

LENIN AND WORKERS' CONTROL

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The pursuit of power

A POLITICIAN who has one single overpowering aim and pursues it relentlessly, even wading in blood, has, if circumstances are favourable, a chance of success. He is not usually good at longsight or broadsight, but on a single aim he makes fluffly liberals his victims. The same is true of tycoons.

Lenin and the Bolshevik party had that single purpose, to gain and keep absolute power; all other things were means to that end, or were forced on them by the pursuit of it. This is true of collectivism and nationalisation. I shall quote a great deal from Mr. M. H. Dobb, M.A., because of his long service to the Communist Party, his position as lecturer in economics at Cambridge University and the respect given him by the CP. Dobb wrote two books which will help us—**Russian Economic Development Since the Revolution**, in the early twenties, and, in 1948, **Soviet Economic Development Since 1917**. The latter, a most interesting book, is published by Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd.

“The leitmotif running through the speeches and writings of Lenin in 1917 was the overshadowing importance of the class which held the actual reins of power. For him this issue was paramount.” S.E.D.S. 1917, p.82.

We know, of course, that when a Bolshevik uses the term “working class,” he means in this context “the Party,” which alone has the right to speak for the “working class.

Soon after the March revolution the peasants began to seize the estates of the big landowners. Dobb speaks of numerous cases of what the police called “agrarian lawlessness,” mostly the taking of timber from estate woodlands and estate labourers’ strikes in April, although we know that seizures of land had already started. The Provisional Government received reports of such happenings from 174 districts, mainly the Central Region and the Middle Volga.

On May 3, 1917, came the Government decree to establish land committees. Less than two weeks later a peasant congress at Kazan resolved to confiscate all estate land and a local landowner reported that “local administrative authorities are unable to restrain the local land committees” (see p.75). Early in July, Prince Lvov, head of the Provisional Government, resigned, mainly because he accused his government of a tendency “to justify the disastrous seizures of

property that are taking place throughout Russia . . . instead of combatting aggressive tendencies." (ibid, p.76).

"In industry a parallel form of direct action was taking place in the summer and autumn In the summer reports began to multiply of arrests of engineers by workers, acting in the name of local Soviets, and of the forcible expulsion from factories of unpopular foremen. On June 1 a national resolution of the executive committee of the Soviets advised all industrial workers to 'create councils at the enterprises, the control embracing not only the course of the work at the enterprise itself, but the entire financial side of the enterprise.'" (ibid, pp.76-77).

Deposed by the workers

Dobb goes on to relate what were then well-known facts of further direct action in mine and factory. In June at Kronstadt dock committees were insisting on inspecting the books and accounts of the management and preventing illicit removal of materials. In the cable works the owner was deposed by the workers, after being accused of trying to close the works and sell out to a foreign bank.

In July, 1917, a conference of Ukrainian factory committees decided to remove directors who "refuse within five days to satisfy the workers' demands." From Kharkov the Government received complaints by factory owners that the management of one of the city's largest factories and the directors of the locomotive works had been kept under arrest by the workers for 24 hours.

In Petrograd, in autumn, some factories were to be closed by the owners. The workers at once prevented the transfer of machines and materials from the works. At Nikolaev on the Black Sea the workers at a shipyard sent delegates to places supplying the yard with raw materials to ensure supplies. In Moscow a meeting of leather workers' delegates decided to proceed at once to prepare the sequestration of the industry.

In October, one month before the Bolsheviks took power, the coal miners, after a series of strikes, took control of the mines. "Atuman Kaledin (later to be a leading figure in the Civil War) wired the Minister of War: 'At the moment the entire power has been seized by various self-appointed organisations which recognise no other authority than their own.'" (ibid, p.78).

In large and small factories of many kinds the workers

were taking complete control, while the peasants were sweeping away the landowners and their managers.

In the take-over of industry the soviets played little part, most of the action being taken by the factory workers on the spot, sometimes backed by delegate meetings of factory workers of the district.

It is well to recall what was a soviet. In the revolution of 1905 and again in 1917, the workers and peasants quickly formed makeshift councils. In the towns they were formed first of all by delegates from factories and other places of work, later were added delegates from the professions and even from groups of shopkeepers. Political parties then were allowed to affiliate. These councils were called soviets. But by the last-mentioned type of affiliation the way was open to any unscrupulous politician to invent groups and gain more votes, also political theory tended to hog the discussion. But in the case of the factory mass meeting and committee this hardly arose, so that the workshop became the centre of revolutionary action and construction in the towns.

Two kinds of soviet

In the country the soviet was usually overwhelmingly peasant, concerned with getting the land under the control of the tillers and attending to local social needs. Most political parties had no interest in the peasants' aims, certainly not the Bolsheviks. Those who were with the peasants in this takeover were the Anarchists and Syndicalists, particularly in the Ukraine, and, in the great majority of cases, the peasants' own party, the Left Social Revolutionaries. Soldiers and sailors also formed soviets.

The real soviets had nothing in common with the present so-called "soviets," nor were they initiated by the Bolsheviks. Until a month before they took power, the latter did not have a majority on any significant soviet. "In the course of the preceding month (October) the Bolsheviks had secured a majority in the Soviets of Petersburg and Moscow and of one or two other cities" (ibid, p.79). The peasant soviets were all for the Left S.R.'s.

The Anarchists and Left S.R.'s and the peasants, with or without anyone's encouragement, were sweeping to victory in their battle for "the land to the tillers." Nothing could stop them. Nothing except satanic treachery. That was coming.

The kiss of death

LATE in 1917 the Russian provisional government was confused, weak and ready to fall. Peasants, wage workers, soldiers and sailors, growing stronger in their soviets, were moving in half-awakening to take over the direction of the country. Lenin saw his opportunity.

The peasants were winning their battle for the land, so the Bolsheviks suddenly switched their land policy and, in the face of a successful revolution, cried with the Anarchists and Social Revolutionaries, "The land to the peasants!" Lenin wrote his **State and Revolution**, which looked like an approach to Anarchism and a rebuff to Marxists, and an alliance with the Left Social Revolutionaries was made.

On November 7 the rising against the Kerensky Government was made in Petrograd, the attack on the Winter Palace being led by a Russian Anarchist, Bill Shatov, returned home from America. The sailors of Kronstadt, "the flower of the 'October Revolution'," were given pride of place in the battle. Success followed in Moscow. Under Lenin a new government was formed, some seats being given to the Left S.R.'s and to smaller groups, such as Maxim Gorki's Novaya Zhizn. However, the Bolsheviks held the posts of physical power, they were the commissars who controlled the army, the police and the jails; the S.R.'s and Gorki got the portfolios of education and such. Revolutionaries in Russia then seemed to trust one another a great deal. Certainly the non-Bolsheviks never intended a one-party dictatorship. They were soon to learn, as others are still learning, that an alliance with the Communists is the kiss of death.

On November 18 the Peasant Congress met in the Duma. The Bolsheviks had tried hard to gain a majority, but could command only 20 per cent. of the delegates, the Left S.R.'s having a big majority and beloved Maria Spiridonova in the chair. The delegates expressed the self-confidence of the delegates in their handling of the land question.

Isvestia of November 10, 1917, published Lenin's Land Decree, seemingly giving to the peasants the land they already possessed, but in fact limiting the land they might take. "It was the intention of the Bolsheviks, however, that a considerable portion of the estate lands should not be subject to distribution, but be retained as model State farms; and the annexe to the decree referred explicitly to 'Territories where cultivation is of a high order: gardens, plantations,

nurseries for plants and trees, orchards, etc.' as 'not subject to division', but as reserved for 'the exclusive use of the State or district as model institutions'; and similarly 'studs, State and private cattle-breeding establishments, poultry farms'." M. H. Dobb, **Soviet Economic Development since 1917**.

Dobb goes on to say that peasant pressure curtailed the plan, for example only between two and three million acres of sugar beet estates were left to the State, instead of 10 to 12 million. The land possessed by the peasants increased from 70 per cent. of all cultivated areas to 96 per cent. In the Ukraine the increase was from 56 to 96 per cent. and the land workers were in almost complete control of agricultural production.

'Decree on Workers' Control'

Lenin at the same time tried to stop the take-over of industry, his "Decree on Workers' Control" came on November 14, 1917. Here we must be careful, the decree was not written in English and translation of political terms is often faulty and influenced by the political consciousness of the translator. The Russian words used in the decree do not mean the same thing that is meant by "Workers' Control" in the English-speaking world. Dobb comes halfway to admitting this, "In fact the very word that is usually rendered into English as 'control' has in Soviet usage a meaning that goes at least halfway towards what in England would be referred to as 'supervision' and might at any rate be not inappropriately rendered as 'steering'." (Ibid.). The works committees were intended to be something that we would now recognise as ancestors of the Joint Production Committees organised by the British Communist Party and the Engineering Employers' Federation in the late war.

Bolshevism somehow acquired the reputation of being "Socialism, but in a hurry." Dobb denies that it was so and, ascribing the myth to such writers as R. W. Postgate (**Bolshevik Theory**) and Norman Angell, goes on to say, "But the placing of Socialism on the immediate agenda was explicitly disclaimed. Clause 8 of the April Theses clearly affirmed: 'Not the "introduction of Socialism" as an immediate task, but to bring immediately social production and distribution of goods under the control of the Soviet.'" (Ibid, p.68). That is, State control. With a fatalism worthy of Marxist deter-

