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The Two Octobers

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The victorious revolution of the workers and peasants in 1917 was legally established in the Bolshevik calendar as the October Revolution. There is some truth in this, but it is not entirely exact. In October 1917 the workers and peasants of Russia surmounted a colossal obstacle to the development of their Revolution. They abolished the nominal power of the capitalist class, but even before that they achieved something of equal revolutionary importance and perhaps even more fundamental. By taking the economic power from the capitalist class, and the land from the large owners in the countryside, they achieved the right to free and uncontrolled work in the towns, if not the total control of the factories. Consequently, it was well before October that the revolutionary workers destroyed the base of capitalism. All that was left was the superstructure. If there had not been this general expropriation of the capitalists by the workers, the destruction of the bourgeois state machine — the political revolution — would not have succeeded in any way. The resistance of the owners would have been much stronger. On the other hand, the objectives of the social revolution in October were not limited to the overthrow of capitalist power. A long period of practical development in social self-management was before the workers, but it was to fail in the following years.

Therefore, in considering the evolution of the Russian socialist Revolution as a whole, October appears only as a stage — a powerful and decisive stage, it is true. That is why October does not by itself represent the whole social revolution. In thinking of the victorious October days, one must consider that historical circumstance as determined by the Russian social revolution.

Another no less important peculiarity is that October has two meanings — that which the working masses who participated in the social revolution gave it, and with them the Anarchist-Communists, and that which was given it by the political party that captured power from this aspiration to social revolution, and which betrayed and stifled all further development. An enormous gulf exists between these two interpretations of October. The October of the workers and peasants is the suppression of the power of the parasite classes in the name of equality and self-management. The Bolshevik October is the conquest of power by the party of the revolutionary intelligentsia, the installation of its 'State Socialism' and of its 'socialist' methods of governing the masses.

The workers October

The February Revolution caught the different revolutionary parties in complete disarray and without any doubt they were considerably surprised by the profound social character of the dawning revolution. At first, no one except the anarchists wanted to believe it. The Bolshevik Party, which made out it always expressed the most radical aspirations of the working-class, could not go beyond the limits of the bourgeois revolution in its aims. It was only at the April conference that they asked themselves what was really happening in Russia. Was it only the overthrow of Tsarism. or was the revolution going further — as far as the. overthrow of capitalism? This last eventually posed to the Bolsheviks the question of what tactics to employ. Lenin became conscious before the other Bolsheviks of the social character of the revolution, and emphasised the necessity of seizing power. He saw a decisive advance in the workers' and peasants' movement which was undermining the industrial and rural bourgeoisie foundations more and more. A unanimous agreement on these questions could not be reached even up to the October days. The Party manoeuvred all this time in between the social slogans of the masses and the conception of a social-democratic revolution, from where they were created and developed. Not opposing the slogan of petit- and grand-bourgeoisie for a Constituent Assembly, the Party did its best to control the masses, striving to keep up with their ever-increasing pace.

During this time, the workers marched impetuously forward, relentlessly running their enemies of left and right into the ground. The big rural landowners began everywhere to evacuate the countryside, fleeing from the insurgent peasantry and seeking protection for their possessions and their persons in the towns. Meanwhile, the peasantry proceeded to a direct re-distribution of land, and did not want to hear of peaceful co-existence with the landlords. In the towns as well a sudden change took place between the workers and the owners of enterprises. Thanks to the efforts of the collective genius of the masses, workers' committees sprang up in every industry, intervening directly in production, putting aside the admonishments of the owners and concentrating on eliminating them from production. Thus in different parts of the country, the workers got down to the socialisation of industry.

Simultaneously, all of revolutionary Russia was covered with a vast network of workers' and peasant soviets, which began to function as organs of self management. They developed, prolonged, and defended the Revolution. Capitalist rule and order still existed nominally in the country, but a vast system of social and economic workers' self-management was being created alongside it. This regime

of soviets and factory committees, by the very fact of its appearance, menaced the state system with death . It must be made clear that the birth and development of the soviets and factory committees had nothing do with authoritarian principles. On the contrary, they were in the full sense of the term organs of social and economic self-management of the masses, and in no case the organs of state power. They were opposed to the state machine which sought to direct the masses, and they prepared for a decisive battle against it. “The factories to the workers, the land to the peasants” — these were the slogans by which the revolutionary masses of town and country participated in the defeat of the State machine of the possessing classes in the name of a new social system which was founded on the basic cells of the factory committees and the economic and social soviets. These catch-words circulated from one end of workers’ Russia to the other, deeply affecting the direct action against the socialist-bourgeois coalition government.

As was explained above, the workers and peasants had already worked towards the entire reconstruction of the industrial and agrarian system of Russia before October 1917. The agrarian question was virtually solved by the poor peasants as early as June — September 1917. The urban workers, for their part, put into operation organs of social and economic Self-management, having seized from the State and the owners the organisational functions of production. The October Revolution of the workers overthrew the last and the greatest obstacle to their revolution the state power of the owning classes, already defeated and disorganised. This last evolution opened a vast horizon for the achievement of the social revolution putting it onto the creative road to socialist reconstruction of society, already pointed at by the workers in the preceding months. That is the October of the workers and the peasants. It meant a powerful attempt by the exploited manual workers to destroy totally the foundations of capitalist society, and to build a workers’ society based on the principles of equality, independence, and self-management by the proletariat of the towns and the countryside. This October did not reach its natural conclusion. It was violently interrupted by the October of the Bolsheviks, who progressively extended their dictatorship throughout the country.

The Bolshevik October

All the statist parties, including the Bolsheviks, limited the boundaries of the Russian Revolution to the installation of a social-democratic regime. It was only when the workers and peasants of all Russia began to shake the agraro-bourgeois order, when the social revolution was proved to be an irreversible historical fact, that the Bolsheviks began discussing the social character of the Revolution, and the consequent necessity of modifying its tactics. There was no unanimity in the Party on questions of the character and orientation of the events which had taken place, even up to October. Furthermore, the October Revolution as well as the events which followed developed while the Central Committee of the Party was divided into two tendencies. Whilst a part of the Central Committee, Lenin at its head, foresaw the inevitable social revolution and proposed preparation for the seizure of power, the other tendency, led by Zinoviev and Kamenev, denounced as adventurist the attempt at social revolution, and went no further than calling for a Constituent Assembly in which the Bolsheviks occupied the seats furthest to the Left. Lenin's point of view prevailed, and the Party began to mobilise its forces in case of a decisive struggle by the masses against the Provisional Government.

The party threw itself into infiltrating the factory committees and the soviets of workers' deputies, doing its best to obtain in these organs of self-management the most mandates possible in order to control their actions. Nevertheless, the Bolshevik conception of, and approach to, the soviets and the factory committees was fundamentally different from that of the masses. While the mass of workers considered them to be the organs of social and economic self-management, the Bolshevik Party looked on them as a means by which it was possible to snatch the power of the sinking bourgeoisie and afterwards to use this power to serve the interests of the Party. Thus an enormous difference was revealed between the revolutionary masses and the Bolshevik Party in their conceptions and perspectives of October. In the first case, it was the question of the defeat of power with the view of reinforcing and enlarging the already constituted organs of workers and peasants self-management. In the second case, it was the question of leaning on these organs in order to seize power and to subordinate all the revolutionary forces to the Party. This divergence played a fatal role in determining the future course of the Russian Revolution.

The success of the Bolsheviks in the October Revolution — that is to say, the fact that they found themselves in power and from there subordinated the whole Revolution to their Party is explained by their ability to substitute the idea of a Soviet power for the social revolution and the social emancipation of the masses.

A priori, these two ideas appear as non-contradictory for it was possible to understand Soviet power as the power of the soviets, and this facilitated the substitution of the idea of Soviet power for that of the Revolution. Nevertheless, in their realisation and consequences these ideas were in violent contraction to each other. The conception of Soviet Power incarnated in the Bolshevik state, was transformed into an entirely traditional bourgeois power concentrated in a handful of individuals who subjected to their authority all that was fundamental and most powerful in the life of the people — in this particular case, the social revolution. Therefore, with the help of the “power of the soviets” — in which the Bolsheviks monopolised most of the posts — they effectively attained a total power and could proclaim their dictatorship throughout the revolutionary territory. This furnished them with the possibility of strangling all the revolutionary currents of the workers in disagreement with their doctrine of altering the whole course of the Russian Revolution and of making it adopt a multitude of measures contrary to its essence. One of these measures was the militarisation of labour during the years of War Communism — militarisation of the workers so that millions of swindlers and parasites could live in peace, luxury and idleness. Another measure was the war between town and country, provoked by the policy of the Party in considering peasants as elements unreliable and foreign to the Revolution. There was, finally, the strangling of libertarian thought and of the Anarchist movement whose social ideas and catchwords were the force of the Russian Revolution and orientated towards a social revolution. Other measures consisted of the proscription of the independent workers movement, the smothering of the freedom of speech of workers in general. All was reduced to a single centre, from where all instructions emanated concerning the way of life, of thought, of action of the working masses.

That is the October of the Bolsheviks. In it was incarnated the ideal followed by decades by the revolutionary intelligentsia, initially realised now by the wholesale dictatorship of the All-Russian Communist Party. This ideal satisfies the ruling intelligentsia, despite the catastrophic consequences for the workers; now they can celebrate with pomp the anniversary of ten years of power.

The Anarchists

Revolutionary Anarchism was the only politico social-current to extol the idea of a social revolution by the workers and peasants, as much during the 1905 Revolution as from the first days of the October Revolution. In fact, the role they could have played would have been colossal, and so could have been the means of struggle employed by the masses themselves. Likewise, no politico-social theory could have blended so harmoniously with the spirit and orientation of the Revolution. The interventions of the Anarchist orators in 1917 were listened to with a rare trust and attention by the workers. One could have said that the revolutionary potential of the workers and peasants, together with the ideological and tactical power of Anarchism could have represented a force to which nothing could be opposed. Unhappily, this fusion did not take place. Some isolated anarchists occasionally led intense revolutionary activity among the workers, but there was not an Anarchist organisation of great size to lead more continuous and co-ordinated actions, (outside of the Nabat Confederation and the Makhnovchtina in the Ukraine). Only such an organisation could have united the Anarchists and the millions of workers. During such an important and advantageous revolutionary period, the Anarchists limited themselves to the restricted activities of small groups instead of orientating themselves to mass political action. They preferred to drown themselves in the sea of their internal quarrels, not attempting to pose the problem of a common policy and tactic of Anarchism. By this deficiency, they condemned themselves to inaction and sterility during the most important moments of the Revolution.

The causes of this catastrophic state of the Anarchist movement resided in the dispersion, the disorganisation and the absence of a collective tactic — things which have nearly always been raised as principles among Anarchists, preventing them making a single organisational step so that they could orientate the social revolution in a decisive fashion. There is no actual advantage in denouncing those who, by their demagogy, their thoughtlessness, and their irresponsibility, contributed to create this situation. But the tragic experience: which led the working masses to defeat, and Anarchism to the edge of the abyss, should be assimilated as from now. We must combat and pitilessly stigmatise those who in one way or another, continue to perpetuate the chaos and confusion in Anarchism, all those who obstruct its re-establishment or organisation. In other words, those whose actions go against those efforts of the movement for the emancipation of labour and the realisation of the Anarchist-Communist society. The working masses appreciate and are instinctively attracted by Anarchism, but will not

work with the Anarchist movement until they are convinced of its theoretical and organisational coherence. It is necessary for everyone of us to try to the maximum to attain this coherence.

Conclusions and Perspectives

The Bolshevik practice of the last ten years shows clearly the counter-revolutionary [role] of their dictatorship of the Party. Every year it restrains a little more the social-and political rights of the workers, and takes their revolutionary conquests away. There is no doubt that the 'historic mission' of the Bolshevik Party is emptied of all meaning and that it will attempt to bring the Russian Revolution to its final objective : State Capitalism of the enslaving salariat, that is to say, of the reinforced power of the exploiters and at the increasing misery of the exploited. In speaking of the Bolshevik Party as part of the socialist intelligentsia, exercising its power over the working masses of town and country, we have in view its central directing nucleus which, by its origins, its formation, and its life-style has nothing in common with the working class, and despite that, rules all the details of life of the Party and of the people. That nucleus will attempt to stay above the proletariat, who have nothing to expect from it. The possibilities for rank and file Party militants, including the Communist youth, appear different. This mass has passively participated in the negative and counter-revolutionary policies of the Party, but having come from the working-class, it is capable of becoming aware of the authentic October of the workers and peasants and of coming towards it. We do not doubt that from this mass will come many fighters for the workers' October. Let us hope that they rapidly assimilate the Anarchist character of this October, and that they come to its aid. On our side, let us indicate this character as much as possible, and help the masses to reconquer and conserve the great revolutionary achievements.

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