

The Russian Revolution of 1917

1917: A Part of Our Revolutionary Heritage

In 1917 the workers of Russia carried out the first victorious socialist revolution. It was the first example of workers taking power consciously as a class. The Russian workers led the rest of the country in an effort to build a better world, and they reached out to help the rest of the international working class to do the same. The workers created their own system to govern the country, guaranteeing that the majority would have the final say. They created this system to solve the severe social crisis that Russia suffered as a result of the First World War, a war fought over resources by the major capitalist countries. In achieving this victory, they showed how the working class might begin to solve the problems of modern society.

Russia at the Turn of the Century

Russia was a poor and underdeveloped country. The country was a monarchy governed by the Tsar, the hereditary ruler of Russia. Most people were peasants, ruled over by a minority of noble families. Peasants were obligated by law to till the land for their noble masters. During the 18th and 19th centuries, the Tsars built a modern standing army, roads and railroads, and developed a military industry. Neighboring countries such as Georgia and the Ukraine were swallowed up into the Empire and Siberia was colonized. The peasants were heavily taxed to pay for these developments. They built the roads and fought in the army. They went to the cities to work in the factories. The industry and military might of the Russian empire was built on the suffering of the Russian people.

Even in old, feudal Russia, the capitalist mode of production was developing. The drive for profit pushed the nobility and the state to seek more modern ways to exploit people. In 1861, the peasants were released from obligation to the nobility. This meant in fact that the nobility was no longer obligated to let peasants live on their land. Now the landlords could freely buy and sell the land for their own profit. Peasants had to become sharecroppers or go to the cities and become workers. Between 1861 and 1905, the total area of land worked by peasants for their own subsistence was reduced by 36 percent. To the peasants, this meant the end of their way of life, impoverished and insecure as it may have been. They desperately wanted to own enough land to support and feed themselves and their families but these developments left them with less and less. This generated an intense frustration which was fuel for the revolution. Since the peasants were isolated and spread out all over Russia they had very little possibility to organize together on a large scale. Unlike the urban population, people in the countryside rarely came into contact with one another. The peasants were scattered in 500,000 villages and hamlets over the five million square versts (one verst = 213 mile) of European Russia.

Capitalism in Russia didn't develop in isolation. Rather, it developed under the pressure of the neighboring countries. The countries bordering Russia such as Sweden and Germany possessed much more advanced military and industrial systems. Over the years this

had spurred the Tsars to create a modern army and build up the industry to support it. Ironically, in order to avoid foreign military domination, the Tsars accepted economic domination by foreign capital borrowed from other European countries, particularly France, England, and Belgium.

The capitalists of these countries invested in Russian industry with the willing aid of the Russian state. In return, the Tsar was the loyal servant of these countries in their conflicts with Germany and Easter Europe. Foreign capital invested in Russian industry went through an enormous expansion at the turn of the century. Whereas in 1890 the sum total of the production of all the Russian factories and plants amounted to 1.5 billion rubles, by 1900 it had risen to between 2.5 and 3 billion rubles. The number of factory workers increased during the same period from 1.4 million to 2.4 million. Workers in Russia were drawn from the countryside directly into enormous factories. Russia had one of the most concentrated industrial systems in the world. Factories, which employed more than 1000 workers each, employed 41.4 percent of Russian workers, while the same scale of factories in the U.S. employed only 17.8 percent of workers. While Russian industry was growing rapidly, this growth was uneven. Labor was cheap while imported modern machinery was expensive. Large factories employed an often awkward combination of advanced and primitive technology, worked by both educated and illiterate labor. This resulted in low productivity relative to the rest of Europe. Workers in these factories slaved for 10 to 14 hours a day. The conditions of exploitation were therefore some of the most extreme in the world. The concentration of super-exploited workers in large factories gave the class struggle an explosive character. Russia's historical development led to the formation of this small but potentially powerful working class in the urban centers. The workers' anger and frustration was kept in check by the authoritarian state.

The Russian revolutionary leader, Leon Trotsky, described the brutal system of Russian capitalism as "autocratic police capitalism." The Tsar's regime was much like the repressive regimes we see today in the third world who sell their services to stronger foreign powers in exchange for the privileges of a few corrupt rulers and their friends. Capitalism in these countries is developed from the outside by foreign investment utilizing the police and the army to enforce the exploitation of the population. Domestically, no leeway was given for anyone outside the nobility to better his or her conditions in society.

There were no political rights. All political organizations were forbidden. Trade unions were outlawed. There was no democracy. Because of this, many workers understood the need for a fundamental change in the way society was organized politically. From the beginning, the workers movement was led by revolutionaries who were searching for a way to make this fundamental change possible.

There was a native capitalist class in Russia but its weight in society was less than that of the big landlords and foreign capital. These Russian capitalists were little more than merchants and peddlers until they developed an alliance with the Tsarist state. This state was firmly based on the hereditary landed nobility. Russian capitalists never took political power from these people as their counterparts in Europe had. In their weakness, they feared having to contend with the peasantry and working class without the help of the Tsarist

state. When the revolution opened up the struggle between classes, the weak Russian capitalist class preferred to ally itself with the old regime of nobles and landlords rather than to face the workers and peasants anger.

The urban middle class was small, rootless, and frustrated by its lack of prospects. In Russian society, geared for military production and agricultural exploitation, there was little room for educated professionals. In addition, many young people from the intelligentsia were appalled as they watched the great mass of Russian people suffering under the weight of absolutism. This led to a situation where many Russian intellectuals and other middle class people felt an acute moral crisis. Under Tsardom, they had no hope of really utilizing their talents to fight the ignorance and poverty of Russian society.

The Socialist Movement

In Russia, socialist organizations were illegal and by necessity operated underground. They came to the fore as leaders and organizers when the workers themselves were ready to fight. These fights generated few gains and were always met with intense repression, but they proved to the workers which organizations could be relied on to lead their struggles.

Revolutionaries differed on perspectives and tactics. The revolutionaries were split into three main political groupings: the Mensheviks, the Bolsheviks, and the Socialist Revolutionaries.

The Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks were two factions of the same party, the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party. They agreed that the immediate task of the coming Russian revolution was to do away with the Tsarist state and to expropriate the noble landlords so that the peasants could take the land they needed. Both factions expected that through the revolution, the workers would be able to win reforms like the eight hour day. They differed on matters of party organization and their analysis of the role that the working class would play in the Russian revolution.

The Mensheviks argued for a party of all who agreed in principle with the ideas of socialism. They had many workers in their ranks but they were loosely organized alongside middle class elements. They believed that the role of the workers in the coming revolution would be crucial but that the working class would not assume the leadership of the revolutionary movement. They believed the working class would participate in an alliance with and under the leadership of the Russian capitalists.

The Bolsheviks were more closely linked to the industrial working class. They organized only those who were participants in revolutionary activity amongst the workers into the party – those who were professional revolutionaries. They understood that if the working class were to play a role in the revolution, it would need to struggle for leadership of that revolution, against the capitalists, and in alliance with the peasantry.

The Socialist Revolutionaries descended from the older Russian non-Marxist revolutionary movement called the Populist or Narodnik movements. These were made up of young revolutionaries from the nobility and the middle class who had gone to the countryside to organize the peasantry. Their theories put forward a utopian socialism of Russia peasant communes, freed from the influence of Europe. In practice they demanded land reform and a democracy based on the peasant communes.

1905: The Creation of the Soviets, and the Dress Rehearsal for 1917

The period from 1901-1905 saw an economic downturn in the world beginning in the United States. Capitalism and the world market link together the most far-flung corners of the world. The crisis that hit the U.S. in those years sent ripples through the economics of every other country. In Russia, high prices and the lack of land for subsistence caused enormous famines and peasant uprisings in 1891, 1892, 1897, 1898 and 1901. Workers and peasants all over the country were revolting. Large strikes took place in the cities. In 1903, fully one third of the army was engaged in holding back this revolutionary tide.

The Tsarist government had attempted to shore up the country's political situation by invading and seizing the territories of Manchuria and Korea. In February of 1904, this provoked a bloody war with imperial Japan (which also sought control over the Asian mainland). The war, while generating an initial spark of patriotism, failed to unify the country behind the Tsar and only served to deepen the turmoil. On January 9th 1905, a peaceful march of thousands of workers carried a petition to the Tsar's palace asking for better conditions. This march was met by machine gun fire and hundreds were killed. The government's violent response broke what little trust many workers had kept in the government. This incident spurred on greater protests and in the following months, waves of strikes convulsed the country.

The workers elected committees to organize the strikes. As the movement grew, the strikes paralyzed whole sections of the economy. This mass strike, or general strike, posed new problems and possibilities for the workers. A society, especially a poor one, can survive without basic economic services for only a short time. Workers found themselves not only withholding their labor but starting work again in order to take care of the needs of society.

In these committees, the workers had created a much more direct form of organization than had ever existed before. They became known as "Soviets" or "workers' councils." Soviets were made up of workers delegates, elected one per 500 workers from the shop floor or working class district. These representatives were people who the workers knew in their daily lives and had chosen to put forward as their trusted representatives. Delegates were recallable at any time. In this way, leadership was to be based on initiative, instead of serving as a source of privilege for career politicians. Members of the Soviets had to carry out their tasks themselves while being directly accountable to their constituents. Most importantly, this new form of organization sought to draw people into its

functions rather than to do everything for them. Delegates organized the work, and working people participated directly in the policies they voted for.

The peasants in the countryside were in revolt against the landlords. Estates were being burned and land seized. This movement, however, remained uncoordinated and local. It didn't have any real organized links to the revolutionary developments in the cities. This spelled disaster for the revolution because the army was drawn primarily from the peasantry. The Soviets, however, were based on the workers in the cities, mainly Petrograd. In their inexperience, the workers did not link their struggle with the peasant revolts. The nobility was able to call upon the army to repress the revolutionaries and dissolve the Soviets. In failing to develop links with the peasant movement and the soldiers, the workers left the army, the true foundation of the Tsarist state intact.

The revolution was defeated in early December 1905 but the experience of the Soviets and the revolution was invaluable for workers and revolutionaries. The Soviets failed to win what the workers wanted but they won the workers to the idea that they must struggle in their own name to get what they wanted. The working class would retain this experience and act with a greater determination and understanding in 1917. Revolutionaries realized that the revolution had to be spread or else it would find itself isolated; it had to find allies or else it would be drowned in blood. In more ways than one, 1905 was the dress rehearsal for what would happen in 1917.



Street demonstration, Petrograd, June 18, 1917. The banner in the foreground reads: *“Down with the Ten Capitalist Ministers/All Power to the Soviets of Workers’, Soldiers’, and Peasants’ Deputies/And to the Socialist Ministers/We Demand That Nicholas II be Transferred to the Peter-Paul Fortress.”*

The revolution left its mark on the government. The Tsar was forced to make some concessions. The Duma, a parliamentary body, was set up and elections were held. It had no real power. Representatives were merely allowed to “advise” the Tsar on matters of taxation and policy. A few basic civil rights were granted, as well as limited legality for trade unions.

At first, these reforms meant little as the Tsar's police made sure that the workers were unable to use these rights in their own interest. The Tsar was able to gain the upper hand, and he used it ferociously. The Tsarist secret police hunted down revolutionaries. They paid thugs and criminals to carry out attacks on Jewish people in an attempt to channel people's anger. Elections to the Duma were crassly manipulated and returned majorities of servants of the Tsar. Even though workers felt the defeat of the revolution as their organizations suffered the brunt of the repression, the experience of the revolution was an invaluable education. They would not remain silent for long.

Between 1910 and 1912, the working class began to raise its head again. Waves of strikes again swept the country. Though it had no real binding power on the policies of the government, workers representatives were able to use the Duma as a platform to voice the grievances of the workers. The unions likewise created a forum for workers to have a voice on the shop floor. Elections to the Duma

became an important political forum. The revolutionaries, especially the Bolsheviks, used this platform to get their message across. Papers and pamphlets were subject to censorship but the speeches of Duma representatives could usually be printed. An elected revolutionary was able to use this platform to voice the concerns of workers and present a revolutionary perspective in front of the whole country. The trade unions saw an enormous expansion of membership. Revolutionaries spurred on and gave shape to the day-to-day struggles on the shop floor, and the unions became an important weapon in the hands of the workers. Linked to these activities was the growth of the revolutionary parties as workers came to understand the need for a political perspective in their struggles. Revolutionary newspapers such as the Bolshevik Pravda circulated widely and the perspectives and debates within the revolutionary movement were closely followed by the workers. In every aspect of life, the workers entered the revolutionary movement with a new faith in themselves and the possibility that they could transform society.

1917: The First World War, The Revolution, and The Role of Revolutionaries

Like 1905, the revolution of 1917 was caused by war: in this case, the First World War. This war was one of imperial competition between the major powers of France, England, Germany, Russia, and later the United States. Capitalism requires access to the world's resources to produce commodities. It also pushes capitalists to dominate territory, developing ever-expanding markets in order to maintain a steady growth of profits. The capitalist governments set armies of military and diplomatic personnel to work against each other. By the beginning of 1914 the worldwide competition for resources and the control of markets had put the countries of Europe in a state of constant military confrontation. Every country kept its armies at the ready. War inevitably sprung from this intense competition between capitalist countries. The international capitalist class fought amongst itself to decide whose hand would redraw the map when the killing was done. The victors would be able to claim the worlds' markets and raw materials as their own. Worldwide, the working class suffered slaughter and deprivation as the imperialist powers fought. Economies were wrecked and people starved while the capitalists profited from the destruction, hoarding the necessities of life to sell for immense profits.

The revolutionaries in Russia were part of the Second or Socialist International. Since the time of Karl Marx, in the mid 1800s, socialism had become a powerful force, along with the growth of an industrial working class worldwide. Workers were organized around socialist parties in all of the big European countries. The most important party was the German Social Democracy (Socialists were also known as "Social Democrats"). The workers of Europe had fought hard battles to set up these parties as well as large trade unions.

The Second International was pledged to resist war as a capitalist crime, a slaughter of workers in the service of profit. However, the Socialist parties and trade unions of Western Europe were deeply entrenched in the pre-war political system. These organizations were designed to defend workers from capitalism but in doing so they became integrated into the system as intermediaries between workers

and bosses. The socialist parties and trade unions built by the workers developed a layer of bureaucrats who were invested in maintaining their positions. Everywhere in the world, socialist parties were being torn apart as the different elements in them went in different directions.

The party machines and bureaucracies in France and Germany voted full support for the war and sent the workers to the trenches to die. The workers' organizations had betrayed them but the workers of the world still sought solutions. Revolutionaries within the socialist parties formed an opposition which fought for a revolutionary perspective. In Russia, as in the rest of Europe, the lines were clearly drawn around the question of the war.

The Mensheviks and most of the Socialist Revolutionaries supported the war and avoided the issue of land reform because they looked to the capitalists to lead the country. They did not see how the working class, small as it was, could lead. They wanted a democratic republic, believing that Russia would go through the same process of development as the West. In reality, this meant that they lined up behind the capitalists, even as the capitalists shed their democratic pretenses and attempted to use dictatorial methods to suppress the workers movement. The Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries fought tooth and nail against the revolutionary policies of land distribution and peace.

The Bolshevik Party was the only party that, from the start, condemned the capitalists for their war and called for a war against the real enemy of the Russian people – the capitalists and the Tsar. Their slogan was "Peace, land, and bread." Peace: an end to the war. Land: give the land to the peasants. And Bread: an improvement in the lives of workers. This slogan called for people to solve their most immediate problems themselves through direct action. The peasants would form committees to divide the land; bread would be assured by an economy that was mobilized to fulfill people's immediate needs rather than the needs of the war machine, and peace could be achieved by uniting with workers and oppressed people in other countries. The Bolshevik party was the only party of any size willing to propose these measures.

Every element of the Bolshevik analysis rested on the prospect that the Russian Revolution would be the spark that sets off revolution in the rest of the world. Mutinies in the French and German armed forces, as well as growing strikes and anti-war demonstrations, showed that the revolutionary mood was sweeping Europe. Anti-colonial struggles in the oppressed nations of Africa and Asia demonstrated this as well. The working class is an international class, united by its shared subjection to world capitalism and the shared potential to liberate humanity from that subjection. While Russia might face the fury of the capitalist countries of the world, its revolutionary example would resonate with millions of people in every country of the world.

The war plunged Russia into a crisis, even more catastrophic than the war with Japan in 1905. Farmers had been pulled away from their farms in order to fight. Massive casualties at the front were coupled with severe hardship at home. The country faced an immense

famine as grain reserves were depleted and the harvest failed to replenish them. Factories were geared to the production of war materials and the basic necessities grew scarce. The war not only stole soldiers away from their loved ones, it threatened the families they were leaving behind with starvation and misery.

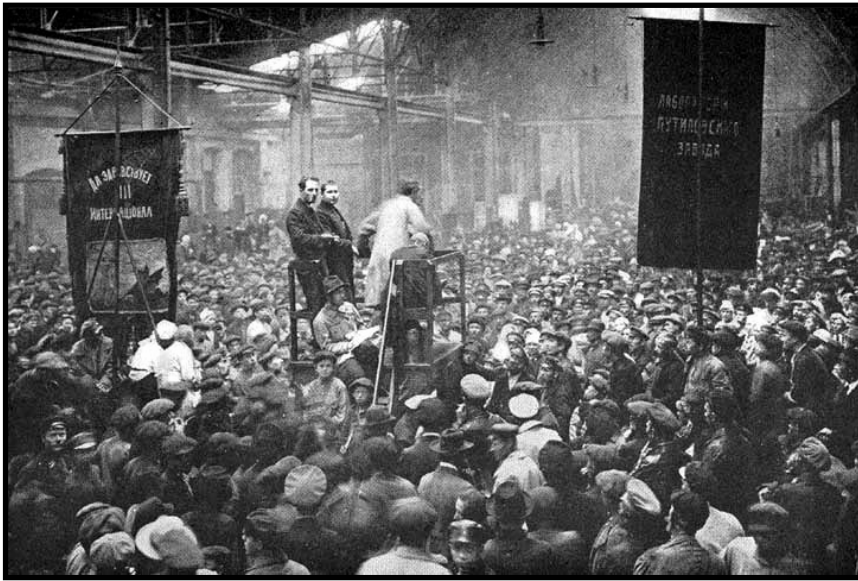
In February of 1917, the situation reached a breaking point. Strikes broke out in the major factories. On the 22nd of February, the largest factory in Petrograd, the Putilov works, went on strike. Enormous demonstrations filled the streets. Troops, sick of the war, refused to fire on the people in order to defend the Tsar. They mingled with the crowds and dissolved into the population.

On March 8th, International Women's Day (which was a day of protest begun by women workers in America in 1857 that later became an international workers' holiday), the women of Russia demonstrated, calling for bread and peace. They marched to where the Tsar hid in his palace. All of Russia watched as the women demonstrated while the Tsar was unable to rely on his soldiers.

The Tsar was at the mercy of the workers and soldiers. Without anyone obeying his orders, his power had dissolved.

The Soviets: Building a World on New Foundations

During this period, workers' Soviets sprang up all over the country. People had not forgotten 1905. The revolutionaries had preserved and studied the organizational experience of that revolution and perhaps most importantly, the experience persisted in the memories of the participants themselves. In early June, the Soviets convened a national congress in Petrograd which drew delegates from all over Russia.



Rally of workers in the Putilov Factory, 1917

The property owning classes feared the Soviets. With their remaining legitimacy, they proclaimed the provisional Government, a promise of a "democratic republic." The Provisional Government was a new government patched together on top of what remained of the Tsarist state apparatus: its police, its bureaucracy, and portions of the army. It was set up by representatives of the same classes which had ruled before, with the addition of some moderate middle class democrats. It promised democracy, and land reform but only after the experts sat down to write a constitution. Until then the Provisional Government would rule. The war policy would continue.

The Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks found themselves sitting side by side with ex-Tsarist nobility who had seen the light and found "democracy." Their analysis ruled out the direct rule of the country by the working class and peasants. They saw the future in the Provisional Government, not the Soviets. This choice amounted to a class choice: for the rule of the capitalists and the landlords, against the rule of the workers. In the name of the revolution these parties defended the old order. Furthermore these politicians were leaders who chose themselves. Real democracy was practiced in the Soviets where the people made the decisions themselves and chose their own leaders. The two systems were fundamentally opposed.

The Russian capitalists with their ties to French and British capital were far too much a part of the old order to break with the war policy let alone distribute the land. The workers and peasants could not tolerate their oppression under the old order. An open contest

for power was unavoidable. The lines were drawn: The Soviets, peace, reconstruction of the war ravaged economy, and land distribution on the one hand; The Provisional Government, War, economic waste, and the landlords on the other. The choice was one of class rule: Either the workers would lead the country out of the war and reconstruct the economy under workers' control, or the capitalists and landlords would continue to bleed the country and maintain the old order.

The Bolshevik militants patiently explained their position in the regular meetings of the Soviets. The other parties gradually lost seats in the Soviets to the Bolsheviks. People became convinced of the Bolshevik position: if they wanted peace and land they would have to take it themselves.

Of the revolutionaries in Russia, only the Bolsheviks posed the Soviets as a clear alternative to the Provisional Government. Even some of the Bolsheviks were hesitant at first. Local Bolshevik leaders faltered on the brink of revolution. What was possible in this situation?

The workers had their own answer. They demanded the revolution! The Party's close links to the workers made it possible for them to draw the correct conclusions and act, despite the hesitations of a few. Armed with a clear analysis of the possibilities, the Party was able to play a critical role in organizing and coordinating the initiative of the workers.

The other parties, the Mensheviks and the Socialist Revolutionaries drew other conclusions. The Mensheviks reasoned that Russia would have to undergo economic development in the exact same manner as Europe had, going from feudalism into a prolonged state of capitalism led by the bourgeoisie. The Mensheviks had supported the liberal democrats in the Provisional Government. Unfortunately for their analysis, the bourgeoisie in Russia was so weak that it did not want to take power. Instead, it was desperately trying to keep the Provisional Government in power for fear of the workers. The Socialist Revolutionaries put aside their vision of peasant communes in a patriotic fervor in support of the war. Both threw themselves into the arms of the Provisional Government, the old state apparatus with a new name.

Unlike 1905, revolutionary agitators had been very active amongst the troops of the Russian army and navy. The sailors of the navy, drawn from the skilled urban working class, were a decisive and powerful revolutionary force from the start. As the crisis of the war deepened, the soldiers, drawn mostly from peasant villages, and hearing the promise of bread and peace, formed their own councils and linked up with the Soviets. Through the soldiers, the Soviets were able to make contact with the villages and organize the peasants into their own soviets. The working class alliance with the peasantry guaranteed the victory of the revolution over the old order.

The July Days: A Test of Leadership

Very quickly the revolutionary tempo picked up. In June, the Provisional Government ordered a major new war effort. They tried to mobilize demonstrations in favor of the war. However, the workers organized a larger demonstration, opposing the war and opposing the capitalists. A million armed workers marched in the streets of Petrograd.

In Petrograd the mood of the workers was revolutionary. They felt power within their reach and could hardly bear to suffer the existence of the war-mongering Provisional Government a moment longer. They demonstrated under banners that proclaimed the Bolshevik slogan "All Power to the Soviets!"

The Bolsheviks however, through the network of their organization, were more keenly attuned to the mood of the country. They understood that an uprising in Petrograd would be premature. It would fail to bring the rest of Russia along, most importantly the growing peasant movement.

The workers trusted the Bolshevik analysis. The demonstration was a show of the workers' strength. Even so, it did not break out into an open confrontation with the Provisional Government. The Bolsheviks participated in the demonstrations even though they thought they were premature. They went through this experience alongside the rest of the working class. Afterward, the Bolsheviks were harassed and imprisoned by the Provisional Government, which feared its own imminent destruction. The Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks, ministers and functionaries, willingly carried out the repression of the "dangerous extremists." They proved for all to see whose side they were really on.

In September, the capitalists attempted a coup under the leadership of Tsarist General Kornilov. The workers responded to defend the revolution, forcing the Provisional Government to give them weaponry. The coup melted away, faced with the united strength of the working class. The line was drawn and it was clear. The workers had to rely on themselves through their Soviets and their Party,

October: All Power to the Soviets!

Arms in hand, the workers didn't need to wait long to test their strength against the Provisional Government.

Well before 1917, the workers had begun building their own defense guards to protect strikes and demonstrations. In April, these were united into a wider organization called the Red Guard. By June, armed workers' units were set up in every working class district of Petrograd, all united under a general staff. Workers organized their factories on a military footing. In September, workers at 79 Petrograd factories were teaching themselves to use weapons and fight together. Workers stood guard on a rotating basis, a third of the workforce standing guard while the others worked. Regular wages were paid for hours on guard duty. Officers were elected. Guard

units were organized into battalions of 400 to 600 each, Any more than three absences from duty and a worker was expelled from the Red Guard. If the officers had not already received military training, they took special courses. On the eve of the October uprising, there were 20,000 Red Guard in Petrograd, and 100,000 in the country as a whole. The people were armed and ready to build a new society. They had the means to back up their demands for "All Power to the Soviets!"

Clearly, the Soviets and the Provisional Government could not coexist. The working class anticipated the coming national Congress of Soviets on October 25th. And with a Bolshevik majority, they would make a clear break with the Provisional Government and dissolve it, placing state power directly in the hands of the workers. The decisive moment however came a few days earlier. On October 22, Soviet power was put to the test when the Provisional government ordered the Battleship Aurora to vacate the harbor of Petrograd. The sailors, many having been skilled factory workers, were some of the most solid revolutionaries. If they lost their control of the Battleship, it would be a decisive defeat for the workers' revolution. Quickly the Bolsheviks and other revolutionaries mobilized and sent armed detachment to the hall where the Provisional Government was meeting. The Red Guard announced that the old government served no purpose and was ordered to retire. The Provisional Government dissolved just as the Tsar's government had. The Second congress of Soviets met two days later with full power and authority. All power lay in the hands of the workers and peasants.

October: The Soviets in Action

The Soviet Government was the first example of what workers' can do on a national scale with the power in their hands. They offered peace to the people of Russia, calling on all other countries to do the same and put an end to the murderous war. They offered national independence to the peoples subjugated by the Russian Empire.

They provided support and encouragement to the peasant movement which had already begun to redistribute the land that the peasants needed. Thus the workers proved that they were with the peasants against the landlords.

They took the factories, sending their Red Guards to defend striking workers in every dispute with the old bosses. The workers police force was for protecting people, not property. They established fair and open courts for the first time in Russia. Judges were elected rather than appointed and trials were held before juries of ordinary people.

They established a separation of church and state while establishing the rights of all to freedom of speech and belief for all.

They established equal rights for men and women. Legalizing abortion and setting up communal day care, public laundries, and public kitchens, to liberate women from housework.

Ordinary people participated in culture and politics. Groups of working people were given control of the print media proportional with their support. For example, if a political organization or newspaper had 1000 supporters, it would be given a certain amount of ink and paper and access to presses proportional to its support. If it had 10,000 supporters it would get ten times as much. This is the opposite of our "free press" in which audiences are force-fed by corporations who own every aspect of the media. Workers actively sought out information. Meetings ran non-stop on political and educational themes. Libraries were open seven days a week and 15 hours a day.

Perhaps most importantly they offered the rest of the worlds' workers aid and partnership, forming the Communist International to spread the revolution. This body called together the revolutionary tendencies from socialist organizations and militant unions all over the world. Together they would coordinate their activities, forming revolutionary communist organizations in their respective countries.

The Civil War: The Revolution Under Siege

Russia suffered immensely from World War I. And when the revolution happened, the capitalists of the world joined together to destroy it. Revolutionary Russia was invaded by 14 countries including Britain, France, the United States, Japan, Italy, Canada, Romania, Czechoslovakia, Estonia, China, Czechoslovakia, and Serbia. The civil war was an attempt by these powers to put the country under the control of the Tsar's old generals.

The country was blockaded, starved, battered, and mined. In 1920, industrial production had fallen to one quarter of its prewar level. During this same period, the population of Petrograd fell by 66 percent.

Many of the best revolutionary organizers and workers, educated by the process of revolution, died on the front lines. Workers, who had been the driving force of the revolution, found themselves unemployed and starving thanks to the ravaged economy. Many left the cities to return to their ancestral villages in search of food. The Soviets ceased to meet and oversee the functions of the state. Without the active participation of the population, the Bolshevik Party became not only the source of state personnel, but became the decision making body as well. The party had fused with the state.

Without aid from workers taking over other parts of the world economy, Russia was doomed to reproduce all of the pettiness and degradation which scarcity inflicts on people.

The Workers' Struggle is an International Struggle

Between 1917 and 1927 workers nearly made revolutions in many countries, and workers all over the world felt a wave of revolutionary enthusiasm. The slaughter and insanity of the First World War proved to many that the capitalists were incapable of running the world for the benefit of humanity. In 1918 the German workers formed councils, overthrew the last vestiges of absolutism and fought hard battles against the old army. In Italy, workers formed councils and peasants began seizing land from the landowners. In Japan, the workers seized the rice that the capitalists were hoarding. In China, a revolutionary movement was growing which would culminate in a revolutionary attempt in 1925-27. In Britain, workers underwent a wave of strikes led by committees of shop stewards. In Ireland, workers took over factories and formed "Soviets." In the colonial world, movements to break free of imperialism also raged. A huge general strike wracked British occupied Palestine in 1919. Even in the United States workers seized the city of Seattle and ran it during the course of a strike. Workers demanded an end to the attacks on revolutionary Russia and in many cases refused to load arms bound for the intervention.

The revolutionary attempts in other countries failed because they lacked revolutionary parties with the history and cohesion of the Bolshevik Party. A revolution in an industrial powerhouse such as Germany would have changed the course of history. Another revolutionary power, especially an industrialized country, would be able to lend its technological and industrial strength to Russia's recovery. As it stood, all the Russian workers had to share was poverty. Without the high level of technology and material wealth generated by the world market – the material basis for socialism – people were forced to live in a state of desperate poverty. Their first thought was to survive.

Disappointed and frustrated, the workers fell away from the government they had created to concentrate on their own individual survival. This created an opening for a bureaucracy to grow up and eventually assume control of the country and rule in its own interests. The Soviets became simply rubber stamps for the Party bureaucracy. This bureaucracy was a counter-revolutionary force.

Stalin was the leader of this counter-revolution. At the head of a bureaucratized state machine, he put forward the theory of "socialism in one country": that Russia by itself could build a socialist society. This had nothing to do with the theories Marx or Lenin and the Bolshevik party.

At its core it represented a truce with capitalism. The international working class remained in chains, but the Soviet state withdrew within itself. Everywhere the Stalinist policy attached the communist parties to the left wing capitalist parties. This meant dissolving the revolutionary forces into nationalist movements in the colonized world, and supporting the left wing bourgeois parties of the capitalist countries in their cynical manipulations. These "allies" sang the praises of the Soviet Union but didn't hesitate to play their role in suppressing revolutionaries. In China and in Spain, in Britain and in France, mass movements of the working class were strangled, and revolutionary attempts by the workers were sabotaged. The bureaucrats presided over a decimated working class, and betrayed the world revolution by turning the Communist International into a brake on the world revolution.

The Bolshevik Party was not dead however, nor were its allies in other countries. Many revolutionaries struggled against the odds to reverse this degeneration. The International Left Opposition was formed as a means to attempt a regeneration of the Bolshevik Party and the revolution. Around the figure of Leon Trotsky, it collected some of the best, most devoted, most politically conscious of the revolutionary generation. In Russia, they organized meetings in the unions, in the Party, and amongst the workers. In other countries, they set out to win the honest revolutionaries in the Communist parties away from the dead-end policies of Stalinism. Against all odds they continued the Bolshevik legacy, attempting to explain what was happening and show the workers that there was a way out, that they could return to power in Russia and win power in other countries by marching under their own banner.

The revolution did not spread, and the international working class suffered a defeat. But they showed what was possible when the working class takes power. The Russian workers ended a bloody imperialist war. They broke many of the old traditions of Russian feudalism. They began reorganizing society along cooperative and truly democratic lines in the interest of the majority rather than a minority. They began the task of organizing the international revolution along with revolutionaries from other countries. Like the Paris Commune, the Russian Revolution stands as a historic achievement of the working class. We can learn and take inspiration from its example. Humanity is still searching for ways to solve the same problems. War continues, poverty deepens, and society continues its disintegration.

The problems remain the same, as do the solutions. People all over the world are still searching for a possibility that we can change society. Workers can run society for themselves. The Russian Revolution was proof of that. The revolutionary potential of the working class opens the possibility of liberation for all of humankind.