of other parties, the right of candidates to put forward and publish alternative economic and political platforms and the end of censorship. Otherwise there could be as many secret ballots with as many candidates as one liked but there would be no real debate, no real choice, no real freedom and no real control by the working class.

WORKING CLASS

Soviet workers distrust Gorbachev despite his much vaunted glasnost (openness). When he denounces the pursuit of material gain among Soviet youth and extols the virtues of discipline and work they look at the enormous incomes and perks of Gorbachev and the other bureaucrats. Thus they will judge his reforms against certain tests. Will he release political prisoners? establish habeas corpus? eliminate censorship, the special shops, restaurants and hospital sections? Will he establish the right to strike and give real control over the workplace and production to the workers?

In reality these demands cannot be met by the bureaucracy, even its liberal wing. Real active democracy with genuine workers participation, decision-making and control cannot be switched on and off, directed and limited from the top down. Its fulfillment can only be the creation of the working class itself. Change will come from the bottom up, not from the top down. The bureaucracy will not give up its power and privileges without a struggle and it has a formidable state machine to defend itself. Only a revolution can overthrow the bureaucracy and institute workers control.

Already there are reports that workers are resisting the burdens which perestroika (restructuring) are putting on them. For example in December 1986 there was a mass workers protest against a reduction in



STALIN: GORBACHOV'S MENTOR



NICARAGUA: GORBACHOV STAYS AWAY

wages in the Kamoz lorry factory in the town of Brezhnev. It should not be surprising if the resistance does not often take collective, active and political forms. The decimation, then terror and atomisation of the Soviet working class has produced a depoliticised working class which is not yet conscious of its class interests.

INTERNATIONAL

If workers in the Soviet Union distrust Gorbachev, there are growing illusions in

him among many in the West. His disarmament proposals have put Western imperialism on the spot and partially exposed their hypocrisy and main responsibility for the arms race and the threat of nuclear war. His boldness on this issue reflects a broad consensus among the bureaucracy that the nuclear arms race is a real burden on the Soviet economy. However despite the hype surrounding the latest agreement reducing nuclear weapons it will effect only 3% of the total. Development and production of strategic missiles will continue. The agreement may even make this easier.

However this is only part of Gorbachev's foreign policy, which in its fundamentals has not changed since Stalin's development of the theory of 'Socialism in one country'. The new programme of the Communist party, adopted at the 27th congress, has dropped even the formal object of the international elimination of capitalism. To indicate his goodwill, Gorbachov has cut oil supplies to

Nicaragua, and in his forthcoming visit to Latin America will not include a visit to Nicaragua or Cuba.

While Gorbachov's reforms will not in themselves lead to real socialist democracy in the Soviet Union and do not in any real way represent a new revolution, they may well open the door wide enough to let in the real power that will do both - the Soviet working class. If this did happen then the new Russian revolution would shake the world up as much, if not more, than that of 1917. It is to this happening that workers and socialists in Ireland and around the world must look.

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THE NEED FOR A REVOLUTIONARY PARTY

In 1894 Lenin wrote in a small pamphlet:

'the time will come when all advanced workers of Russia will understand it (the leading role of the working class). And when this happens the Russian working class will, by leading the peasantry behind it, take Russia to the communist revolution'.

When Lenin wrote this the working class was an insignificant proportion of Russian society. The struggle against the Tsar was led by capitalist politicians. The peasantry were an overwhelming majority of the Russian people. Yet in 1917 the revolution that Lenin predicted did take place. It was led by the working class and that working class victory was made possible by the existence of the Bolshevik party - a party founded by Lenin and hardened in class struggle in which it resolutely defended the principle of the leadership of the working class.

Grigorii Zinoviev, a leader of the revolution, who wrote a popular history of the party, defined its role around this principle:

'The question of the hegemonic proletariat was so important that it did not permit anyone who made a mistake over it to go unpunished. Anyone who stumbled over this question was compelled by the laws of gravity to sink lower and lower.'

Zinoviev gives a great deal of detail about the opposing currents against which the Bolsheviks had to fight: Populism, economism and the reformism of the Menshevik wing of the social democrats.

For Lenin a party had to represent a specific class. For the populists it was enough to represent 'the people'. The Bolsheviks admired the heroism of the early Russian populists but saw clearly that their lack of a class analysis made it impossible for them to develop a fully revolutionary program or make full use of the power and organization of the working class. Populism was double-edged. It could quickly develop in a reactionary direction and become an instrument of capitalist policy within the working class.

The economists sang an old familiar song. Workers could only be organized around 'bread and butter' issues and not around political demands. The Bolsheviks showed how this was contradicted by the demands workers themselves made and how in practice it left 'politics' to the capitalists.

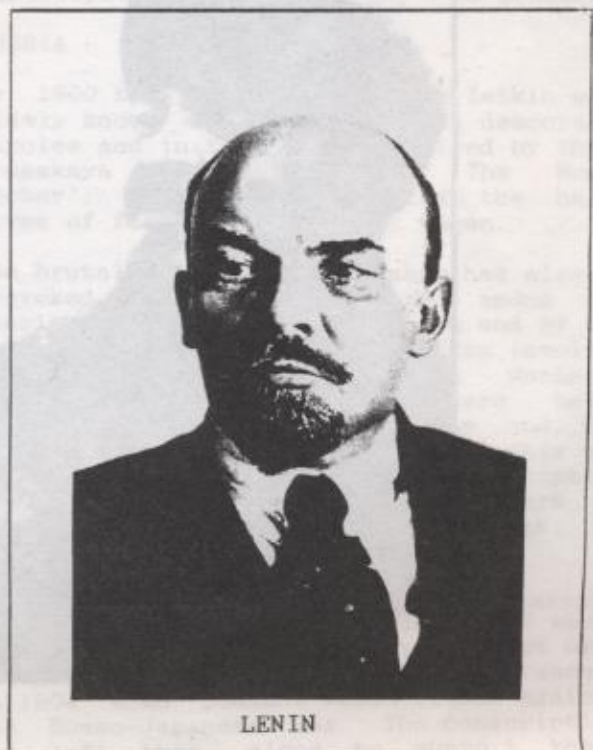
But it was the struggle against Menshevik reformism which really defined Bolshevism. Of course the workers should hold power - but not

just yet. The logic of this position was graphically demonstrated in 1917 when they joined with the capitalists in opposing the revolution.

A major issue between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks was party organization. Lenin bitterly opposed amateurishness and 'primitiveness' in party organization and fought for a party of professional revolutionaries. He also advocated the principle of 'democratic centralism' - there should be the fullest and most open debate inside the party but everyone was bound to common action on the majority decisions of the party.

These principles have been subject to bitter debate in the 70 years since the Russian revolution. Some argue that this type of organization may have been necessary in Russia at the time of the Revolution but is not necessary now. Others say they were always wrong and led directly to the Stalinist deformation of the revolution.

One argument is that revolutions since the Russian revolution have not been led by bolshevik parties and that these are not necessary. J.P. Cannon, the American Trotskyist, shows how these revolutions depended on special circumstances - communist



LININ

parties that were faced with revolution or all-out reaction and which chose to ignore Moscow's advice or Nationalist groups as in Cuba that had in their military structure some of the aspects of Bolshevism and which had to struggle desperately to develop their party and program to avoid defeat. He makes two other valuable points - that the need for a party does not stop with the revolution and this absence has led to permanent crisis in post-revolutionary societies and that in the heartlands of imperialism any sort of revolution is impossible without a class-conscious party and program.

Ernest Mandel dismisses the slur of stalinism by pointing out the organic connection between party and class. The 'leading role of the party' in Russia was based on workers' power in the soviets. It was the decimation of the working class by famine, war and isolation which gave Stalin his power.

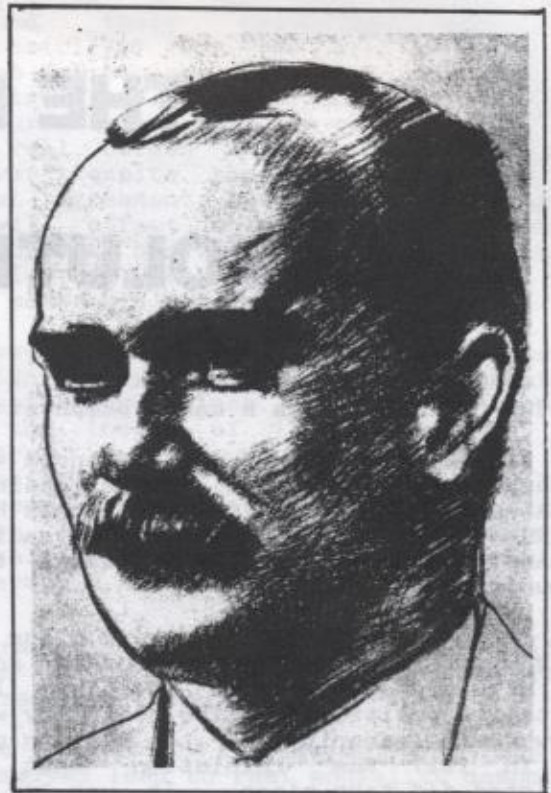
It is in that organic link that the central need of a party and of Bolshevik methods lie. Workers make revolutions and at times of upsurge may advance far ahead of revolutionaries but their everyday lives are dominated by the struggle for existence - the need to sell their labour to survive. A Bolshevik party is needed as a memory of the class to carry lessons of struggle from one battle to the next and it can only do this by being part of the class and part of its struggle.

In Russia 70 years ago the peasants were the overwhelming majority class and the bourgeoisie had a strong record of struggle against absolutism. Yet it was the working class, led by a Bolshevik party, that took power.

How much stronger then is the need for a workers' party in Ireland today, where the

capitalists are the open tool of imperialist power and the working class the major social class? How much more necessary is an Irish bolshevik party to fight against the ideas of reformism, economism and populism whose influence still suffocates the revolutionary potential of the working class - in Ireland as much as anywhere else.

JOHN McANULTY



LENIN AND TROTSKY

THE BOLSHEVIKS AND WOMEN'S LIBERATION

'The position of woman is the most graphic and telling indicator for evaluating a social regime and state policy. The October Revolution inscribed on its banner the emancipation of womankind and created the most progressive legislation in history on marriage and the family.....'

LEON TROTSKY

This was true. The first successful workers' revolution in history was also a massive step forward for women. Its leaders, the Bolsheviks, owed their advanced ideas to the international marxist movement of which they were part.

ORIGINS

In the nineteenth century Marx and Engels had produced the most thoroughgoing analysis of women's oppression hitherto existing on the planet. In his 'Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State' Engels traced the subordination of women to her role in the family, a central prop of class society, and claimed that the full emancipation of women depended on overthrowing that society.

Equally influential was the richly descriptive 'Woman and Socialism' by the marxist August Bebel. A book of tremendous scope, it became the 'unofficial bible of the European marxist movement'. Its conclusions were those of Marx and Engels that the path to liberation for women lay through the socialist revolution.

The russian revolutionaries would certainly have been familiar with these works which, one may say, provided a theoretical framework but crucial to their future policy was the attempt by the German Social Democratic Party*, co-founded by Bebel in 1875, to put these ideas into practice.

CLARA ZETKIN AND THE SDP

This work was led by Clara Zetkin (1857-1933) whose political and strategic interpretation of the marxist theory was to have a decisive influence on the Russian women's movement. What therefore did she stand for?

Her main ideas were outlined at the Founding Congress of the Second International. These were: the liberating character of work, public life and political activity for women; the inability of women's rights movements (like the Suffragettes) to bring about full emancipation; and the need for special organisation of political work among women within the socialist movement.

She thought the politicisation of women essential for the socialist revolution:

'The organisation and the political tutelage of women industrial workers is not

only an important step towards bettering the position of women BUT ALSO AN IMPORTANT DETERMINANT OF A MORE VIGOROUS AND SPEEDY ADVANCE OF THE LABOUR MOVEMENT AS A WHOLE and a profound influence on the rapid transformation of present day social relations'.

To help achieve this Zetkin took over the direction of DIE GLEICHHEIT the women's journal of the Social Democratic Party and turned it into a major voice of Social Democracy as well as the central organ of the socialist women's movement in Europe, adding a staff of regular correspondents from the factories. In the 1890s she won the right to conduct special political work for the Party among women and to hold special conferences of socialist women in conjunction with the Party congresses. Her efforts were capped in 1907 by the summoning of the First International Conference of Socialist Women (two more followed in 1910 and 1914) and the establishment of a permanent International Women's Secretariat with Zetkin herself as secretary.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, therefore, the Social Democrats had built the biggest, most influential and politically advanced working women's organisation in the world.

They had argued their strategy for women's liberation through class struggle against the rival political currents of utopian socialism and bourgeois feminism. As political exiles future Bolshevik leaders like Lenin, Krupskaya, Kollontai and Armand participated in these Europe wide debates.

RUSSIA

By 1900 the ideas of Bebel and Zetkin were widely known in Russian social democratic circles and in that year, inspired by them, Krupskaya and Lenin wrote 'The Woman Worker', a pamphlet describing the harsh lives of factory and peasant women.

The brutal conditions of labor had already provoked strikes and riots among the Russian working class since the end of the nineteenth century. These strikes involved large numbers of textile workers, predominantly women, who were being increasingly employed as cheap and, the employers hoped, docile labour. This was not to be the case - women participated fully in the strike movement, part of which, like the famous strike at Orekhovo-Zuyevo - was led by them.

The industrial unrest had its counterpart in the countryside where since 1903 waves of peasant uprisings and strikes swept over Southern Russia. Crisis point was reached in 1904 when peasant women rioted against the Russo-Japanese war. The conscription had left them alone to support their



families on small plots of land. Many of them were to end up in the cities, desperate for work, employed either as the lowest paid servants or as sweat shop labour.

During these years the young Russian working class was increasing in strength and organisation and a 1900 census revealed that their numbers included 6 million female wage earners. However, the disputes they had had so far were primarily of an economic character. 1905 was to change all that.

1905

When the Tsar murdered thousands of workers assembled on 9 January at the Winter Palace to demand merely a constitution he also destroyed their illusions in him; from now on it would be war to the knife with the tsarist autocracy. Strikes and demonstrations, now of a political character, broke out immediately all over Russia including one of the largest ever seen involving 11,000 women textile workers at Ivanovo-Voznesensk.

The politicisation of women was further accelerated when the Shidlovsky Commission, set up in March to investigate the massacre, excluded female factory delegates. This denial of political rights was intolerable after women had died at the Winter Palace and had participated in the mass protests afterwards. It brought to the forefront the whole question of female representation. The bourgeois feminists responded quickly.

BOURGEOIS FEMINISM

The workers' protests won concessions from the Tsar which emboldened the bourgeois/democratic movement and with it the bourgeois feminists. The massive protests of working and peasant women posed the whole question of civil equality for women. There was a sudden interest in women's rights and the 'woman question' was debated by all the political parties. Bourgeois women's political organisations appeared 'which tried to unite women of all classes under their narrow feminist banner'. In particular they 'tried every means of establishing contact with working women and winning them to their side.'

With some initial success. When they organised petitions at the time of the Duma elections demanding votes for women, most of those who signed were factory women. This represented the instinctive need of the oppressed for a voice which the socialist movement was still slow to recognise. The feminists tried to recruit women into the 'Women's Union for Equality' which involved employers and employees. However, this union which claimed to be 'above class' was not really interested in improving working conditions and soon lost proletarian support. The goals of the bourgeois-feminist movement were, as Alexandra Kollontai pointed out, the narrow ones of their class, 'access to the ballot box and the deputy's seat'. They would have to be challenged.

ORGANISING WORKING WOMEN

For this purpose in 1906 Kollontai formed a group of Social Democrats whose aim was to draw the attention of the Party to the demands and needs of working women and to argue for special agitation to draw women into the Party and trades unions. Their first efforts aroused indifference and distrust among the Party rank and file who associated them with the 'hated feminism', but gradually they gained ground.

By the spring of 1907 there was a movement of working class women of mass proportions. They were brought together through public meetings, now organised by the socialists, and through clubs which held lectures, discussions and arranged meetings with trade union delegations. In 1907 they sent a delegate, Kollontai, to the First International Conference of Socialist Women in Stuttgart.

WATERSHED

As the socialist women's movement developed, differences with the bourgeois feminists became more pronounced. Social Democrats were prevented from speaking at feminist meetings. However, they decided to send a delegation to the bourgeois All Russian Women's Congress of December 1908 to use the Congress as a platform to make the definitive case for a proletarian women's movement. To arm her followers beforehand Kollontai wrote 'The Social Basis of the Woman Question' which argued essentially that in a society based on class contradictions there is no room for a women's movement indiscriminately embracing all women.

On all issues discussed at the Congress the

proletarian delegates put forward independent resolutions proclaiming their revolutionary perspectives. As the conference progressed the huge differences in tactics and political programme became apparent. When the platform made a final call for a single cross-class women's organisation the proletarian delegation left.

This conference marked the demise of the feminist current as working women joined the unions in large numbers and grouped themselves around the Social Democratic Party. Kollontai, who was forced to leave early because of police harassment, went into exile abroad where she joined Clara Zetkin in the German SPD. Other labor veterans were harassed or arrested until the tiny nucleus of the women's socialist movement based in St Petersburg, ceased to function.

QUIET YEARS

During the next few years repression caused a quietude to settle on the women's movement in Russia. They did not celebrate International Women's Day (proposed by Zetkin in 1910) until 1913. However the sentiments were still intact as Bolshevik initiatives were to show. The May 1912 edition of Pravda, the Bolshevik newspaper, carried a series of articles on the exploitation of female labour and received shoals of letters in reply. The Central Committee meeting in Galicia in 1913 agreed with Lenin and Krupskaya to make a 'special effort' to organise women workers and to launch a publication RABOTNITSA (Working Woman) for this purpose. This first Russian marxist journal devoted to women appeared on March 8th 1914 and immediately sold 12,000 copies. The editorial board was inundated with letters and the subsequent four issues were sell-outs until the police closed it in June.



Woman at work in a tractor factory

REVOLUTION

The events of February 23rd 1917 were sparked off by a St Petersburg Women's Day protest at food shortages and the war. Women were instrumental in persuading the soldiers not to shoot the insurgents and to join the revolution thus assuring its success.

Under the newly established Provisional Government political agitation was declared legal. On March 13th a plenum of the Petrograd Committee of the Bolshevik Party agreed to create a Bureau of women workers and to revive RABOTNITSA. In fact a series of bureaus, commissions and groups were set up throughout Petrograd and its district with a staff of teaching cadres at the centre.

RABOTNITSA was re-launched on May 10. It appeared several times a month and had a circulation close on 50,000. It advanced the Bolshevik program in terms relevant to women, concentrating on the war, high prices and labor conditions. Those writing for the journal combined this with visits to the work-places and working class districts to talk personally to the women. They recruited them to the RABOTNITSA school for agitators so they could go back to their areas to make speeches, distribute RABOTNITSA and report back to the centre.

'RABOTNITSA was thus the hub of an agitational network that... could serve as a model for post-revolutionary mobilisation...

The overall political task of RABOTNITSA was to rally working women to maintain their class position in the face of the Provisional Government and its supporters like the feminists who had re-emerged to demand the vote. Kollontai responded with an article in Pravda entitled 'Working Women and the Constituent Assembly'.

The Government granted limited reforms to the women of the professional and middle classes who supported their policy on the war etc. In contrast they refused to grant any of the demands of the most down-trodden exploited groups of women, the laundresses and the soldiers' wives. These were supported by the Bolsheviks whose anti-war propaganda the laundresses included in their strike manifestations.

Support for the war was the ultimate indictment of the Feminists. They formed women's 'Death Battalions' to go to the front and 'shame the waverers'. Emmeline Pankhurst was invited to Petrograd where she exhorted Russian soldiers to be 'patriotic'.

OCTOBER

In October the 'Death Battalions' were sent to defend the Winter Palace against the Bolsheviks. However they were outnumbered by the thousands of working women who were intent on storming it. Women were in the workers' militias (later the Red Guards); the medical units, reconnaissance, supply and communication.

BOLSHEVIK GOVERNMENT

Kollontai was appointed Commissar for Social Welfare. There was an immediate 12

A typical peasant women of the 1930s



day conference of women workers whose resolutions quickly became Soviet decrees. In January 1918 complete civil, legal and electoral equality for women was written into the new constitution. However the most advanced Bolshevik leaders like Lenin knew that this formal equality would not be enough - that a mass proletarian women's movement was essential. They convened an All Russian Congress of Women with an impressive program: to recruit women to the Soviets; combat domestic slavery and the double standard of morality; establish centralised collective living accommodation to release wives from household drudgery; labor and maternity protection; abolition of prostitution. Before the Congress adjourned it resolved to set up permanent machinery to carry out its goals.

ZHENOTDEL

The 8th Party Congress resolved to give full support to the Women's Commission which advanced to become the 'Women's Department' (Zhenotdel) of the Government under the directorship of Inessa Armand. Drawing on the RABOTNITSA experience a network of local 'Zhenotdely' was set up.

It was faced immediately with the gigantic tasks of the Civil War. Inessa used the Zhenotdel to mobilise women in support of the Red Army and the Government. The propaganda teams included labor agitators of long experience who travelled on trains and boats to all the fronts. This work was vital to maintain political morale and cohesion in the vast war zone.

Following the Civil War the Zhenotdel, now headed by Kollontai, undertook such things as liberating the 'women of the East' - the non-western borderlands of Russia where religions like Islam still held sway.

The variety of the enterprises was enormous, still reflecting the range of the 1918 Congress programme. As an arm of the Party it helped unlock the energies of the women in the remote, backward areas, thus serving the cause of women's liberation and strengthening the Revolution by creating new reserves of skilled and politically conscious labor.

However, it too fell victim to the Stalinist Thermidor and was dissolved in 1930. The program of the Bolsheviks was not fully realised and the gains of the first ten years of the revolutionary period were eliminated.

CONCLUSION

Political events in Russia saw the testing of two lines for women's liberation. In the extremity of the Russian situation bourgeois feminism was found wanting. The ideas of Marx, Engels and Zetkin on the crucial connection between women's liberation and socialism were totally vindicated. The greatest leaders of the Revolution like Lenin and Kollontai were also the clearest on the woman question: their uncompromising insistence on working class independence was matched by their commitment to the emancipation of women. If finally their program was not fully realised this was not due to any lack of endeavour but to objective historical circumstances by which the Revolution itself was betrayed.

* Social Democracy was still at that time a revolutionary current.

CAITLIN NI CHONAILL

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