One Hundred Years since October

Suzi Weissman

The Russian Revolution of October 1917 opened up a new historical epoch and was greeted with enthusiasm by workers around the world. Never before had workers come close to winning power, though many participated in political life in the social democratic parties of Western Europe. Now, suddenly, in Russia, revolution was an actuality, not simply a hope or a threat, as a huge country broke from international capitalism. It is almost impossible to imagine today the intoxicating power of that moment: Victor Serge described it as one where “life is beginning anew, where conscious will, intelligence, and an inexorable love of mankind are in action.”1

Russian Revolution as Workers’ Democracy / Workers’ Power

Workers around the world greeted the Russian Revolution with jubilation because it represented their broadest aspirations, a new “democracy of free workers, such as had never before been seen.”2 In Russia’s frontline cities of Petrograd and Moscow, Tashkent and Kazan, and in the provinces from Tula to Tambov, Ryazan to Kaluga, in the networks of railroads across the country, hundreds of thousands of workers, peasants, and soldiers took their fate into their own hands. They organized collectively at the level of industry, agriculture, and garrisons, forming committees and councils, developing their politics, their leaderships, and their power to fight their employers and the state, all at the same time. In the process, they created innovative forms of self-rule and of workers’ democracy: workers’ councils, peasants’ councils, soldiers’ councils—soviets, in Russian parlance.

This new democratic form of workers self-organization arose spontaneously and quickly blossomed independently from the existing political parties. The soviets made their first appearance in 1905 and were swiftly adopted as an organizing tool by workers around the globe as a higher form of political organization for the working class. This was an historic reversal—and a significant step forward for concretizing

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2. Serge, From Lenin to Stalin, 22.

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democracy—because it meant that the parties had to compete for workers’ allegiance in a common political arena.

The revolution of 1917 took up where the revolution of 1905 left off; it was from start to finish a story of workers’ initiatives to amass and ultimately take power. The mobilized masses had become increasingly combative and moved toward revolution in the context of a crumbling Russian empire and a war that exacerbated all the difficulties of life. By February 1917 there were strikes and a huge mass rising, with workers taking to the streets. They called for an end to the autocracy, demanding bread, land, and peace. They poured into central Petrograd and overthrew the tsar and his regime.

Most accounts of the revolution characterize it as a violent coup by the minority Bolshevik leadership who manipulated their way to power, overturning a nascent democracy, mobilizing the working class behind them like soldiers following their officers. The overwhelming evidence from a century of intense historical scholarship shows otherwise. Political life within the party and its leadership, as in the soviets, was at all times collective, with tendencies appearing and disappearing over disagreements. The Bolsheviks were able to succeed precisely because they were organized not in a top-down, military way but in a decentralized manner, which could integrate large numbers of workers very rapidly and respond immediately to their initiatives. From this vantage point, as we learn from The Bolsheviks Come to Power, by Alex Rabinowich, the Bolsheviks prevailed because they could so quickly respond to the changing demands, objectives, and moods of the workers, who made the Bolshevik party their organization even as they directly collaborated with worker members of other parties.3

The Bolsheviks came to represent the working class at its most creative and radical, when the class could actually shape the party to its needs. The tactical and strategic skill of Lenin and Trotsky was crucial to the victorious revolution, but they were but first among comrades, their leadership and that of the Bolsheviks based on the effectiveness of their activity. The October Revolution has been widely presented as the work of a small conspiracy that intended to establish a monopoly of power for themselves from the outset. But the fact is that the Bolsheviks had won political majorities for their program in the soviets in the months leading to October.

The Russian revolution was indeed the most radical ever, a first in the world. In the early months, direct democracy prevailed. Far from dictating to the population, the Bolsheviks typically endorsed initiatives already taken by the masses. One example: the decree of November 14 invited the workers to “use their own committees to control the production, accounting and financing of the firms they work in,” a call for workers to turn their occupations of workplaces into worker’s control and worker’s ownership. Land and factories were turned over to peasant and worker soviets, the debt was canceled, and the banks, trusts, and cartels were nationalized. The new Soviet Union conducted a separate peace with Germany and withdrew from the war.

The aim was to create a people’s autocracy, democratic to the core, in which the police
and standing army were to be replaced by the armed people. Reading the journalistic
account of eyewitness John Reed confirms that the so-called “Bolshevik conspiracy
was literally carried into power by a colossal and rising wave of public sentiment.”

**Spreading the Revolution to Save It**

There was a fundamental conundrum. The Bolsheviks, as Marxists, understood that
there could be no socialism without democracy, that institutions of democratic self-
rule were crucial to the rational, equitable reorganization of society in which the
working-class majority were in control of their own destinies. That was the basis of
Marx’s understanding of socialism—the consciously regulated society of the freely
associated producers. Simply put, democracy was the heart of the socialist project;
without democracy there could be no socialism.

Precisely because socialism required and was inseparable from democracy, the
leaders of the Russian Revolution also understood that there could be no socialism if
the revolution were confined to backward Russia with its peasant majority. The peas-
ants supported the revolution because it overthrew the tsar and the landowning arist-
cracy, and the Bolsheviks made good on their demand for land, bread, and peace.
But the peasants’ newly acquired ownership of land was incompatible with the col-
lective ownership favored by the revolutionary working class. This was even more the
case after the civil war that killed so many of the revolutionary workers. Regenerat-
ing that revolutionary working class, moving toward industrialization with socialist
methods of work, and protecting soviet democracy, the very basis of socialism, could
not be accomplished if the Soviet Union remained isolated. The revolution would
have to spread to other countries where capitalism was more developed and workers
were closer to being a majority.

The Bolsheviks’ hopes for extending the revolution depended on their inspir-
ing workers’ risings internationally. This was no pipe dream—militant workers across
the West saw the Russian working class as speaking for them. They appropriated this
new, profoundly democratic form of organization, the soviet, as a new tool in the arse-
nal of class struggle. Committees and councils appeared in sit-down strikes, general
strikes, occupations, and insurrections from Glasgow to Belfast, Winnipeg to Seattle,
Bavaria to Barcelona. From 1918 to 1920, revolutionary crises rocked Europe’s capitals.
But the German revolution, the Finnish and Hungarian communes, all the insurrec-
tionary general strikes went down to defeat. The result was devastating.

**The Revolution Isolated, Capitalism Not Restored, Democracy Annihilated**

The Russian Revolution was rightly seen as a threat to world capitalism: what could
be more dangerous than workers demanding control over their work and their lives?
The success of the revolution was greeted with joy or horror around the world—the

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reaction depending on which side of the class line one inhabited. For the world’s ruling classes, it meant isolating, discrediting, and destroying the revolution, lest it spread to their doors.

Despite what it turned into, the revolution was a transcendent, historic event: it advanced the democratic ideals of the French Revolution for liberty, equality, and fraternity and sought to extend them by deepening democracy into the realm of the social economy, with the goal of ending exploitation, abolishing wage labor and dismantling hierarchy. So long as the revolution could succeed with some autonomy, it could inspire greater support both at home and abroad. The world’s leading capitalist regimes redoubled their efforts to destroy its inner life and dynamism, leaving it to decay of its own accord even as they sustained permanent pressure on it from outside.

The destruction of the revolution’s early progress and vitality began with the civil war, brought on by the world bourgeoisie—a long and bloody conflict in which 7 million died, in contrast with the relatively bloodless revolution. The Bolsheviks won the civil war because they were able to mobilize the people against the fourteen invading armies and the White “contras” of the day. That would not have been possible had it been the work of a small band of conspirators. They had come up with a way to defeat capitalism in Russia but were unable to overthrow capital in the world. Instead, capital showed them the high cost for the attempt. The revolutionary working class was largely killed and their vibrant institutions of democracy remained in name only. The young USSR was economically exhausted and in ruin, under threat internally and internationally, and it lost the agent that could bring democracy to the economy and society—it lost the agent for socialism.

The invasion and civil war left the Bolsheviks isolated in a double sense—internally and internationally. The physical destruction of the working class itself also meant its political destruction and the defeat of its own institutions. The working class was tragically unable to democratically defend what it had democratically created. The soviets became de facto party committees, rubber-stamp organs for the party and later the state, losing their independence and becoming lifeless, largely ceremonial institutions. The irony was that the tool for socialist democracy bequeathed to the international working class could not itself survive the aftermath of the Russian Revolution.

**Capitalist Democracy, “Socialist” Dictatorship**

The failure of the workers’ movement outside Russia precipitated the defeat of revolutionary socialism itself at the hands of the narrow, nationalistic, and brutal rule of the Stalin regime. It was in the interests of world capitalism and the Soviet Union to identify Stalin’s nationalized economy and bureaucratic authoritarian politics—devoid of any democratic forms or role for the working class—with Marxism, socialism, and communism. This did real harm to the socialist idea. With Stalin in power, the Comintern remained a creature of the Soviet party-state. This was the price paid by the failure of the German revolution: had it succeeded, history might have been spared the hellish nightmare of Hitler and Stalin.
The world bourgeoisie lost the battle in Russia but won the overall class war of the time, staving off further revolutions, isolating the Russian Revolution, falsifying history, and linking socialism to dictatorship, not democracy. Henceforth democracy was seen as inextricably linked with capitalist property relations and called “freedom,” which by definition prevented democracy in the social economy and instantiated instead the dictatorship of capital there. Socialism, though anticapitalist, was identified with stultifying bureaucracy, dictatorship, lack of democracy, and terror.

The Cold War embodied this symbiosis of capitalist democracy and Stalinist “socialist” dictatorship—it was beneficial and functional for each of its contestants, both of whom had a vested interest in labeling the Soviet system as Marx’s vision of communism. From 1917 until 1991, the period of existence of the Soviet Union, the October Revolution was relentlessly attacked, denounced, and distorted beyond recognition in the West. Subsequent revolutions and takeovers elsewhere developed as copies of the Stalinized Soviet Union: antidemocratic, nationalized, and often nationalist societies with little resemblance to socialism. Within the former Soviet Union and its bloc, the key was to prevent any form of democratic challenge to the statist economic status quo—in effect to promote the Soviet version of TINA (or “there is no alternative”), the bureaucratic authoritarian (and antidemocratic) form they called communism, tightly controlled from above. Both sides in the Cold War promoted the Stalinized version of “communism” as the goal of the October Revolution of 1917. After 1991, world capital treated the Soviet experience as an irrelevance, a bracket in history soon to be forgotten.

Ironically, while the Soviet Union crushed democracy at home and betrayed the revolution’s promise, that promise likely enhanced democracy in the industrialized capitalist countries. To counteract and preclude the “Soviet threat,” Western capitalist regimes conceded to social democratic reforms fought for by organized labor—often socialists in the labor movement. Important elements of a more advanced political democracy such as universal franchise, representative democracy, free speech, and other basic rights were won and allowed in response to the existence of the Soviet Union and in order to contain radicalism at home. So long as these concessions did not cut into capitalist profits, they could be accommodated.

Socialism—democratic control over the economy—was put off the agenda. Paradoxically, it took the end of the Cold War to make possible the relinking of socialism and democracy. The disintegration of the Soviet Union exposed its bureaucratic authoritarian rule, with its dysfunctional, antidemocratic economy, discrediting all further attempts to define socialism in terms of dictatorship. The extreme and growing inequalities of capitalism under the thumb of the 1 percent have in turn obliterated any notion that that system could enable the democratizing of the economy. This opened the way to broad acceptance—for the first time in almost a century—of the socialist idea, in particular the necessity to democratize the economy. This was realized, if in an embryonic social democratic form, with the candidacy
of Bernie Sanders in 2016. The possibility now exists for going beyond democratic reform of the capitalist economy à la Sanders to the democratizing of the economy itself, the project of socialism so magnificently advanced by the Russian working class in making, if not completing, its revolution.

SUZI WEISSMAN is professor of politics at Saint Mary’s College of California and is on the editorial boards of Critique and Against the Current. She is the author of Victor Serge: A Political Biography, among other works, and is currently writing Leon Trotsky: The Most Dangerous Man in the World and coproducing a documentary feature film of the same name. She is a broadcast journalist in Los Angeles, sits on the National Workers’ Rights Board, and podcasts Jacobin Radio.

References