

International Communist Current

Manifesto on the October revolution, Russia 1917



The world revolution is humanity’s only future



Congress of Soviets, Petrograd 1917

In October 1917, after three years of unspeakable carnage on the battlefields, a beacon of hope in the fog of war: the Russian workers, having overthrown the Tsar in February, now deposed the bourgeois Provisional Government which had replaced him but which insisted on carrying on with the war “until victory”. The Soviets (workers’, soldiers’ and peasants’ councils), with the Bolshevik party at the fore, called for an immediate end to the war and appealed to the workers of the world to follow their revolutionary example. This was no idle dream because there were already rumblings of discontent in all the antagonistic countries – strikes in the war industries, mutinies and fraternisation at the front. And in November 1918, the outbreak of the German revolution obliged the ruling class to call a halt to the war for fear that any attempt to prolong it would only fan the flames of revolution. For a brief period, the spectre of “Bolshevism” – which at that moment symbolised working class solidarity across all frontiers, and the conquest of political power by the workers’ councils – haunted the globe. For the ruling class, it could only mean chaos, anarchy, the breakdown of civilisation itself. But for the workers and revolutionaries who supported it, the October insurrection contained the promise of a new world. In 2017, the Russian revolution remains a pivotal event in world history, and its centenary brings back uncomfortable memories for the powers that rule the world. In Russia itself, the Putin regime is having a hard time getting the right note for its commemoration: after all, Stalin’s mighty USSR, whose empire Putin (trained by the KGB) dreams of restoring, also claimed to be the heir of the October revolution. But alongside (in fact, diametrically opposed to) this nationalist interpretation is the internationalist vision of Lenin and the Bolsheviks, the idea that the loyalty of the Russian working class should not be to Mother Russia but to the workers of the world. In the “democratic” countries of the West, there will also be a confusing mixture of analyses and explanations, but of one thing we can be sure: if they come from the political, media or academic mouthpieces of capitalism, they will all serve to distort the meaning of the Russian revolution.

What are the main lines of this ideological attack, this attempt either to bury or pervert the memory of the working class?

Is the class war over?

**First line of attack:** this is all ancient history, of little relevance to the modern world. We no longer live in the times portrayed in the jerky black and white films of the day, where cavalry charges were still a feature of warfare and where peasants still tilled the land with horse-drawn ploughs (if they were lucky enough to own a horse). Even the big factories like the Putilov works in Petrograd (today St Petersburg) where tens of thousands of workers were exploited to the hilt every day, have largely disappeared, from most western countries at least. Indeed, not only are there many less peasants, but is there really any such thing as the working class, and if there is, is this still an exploited class when you can claim welfare from a benevolent state and can afford to buy (even if on credit) all kinds of items which would have been far beyond the reach of the Russian workers in 1917? Are not super-modern companies like Uber closer to the mark when they categorise their workforce as self-employed individuals rather than as some kind of collective force capable of acting together in their own interests? Are we all, whatever job we do, not better defined as citizens of a broad democratic order?

And yet: we are told day after day that capitalism (mainly in its current “neo-liberal” form) dominates the planet, whether this is presented as a good thing or not. And it is indeed true that capitalism dominates the planet like never before – it is truly a world system, a global mode of production that rules every country in the world, including those like Cuba and China that still call themselves “socialist”. But the fact remains that where there is capital, there is a class which produces it, which labours, and which is exploited because capital is, by definition, based on the unpaid labour extracted from those who work for a wage – whether they work in factories, offices, schools, supermarkets, hospitals, transport, or at home. In short, as Marx put it, in a pamphlet precisely called *Wage Labour*

and *Capital*: “capital presupposes wage labour; and wage labour presupposes capital”. Where there is capital, there is a working class.

Of course the shape of the world working class has changed a great deal since 1917. Entire industrial complexes have shifted to China, or Latin America, or other parts of what was once called the “Third World”. In large portions of the economy in the “industrialised countries” of western Europe, workers have stopped producing material goods on the factory floor and instead work at computer screens in the “knowledge economy” or the financial sector, often in much smaller workplaces; and with the decimation of traditional industrial sectors like mining, steel and ship-building, the equivalent working class residential communities have also been broken up. All this has helped to undermine the ways in which the working class has identified itself as a class with a distinct existence and distinct interests in this society. This has weakened the historical memory of the working class. But it has not made the working class itself disappear.

It’s true that the objective existence of the working class does not automatically mean that, within a substantial part of this class, there is still a political project, an idea that the capitalist system needs to, and can be, overturned and replaced by a higher form of society. Indeed, in 2017, it is legitimate to ask: where are the equivalent today of the marxist organisations, like the Bolsheviks in Russia or the Spartacists in Germany, who were able to develop a presence among the industrial workers and have a big influence when they engaged in massive movements, in strikes or uprisings? In the past few decades, the period from the “collapse of communism” to the upsurge of populism, it often seems as though those who still talk about the proletarian revolution are at best viewed as irrelevant curiosities, rare animals on the verge of extinction, and that they are not only seen in this way by a hostile capitalist media. For the vast majority of the working class, 1917, the Russian revolution, the Communist International – all that has been forgotten, perhaps locked away in some deep unconscious recess, but no longer part of any living tradition. Today, we have reached such a low in the capacity of the workers’ movement to recall its own past that the parties of the populist right can even present themselves – and be represented by their liberal opponents – as parties of the working class, as the true heir of the struggle against the elites that run the world.

This process of forgetting is not accidental. Capitalism today, more than ever, depends on the cult of newness, on “constantly revolutionising” not only the means of production, but also the objects of consumption, so that what was once new, like the latest mobile phone, becomes old in the space of a couple of years and needs to be replaced. This denigration of what’s “out of date”, of genuine historical experience, is useful to the class of exploiters because it serves to produce a kind of amnesia among the exploited. The working class is faced with the danger of forgetting its own revolutionary traditions; and it unlearns the real lessons of history at its peril, because it will need to apply them in its future struggles. The bourgeoisie, as a reactionary class, wants us either to forget the past or (as with the populists and the jihadists) offer us the mirage of a false, idealised past. The proletariat, by contrast, is a class with a future and for this very reason is capable of integrating into all the best of humanity’s past into the struggle for communism.

Capitalism has outlived itself

The working class will need the lessons of its historic past because capital is a social system doomed by its own internal contradictions, and the contradictions which plunged the world into the horrors of World War One in 1914 are the same which threaten the world with an accelerating plunge into barbarism today. The contradiction between the need for a planet-wide planning of production and distribution and the division of the world into competing nation states lay behind the great imperialist wars and conflicts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and it still lies behind the chaotic military confrontations which are wrecking whole regions in the Middle East, Africa and beyond; and the same contradiction – which is just one expression of the clash between socialised production and its private appropriation – is inseparable both from the economic convulsions which have shaken world capitalism in 1929, 1973 and 2008, and the accelerating ecological destruction which is threatening the very basis of life on Earth.



Aleppo 2016

In 1919, the revolutionaries who gathered together in Moscow to found the Third, Communist International proclaimed that the imperialist war of 1914-18 signalled the entry of world capitalism into its epoch of obsolescence and decline, an epoch in which mankind would be faced with the choice between socialism and barbarism. They predicted that if capitalism was not overthrown by the world proletarian revolution, there would be wars even more devastating than that of 1914-18, forms of capitalist rule more monstrous than any that had yet appeared. And with the defeat of the international revolutionary wave, with its consequence of the isolation and degeneration of the revolution in Russia, they were proved only too right: the horrors of Nazism, Stalinism and the Second World War were indeed worse than anything which had preceded them.

It’s true that capitalism has repeatedly surprised revolutionaries by its resilience, its capacity to invent new ways of surviving and even prospering. World War Two was followed by over two decades of economic boom in the central capitalist countries, even if it was also accompanied by the menace of nuclear annihilation at the hands of the two world-dominating imperialist blocs. And although this boom gave way to a renewed and prolonged economic crisis at the end of the 1960s, since the 1980s capitalism has been coming up with new formulae not only for staying alive but even for expanding into areas that had previously been “underdeveloped”, such as India and China. But this very development, which has to a large extent been fuelled by huge injections of credit, has piled up enormous economic problems for the future (of which the financial crash of 2008 was



already a warning). At the same time, the growth of the last few decades has extracted a terrible toll from the natural environment, and has in no sense diminished the danger of military conflicts. The threat of a world war between two gigantic blocs may have receded, but today even more countries are armed with nuclear weapons, and the proxy wars between the great powers, which were once more or less restricted to the less developed regions, are now impacting directly on the central countries themselves, through the multiplication of terrorist outrages in Europe and America, and the waves of refugees desperate to escape the nightmarish wars in the Middle East and Africa. The survival of capitalism is, more than ever, incompatible with the survival of humanity.

In sum, revolution is even more necessary than it was in 1917; it is the last best hope of humanity in the face of a social system in full decomposition. And that can only mean a global revolution, a revolution which sweeps the capitalist system from the planet and replaces it with a world human community which makes the Earth a “common treasury” and frees production and distribution from the inhuman demands of the market and of profit. That was already the secret of the revolution in 1917, which was not merely “Russian” but was understood by its protagonists as only the first blow of the world revolution; and it was indeed an indispensable, active factor in the mass strikes and uprisings which spread across the world in a great wave between 1917 and 1923.

## Does revolution make everything worse?



The problem remains: if a new society is necessary, is it really possible? And in fact, *a second line of attack* on the memory of October 1917 is that *revolution can only make things worse*.

The proof? That the Russian revolution ended up in the Stalinist Gulag: in mass terror, show trials, the falsification of history, the suppression of dissident opinion; that it created economies which could churn out vast military arsenals but were incapable of providing decent consumer goods; that it established a “dictatorship of the proletariat” which used tanks to crush proletarian revolts, as in East Germany in 1953, Hungary in 1956, or Poland in 1981.

And all this was not something which arrived out of the blue after the death of Lenin in 1924 and with Stalin’s rise to power. Even in Lenin’s day, workers’ strikes and rebellions were met with armed force and the uncontrolled violence of the Cheka claimed many working class and peasant victims. Even in Lenin’s day, the soviets had progressively ceased to wield any real control over the state, and the dictatorship of the proletariat had largely been replaced by a dictatorship of the Bolshevik party.

Those who are serious about the possibility of revolution have no interest in concealing the truth, or in minimising the immensity of the task facing a working class which has the audacity to confront and overturn the capitalist system. To make a revolution is to throw off the muck of ages – all the delusions and noxious habits inherited not only from capitalist society and its ideology but from thousands of years of class domination. It requires a vast physical, moral and intellectual effort aimed not only at dismantling the old regime, its state and its economy, but of creating new social relations based no longer on competition and exclusion but on solidarity and cooperation, and all this on the level of an entire planet. The very scale of the project, its seeming impossibility, has become a further factor in the current difficulties of the working class. Far easier to retreat into passivity, or, for those who remain convinced that the present system is deeply flawed, to look for the “easier” alternatives offered by populist strongmen, by nihilistic terrorism posing as “jihad”, or by the “left” parties who claim that the existing capitalist state can introduce a socialist society.

We do not hide from the reality of the Russian revolution, its terrible difficulties and its tragic errors. We will come back to some of these errors in due course. But before we come to the conclusions offered by conventional history – that Bolshevism was from the beginning no different from Stalinism, that any attempt to overthrow the

existing state of affairs will inevitably end up in mass terror and repression, or that human nature is so constituted that present day capitalist society is the best we can hope for – let’s remember that in 1917 the ruling class did not simply trust to the selfishness of human nature, did not wait around until it all went wrong so that they could sneer “I told you so”. In 1917 and the years that followed, the ruling class of the whole world took the threat of revolution very seriously indeed, and did everything they could to suppress it. Faced with the outbreak of the German revolution in 1918, they hurried to bring the war to an end, in order to remove one of the main motive forces behind the mass strikes and mutinies; in addition, the Allies came to the aid of their former enemy – the German ruling class – in the latter’s effort to put down the revolutionary workers, sailors and soldiers who had been tempted to follow the example of the October insurrection. Faced with soviet power in Russia, both sides in the imperialist war intervened with the aim of snuffing out the Bolshevik danger at source. Those defending soviet power in the civil war stirred up by the counter-revolutionary forces in Russia not only had to fight the home-grown “White” armies but expeditionary forces sent in by the British, the Americans, the Japanese, the Germans and others, who also sent arms and advisers to the White armies. The civil war, reinforced by an economic blockade imposed by the western allies after the soviet republic withdrew from the war, rapidly reduced the Russian economy – already exhausted by three years of war – to ruin, and resulted in dire shortages and outright famine. The conditions of civil war also weakened the strongholds of the industrial working class which had been the most active force behind the revolution, since many of its most dedicated militants volunteered to go to the military fronts and of them countless numbers lost their lives, while many other workers had little choice but to flee the starvation in the cities and look for food and work in the countryside. Inside and outside Russia, a constant stream of propaganda was directed at the Bolsheviks, portraying them as murderers of children and ravishers of women, often employing anti-Semitic themes that implied that Bolshevism was a mere tool of a global Jewish conspiracy.

Indeed, for many of the politicians of the “democratic” powers – including Winston Churchill in Britain - the fascist regime in Italy (and later Germany) was seen as a necessary evil if it could be relied on to stem the Bolshevik tide. Similarly, when the USSR under Stalin sought to rejoin the “concert of nations”, a number of bourgeois politicians and states were able to see that Stalin was a “man you could do business with” and understood that his policy of “socialism in one country” meant that he was no longer interested – and was actually opposed to – the world revolution. This acceptance of the USSR into the imperialist concert was confirmed by its participation in the Second World War on the Allied side.

And this was the most telling demonstration that Stalinism was not the continuation of Bolshevism but its gravedigger. In 1914-18 Bolshevism stood for revolutionary opposition to imperialist war, for class struggle against all the belligerent states. In 1941 the Stalinist USSR – following a temporary pact with Nazi Germany – raised the flag of the “Great Patriotic War” and took part in the imperialist carve up of the globe at the end of it.

## The great lie: “Stalinism equals communism”

Stalinism, then, was the product, not of the revolution, but of its isolation and defeat. By 1923, the international revolutionary conflagration sparked off by the October insurrection had died down, providing the ammunition needed by the bureaucratic layer that was gaining strength in the Bolshevik party to argue that the priority was no longer the world revolution, but the building of socialism in the USSR. But this meant abandoning the elementary marxist idea that socialism can only be built on a world scale, that isolated outposts of socialism are an impossibility. And so what was built by the ruthless Five Year Plans of the Stalinist bureaucracy was not socialism but a form of capitalism in which individual capitalists were replaced by a single state boss. This tendency towards state capitalism was by no means limited to the USSR: it was capitalism’s universal response to war and economic crisis, taking diverse forms: fascism in Italy and Germany, the New Deal in the USA, the Keynesian welfare state after World War Two, military dictatorships in many of the weaker capitalist countries. What was particular about the USSR was that the drive towards state capitalism here reached its most concentrated, extreme form, a result of the virtual elimination (either by flight or expropriation) of private capitalists during the revolution; and that, since the counter-revolution had grown up from within the state that emerged

out of the revolution, and had annexed a Bolshevik party which had become almost indistinguishable from the state, the Stalinist regime was for the rest of its days able to claim continuity with the October revolution which it had buried under piles of corpses.

This false identification gave a radical gloss to the Stalinist parties outside Russia, who could also cover their total commitment to capitalism and the national interest of their respective countries with references to Red October. But above all it provided the main factions of the ruling class in the west with a licence to publish the greatest lie in history: that the Stalinist regime was equal to “Communism”.

The immensity of this lie can be measured by comparing the Stalinist system to the understanding of what communism really means that has been defended within the workers’ movement since at least the days of Marx and Engels. For them, as for those that followed in their wake, communism means the overcoming of millennia of human alienation, of any social order in which humanity’s own creations have become hostile forces that dominate its life. At the political level, it means a society without a state, since the state is precisely the expression of the rule of one class over another, and thus of a political apparatus over which the vast majority have no control. And yet the Stalinist regime was the epitome of the total domination of the state over the individual, over society, and above all over the working class. At the economic level, communism means that humanity is no longer subject to inhuman economic laws, to the ruthless demands of profit and the market. And this means that in communism there is no place for money, the market, or wage labour. And yet the totalitarian power of the Stalinist state, the whole economic edifice dominated by production for war, was built on the surplus value extracted from the class of wage labourers. Capital is, in essence, a social relationship, not merely a form of legal ownership. For the wage labourer, it makes no difference whether his or her labour power is sold to a private entrepreneur or a state bureaucrat: the fundamentals of capitalist exploitation remain. And while communism means the end of the separation of humanity into different nations, the abolition of borders, the Stalinist regimes were fanatical purveyors of nationalist ideology, entirely devoted to the defence of their national borders and the pursuit of their national and thus imperialist interests on the world arena.

But if the claim that Stalinism is communism was such a huge lie, why was it able to sustain itself for so long? First of all, it was in the interest of both sets of rulers, east and west, to keep it going. For all their crimes against humanity and the working class in particular, the Stalinist state bourgeoisie depended on proclaiming its “continuity” with the October revolution. The idea that these were “socialist” states in transition towards communism provided these regimes with their ideological justification. In this the Stalinists were cheered on from the “left” by the Trotskyists who continued to argue that these regimes, however degenerated or deformed, were indeed workers’ states that workers should defend. By the same token, for many workers in the west, for those who were not altogether convinced of the benefits of capitalism in its “democratic” form, the idea that there was somewhere on this planet an actual alternative to capitalism remained an important source of hope. The Stalinist regimes were indeed capitalist, but because they were such a distorted form of capitalism they could appear to many as representing a different kind of society altogether.

But for a much greater part of the population in the west – and indeed for the majority of the working class within the Stalinist regimes themselves – the idea that the USSR and its satellites were socialist or communist was the ultimate proof that the western variety of capitalism was the only possible system, a system to be defended or to strive for. In other words, the misery, austerity and repression that characterised the Stalinist regimes demonstrated the impossibility of replacing capitalism with a higher form of society. Capitalist competition, the desire to accumulate unlimited wealth, these were vindicated as being essential to human nature. This is why the ruling class in the west was so emphatic about describing its enemy in the east as socialist or communist, and when the eastern regimes collapsed at the end of the end of the 80s, the lie that this was the final proof of the failure of marxism and communism was amplified across the world in deafening political campaigns whose echo has far from disappeared today. These campaigns have caused considerable confusion and disarray in the ranks of the working class, which was already, in the 1980s, finding it extremely difficult to develop a perspective, a historical project, which could have taken its immediate struggles onto a higher and more unified level. The widely-held idea that there is nothing beyond this present society has dealt a very heavy blow to the capacity of the working class to politicise its struggles and confront the capitalist system as a whole.

## In defence of October



Red Guard unit, Vulkan factory

A key component in the denigration of the Russian revolution is the idea that the October insurrection was no more than a coup d’état by a power hungry Bolshevik party, which quickly set about establishing a totalitarian state, the precursor of the Stalinist regime. Of course, in this version of history, great sympathy and understanding may be shown for the workers who, in February 1917, engaged in spontaneous mass strikes and formed the “democratic” soviets. This movement chased away the Tsarist autocracy and, in the view of eminent liberal historians like Orlando Figes, could have prepared the ground for the emergence of a genuinely democratic parliamentary state, which in turn might possibly have spared Russia from decades of suffering and terror. But those scheming Bolsheviks sabotaged these bright hopes with their dogma about the “dictatorship of the proletariat” and deceived the masses with their demagogic slogans.

But what really happened between February and October 1917? First of all, there was a profound political awakening of the working class and all the oppressed layers – a process captured very well by John Reed in his book *Ten Days that Shook the World*.

*“All Russia was learning to read, and reading politics, economics, history - because the people wanted to know ... The thirst for education, so long thwarted, burst with the Revolution into a frenzy of expression. From Smolny Institute alone, in the first six months, went out every day tons, carloads, trainloads of literature, saturating the land. Russia absorbed reading matter like hot sand drinks water ... Then the Talk, beside which Carlyle’s ‘flood of French speech’ was a mere trickle. Lectures, debates, speeches - in theatres, circuses, school-houses, clubs, Soviet meeting-rooms, Union headquarters, barracks ... meetings in the trenches at the front, in village squares, factories ... What a marvellous sight to see Putilovsky (the Putilov Factory) pour out its forty thousand to listen to Social Democrats, Socialist Revolutionaries, Anarchists, anybody, whatever they had to say as long as they could talk! For months in Petrograd, and all over Russia, every street corner was a public tribune. In railway trains, street-cars, always the spurting of impromptu debates, everywhere ... At every meeting, attempts to limit the time of speakers were voted down, and every man free to express the thought that was in him.”*

This is what is meant by the politicisation of the class struggle. Workers, driven forward by dire economic necessity, are compelled to pose the question of how society as a whole is managed. And not through the fake democracy of the parliamentary system, which “empowers” workers every few years to hand over to experts and professional politicians to govern “on their behalf”, but through the proletarian methods of association, debate and self-organisation – through a whole network of assemblies in the workplaces, in the neighbourhoods, in the regiments, in the villages, assemblies which could send mandated and revocable delegates to more central councils, the soviets. In 1917, such a network sprang up all over Russia and within a year or less had inspired the formation of similar organs across the world. It was in these assemblies and councils that a deep process of maturation was taking place, of confrontation between those within them who remained attached to the parties and ideologies of the old system (including many who still called themselves socialists) and those who stood for taking the revolution to its logical conclusion: not handing over to a parliament dominated by bourgeois parties but resolving an inherently unstable situation of “dual power” through the assumption of political power by the soviets. The slogans of the Bolsheviks – above all the necessity to end the war, which was the cause of terrible hardship for the working class and the peasants – chimed with the growing consciousness of the majority that the bourgeois politicians and parties would not and could not break with the policy of “national defence”; and that, faced with the threat from below, these factions would prefer an open dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, even if this meant the suppression of the soviets. The complicity of the “democrats” with the attempted putsch by Kornilov in August 1917, and subsequent attempts by the Provisional Government to “restore order”, convinced many that the only choice was between



the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie and the dictatorship of the proletariat.

The October insurrection was, in truth, the high point of this whole process of politicisation. It corresponded to a growing influence of the Bolsheviks and other revolutionary groups within the soviets across Russia, a growing demand that the Provisional Government should be toppled and replaced by soviet power. But it also reflected a real development of self-organisation and centralisation. The fact that the insurrection was a planned, coordinated action which, in Petrograd in particular, passed off with a minimum of violence and was for the most part carried out by well-organised detachments of workers and sailors, the fact that it was under the overall command of an organ of the Petrograd Soviet – the Military Revolutionary Committee – and the fact that it rapidly made it possible for the all-Russian Congress of Soviets to declare itself the supreme power in the land, all this demonstrated that the insurrection was not a putsch and, on the contrary, that the Russian working class had learned the practical truth of Marx’s saying that “insurrection is an art”.

*“Demonstrations, street fights, barricades - everything comprised in the usual idea of insurrection - were almost entirely absent. The revolution had no need of solving a problem already solved. The seizure of the governmental machine could be carried through according to plan with the help of comparatively small armed detachments guided from a single centre... The tranquillity of the October streets, the absence of crowds and battles, gave the enemy a pretext to talk of the conspiracy of an insignificant minority, of the adventure of a handful of Bolsheviks... But in reality the Bolsheviks could reduce the struggle for power at the last moment to a ‘conspiracy’, not because they were a small minority, but for the opposite reason - because they had behind them in the workers’ districts and the barracks an overwhelming majority, consolidated, organised, disciplined”* (Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*).

In overthrowing the government of the bourgeoisie in Russia, the working class was able to take advantage of a rather weak, divided, and inexperienced capitalist class. The German bourgeoisie was very quick to show that it was a much more formidable opponent; and it’s certainly the case that in any future revolution, the working class will be faced with an even more sophisticated ruling class with a highly organised state and ideological apparatus at its disposal. Nevertheless, the October insurrection is to this day the highest point achieved by the proletarian class struggle – an expression of its ability to become organised on a mass scale, conscious of its goals, confident of taking the reins of social life. It was the anticipation of what Marx called “the end of prehistory”, of all conditions in which humanity is at the mercy of unconscious social forces; the anticipation of a future in which, for the first time, humanity will make its own history according to its own needs and purposes.

## The necessity for the class party



*Bolshevik Party meeting. Sitting (from left): Avel Enukidze, Mikhail Kalinin, Nikolai Bukharin, Mikhail Tomskey, Mikhail Lashevich, Lev Kamenev, Yevgeni Preobrazhensky, Leonid Serebryakov, Vladimir Lenin and Alexei Rykov*

In the debates within the Bolshevik party in the period immediately prior to the insurrection, Lenin, growing impatient with the vacillations within the soviets (and even within the party itself), raised the possibility that the uprising could be carried out in the name of the Bolshevik party, which had by now won an effective majority within the principal soviets. But Trotsky disagreed, insisting that the insurrection should be clearly seen to be the work of an organ responsible to the soviets, that is to say, of the organisations of the working class as a whole. In this debate was the beginning of an understanding that the taking of political power is not the task of the party. We will come back to this. But what the stormy development of class consciousness between February and October certainly did prove was that a proletarian revolution cannot succeed without the determined

intervention and political leadership provided by a communist party.

As an exploited class in bourgeois society, the consciousness of the class can never be homogenous. There will always be those who are more combative, more resistant to the penetration of the dominant ideology, more conscious of the historical struggle of the class and its lessons. It is the specific task of a communist organisation to regroup the most clear-sighted elements of the class around a solid programme, to defend this programme whatever the immediate level of consciousness in the class as a whole. This does not mean that the communist organisation possesses an infallible truth: the communist programme is based on the theoretical elaboration of the real lessons of history, and is constantly enriched by new experiences and debates within the workers’ movement. And there can be times – as during the Russian revolution itself, when Lenin himself noted that the advanced workers were already to the left of the party – when the party can lag behind new advances in the consciousness of the class. But this only means that the combat against the influence of ruling class ideology has to take place inside the communist organisation as it does within the class as a whole: indeed, it can be said that it is precisely at such moments that the communist organisation reveals its role as a vital laboratory for the elaboration of class consciousness.

Such a moment took place within the Bolshevik party in the aftermath of the February revolution. A majority of the “old Bolsheviks” within Russia, carried away by the democratic euphoria that followed the abdication of the Tsar, took up a frankly opportunist position of critical support for the provisional Government and of continued participation in the war, now dubbed as defensive and no longer imperialist on Russia’s part. This position put into question three years of determined internationalist opposition against the war, which had put the Bolsheviks in the vanguard of the entire international socialist movement. But the proletarian life of the party, though menaced, was far from exhausted. On his return to Russia in April, Lenin – counting on the radicalisation of the most militant sectors of the class – shook the party to its foundations by unveiling the “April theses” which rejected any support for the bourgeois Provisional Government, any participation in the imperialist war, and called on the workers and poor peasants to prepare for the inevitable next step in the revolutionary process: the transfer of power to the soviets, which would be the signal for the world revolution against the global imperialist system. This position, Lenin understood, would have to be fought for within the party, and by the party within the soviets and the class as a whole, not through adventurist actions but through patient explanation, through a political battle for clarity.

*“As long as we are in the minority we carry on the work of criticising and exposing errors and at the same time we preach the necessity of transferring the entire state power to the Soviets of Workers’ Deputies, so that the people may overcome their mistakes by experience.”* (Thesis 4)

By carrying out this work of “patiently explaining”, as the crisis in Russia matured and the mass of workers and peasants became increasingly disillusioned with the false promises of the Provisional Government, the Bolshevik party (once it had itself come round to Lenin’s position) was able to decisively accelerate the development of class consciousness. The patience of the party proved particularly significant in the July days when a minority of workers and sailors in Petrograd were in danger of falling for bourgeois provocations and pushing for the seizure of power at a time when they would not have been followed by the majority of the class in Russia. This would have resulted in a totally demoralising massacre of the most advanced workers - a trap which, less than two years later, the Berlin workers and the Spartacists were not able to avoid. At this moment, the Bolsheviks did not hide in a corner but took part in the workers’ demonstrations, explaining why the time was not ripe for the seizure of power, a position which was not at all popular. In the immediate aftermath of these events, the party was subject to a sustained campaign of calumny, accused of being paid agents of German imperialism, and exposed to direct repression by the government. But the party not only survived this temporary set-back: it was able to regain its influence in the class through its leading role in the struggle against the attempted coup by general Kornilov in August, and build up its presence in the soviets across the country, thus preparing the ground for the moment when, far from holding the class back, it was necessary to come out in favour of determined action: the October insurrection.

This capacity to defend a coherent analysis and hold onto class principles even in times of adversity – just as they had done during the war, when many workers had succumbed to the fever of patriotism – gives the lie to the widespread slander that the Bolsheviks were nothing but a bunch of Machiavellian schemers whose only concern was winning power for themselves.

## The degeneration of the revolution and the errors of the Bolshevik party



*Red Army troops attacking the Kronstadt rebels*

In the wake of the defeat of the revolution, some of the revolutionary political currents who had initially supported the Bolsheviks and the October revolution – parts of the German communist left, internationalist anarchists - who had seen early on the signs of the degeneration of the revolution, began to lend credence to this idea of October as a mere coup d’état by the power-hungry Bolsheviks. The idea arose in their ranks that the Bolsheviks were at best “bourgeois revolutionaries” and were nothing to do with the proletarian movement. But in this way, they removed the real problem facing revolutionaries in coming to grips with what happened in Russia: the need to understand that proletarian organisations can degenerate and even betray under the enormous pressure of the existing social order and its ideology.

For our part, the best starting point for understanding the highs and the lows of the Russian revolution was provided by the Spartacist Rosa Luxemburg, who, in her pamphlet on the Russian revolution, written in 1918 when she was still in prison, expressed her total solidarity with the Bolsheviks against all the bloodthirsty propaganda of the ruling class. For her, by taking decisive action in favour of the proletarian revolution and against the imperialist war, the Bolsheviks had restored the honour of international socialism, deeply sullied by the treason of the opportunist wing of social democracy which had come out in favour of the war in 1914 and which now opposed revolution with all its might. The future, she wrote, belonged to Bolshevism because Bolshevism, as the ruling class readily understood, stood for the world revolution. This stance in no way prevented Luxemburg from criticising with great sharpness and insight the very serious errors she saw in the Bolshevik policies after the assumption of political power: the tendency to curtail and even suppress free debate and political organisation in the soviets and other bodies; the resort to “Red Terror” in the face of counter-revolutionary plots; the concessions to nationalism in the policy of “national self-determination” for the subject peoples of the former Russian empire, and so on. But she never lost sight of the fact that these errors had to be examined in the context of the isolation of the Russian revolution, a context in which capitalist blockade and invasion had very rapidly reduced Soviet Russia to the condition of a besieged fortress. The overcoming of this situation lay exclusively in the hands of the international working class, above all the working class of western Europe, who alone could relieve the siege by fighting for the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism outside Russia. Later on, starting from Rosa Luxemburg’s approach of critical solidarity, other currents, above all the Italian Communist Left, were able to take Luxemburg’s most trenchant criticisms further while rejecting those which were themselves erroneous (such as her defence of the Constituent Assembly in Russia). In particular, the Italian Left insisted that it was the task of revolutionaries living in the wake of the defeat to develop an understanding of all the lessons that could only have been generated by real, living experience: the Bolsheviks themselves, like their contemporaries in the rest of the revolutionary movement, could not have had a prior understanding of questions which had not yet been tested in reality, such as the relationship between the party and the transitional state.

The experience of the failure of the Russian revolution belongs to the working class and it is up to our class and its political organisations to draw out its principal lessons, so that, in a future revolutionary movement, the same errors are not repeated. We have written at great length about these lessons (see the reading list at the end) but we can highlight the most significant:

1. Not only is a socialist society in one country impossible, a lone proletarian *political* power cannot survive long in the face of a hostile capitalist world. When the proletariat takes power in one country, all its political and economic policies must be subordinated to the imperious need to spread the revolution across the globe.

Confined to one country or region, the revolution will inevitably succumb either to outside attack or internal degeneration.

2. The role of the proletarian party is not to exercise power on behalf of the working class. This is the task of the workers’ councils and other mass organisations. The council method of permanently elected and revocable delegation is not compatible with the method of bourgeois parliamentarism in which governmental power is held for several years by parties which have a majority of the national vote. Furthermore, by assuming political power a proletarian party immediately sacrifices its principal function, which is to be the most radical, critical voice within the mass organisations of the class. The Bolshevik’s attempt to hold on to power at all costs after 1917 resulted not only in substituting itself for the soviets but to the decline and eventual destruction of the party itself, which was gradually transformed into a bureaucratic state machine.

3. The proletarian revolution necessarily uses violence against the former ruling class which will fight to the death to hold onto its privileges. But the class violence of the proletariat cannot use the same methods as the state terror of the ruling class. It is aimed above all at a social relation and not at persons; it abhors the spirit of revenge; it must at all times be subordinated to the overall control of the workers’ councils; and it must be guided by the basic principle of proletarian morality – that the means you use must be compatible with the end, the creation of a society based on human solidarity, as opposed to the bourgeois notion that “the end justifies the means”. In this sense, Rosa Luxemburg was absolutely correct in rejecting the notion of Red Terror. Even though it was necessary to respond firmly to the counter-revolutionary schemes of the old ruling class and to create a special organisation aimed at their suppression, the Cheka, this organisation very quickly escaped the control of the soviets and tended to be infested with the moral and material corruption of the old social order. Above all, its violence very soon came to be directed not merely against the ruling class but at dissident sections of the working class – workers on strike against real economic misery during the civil war, proletarian political organisations such as the anarchists who were critical of the Bolshevik policies. The culmination of this process was the crushing of the Kronstadt workers and sailors in 1921, who were denounced as counter-revolutionaries even though they raised the banner of world revolution and the regeneration of the soviets. This was a real expression of the “revolution devouring its own children”, a key moment in the internal destruction of soviet power. Its profoundly demoralising impact on the working class in Russia underlined emphatically that relations of violence within the working class must be rejected at all times.

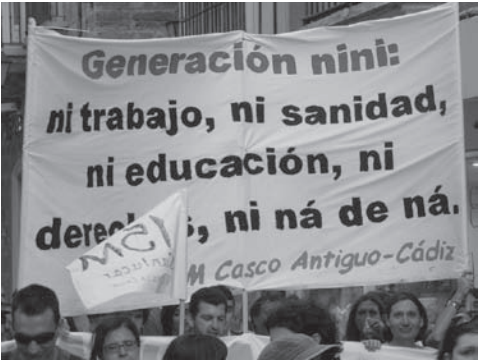
4. The critique of the notion of the Red Terror is connected to the problem of the state in the period of transition. The Russian revolution gave rise not only to organs like the workers’ councils but also to a whole network of soviets regrouping other classes and strata, as well as organisations like the Cheka and the Red Army formed to prosecute the civil war. This general state apparatus, in the terribly difficult conditions encountered by the revolution, tended to reinforce itself at the expense of the specifically proletarian organisations – councils, factory committees, workers’ militias – as well as absorbing and nullifying the Bolshevik party itself. As Lenin observed bitterly in 1922, it was like a vehicle that had escaped the control of the driver. While a transitional state is an unavoidable necessity when classes still exist, the Russian revolution has taught us that state institutions have an inevitably conservative nature and must be constantly supervised and controlled by the direct organs of the revolutionary class. Through its workers’ councils, the proletariat will exert its dictatorship **over** the transitional state.

5. If communism is a movement for the abolition of the state and the capitalist economy based on wage labour and commodity production, it is an error to see it being the product of a stage in which either the state, or a network of workers’ councils, maintain and strengthen capitalist relations. In other words, neither state capitalism nor “workers’ self-management” (which in Russia was advocated by the anarcho-syndicalists) are steps towards communism, but rather methods for the preservation of capital. This doesn’t mean that authentic communism can be introduced overnight, above all when the revolution has not yet conquered the globe; but it does mean that it is the product of a conscious and organised struggle against capitalist relations; that only a self-organised and political dominant proletariat can lead this struggle; and that as far as possible, the immediate economic measures taken by a proletarian power should not be incompatible with the goal of communism. But in Russia, the majority of the Bolshevik party was unable to break with the idea that state capitalism was a necessary stage on the road to socialism. And this, in practice, and even before the victory of Stalinism, meant that the increasing exploitation and impoverishment



of the working class was justified in the name of “developing the productive forces” towards a future communist society. The idea that as long as the Bolshevik party clung to power, the dictatorship of the proletariat still existed, had the same tragic and disastrous consequence as the identification of state capitalism with socialism or as a step towards it: the real defeat of the revolution, the triumph of the capitalist counter-revolution in “Soviet Russia” took place from the inside, disguised as the continuation of October, and as we have seen this has created the most damaging confusions within the working class worldwide. It was the objective basis for the great lie that Stalinism equals communism

1968-2011: the spectre of revolution still haunts the capitalist system



Nothing to lose but our chains: Indignados movement, Spain 2011

It’s one thing to draw the lessons from the defeat of the revolution. But can there be a new revolution in which they can be put into practice? Again, we can point to the irresolvable economic crisis, to the danger of war and self-destruction, to the devastation of the environment, to the rampant growth of criminality and the moral corrosion of social relations, and repeat confidently that communism is more than ever an objective necessity. Further: we can point to the increasingly global existence of the working class, to the growing interdependence of the world economy, and to decades of dizzying development in the means of communication, and insist on the objective possibilities for the unification of the world proletariat in defence of its common interests against capitalist exploitation. But the proletarian revolution is the first revolution in history which depends not only on the development of objective necessities and possibilities, but above all on the *subjective* capacity of an exploited class to understand the origins of its exploitation, and not only to defend itself but to develop a project, a perspective, a programme for the abolition of all exploitation. And this subjective dimension, while much of it may develop unseen, underground, in small minorities, cannot be sustained, nourished and extended without the development of massive movements of the proletariat.

And such movements have indeed appeared on the world stage in the last 50 years. The enormous heights attained by the revolutionary wave of 1917-23 were followed by many decades of counter-revolution, which showed its most brutal face in those countries where the revolution had risen the highest: in Russia with the victory of Stalinism, in Italy and Germany with the advent of fascism and Nazism. And this deadly triangle was completed by the rise of the Popular Fronts and of democratic antifascism. The combination of these forces succeeded in smothering the last outbreaks of proletarian resistance (as in Spain 1936-7) and marching the proletariat into the maws of the second imperialist world war; and for the two decades that followed the war, class conflict was held in check by the economic boom and the safety net of the welfare state, as well as by the new false choice between western “democracy” and eastern “socialism”.

But towards the end of the 1960s, as the post-war boom faded, as daily life under capitalism both in the west and the east revealed its real poverty and hypocrisy, as proxy wars between the two imperialist blocs continued to rage in Vietnam and Africa, a new generation of proletarians, which had not been through the defeats and traumas of its parents, began to question the normality of capitalist society. This questioning, which affected other layers of the population as well, would burst into the open with the huge general strike in France in May-June 1968, a movement which marked the end of the period of counter-revolution and which was the signal for an international wave of workers’ struggles on all continents. At its high point, the May 68 movement in France saw signs of the same intense political debates, on street corners, in schools, universities and workplaces, that John Reed had observed in Russia prior to October 1917. For the first time in decades, the

idea of replacing capitalism with a new society was being discussed seriously among significant minorities of workers and students, and one of the most important fruits of this ferment was a new generation of revolutionary political organisations.

The movement in France could only pose the question of revolution at the theoretical level. Capitalism was just at the beginning of its open crisis and the ruling class still had many political tricks up its sleeve over the next few years, not least the use of its left parties and trade unions as a false “opposition” to the system. But the waves of struggles that began in 1968 continued over the next two decades. Their high point was probably the movement in Poland in 1980, a genuine mass strike which gave rise to forms of organisation – the inter-factory strike committees – which brought to mind the workers’ councils of the revolutionary years. But despite this very advanced level of self-organisation, the Polish workers never raised the possibility of overthrowing the capitalist system. On the contrary, they were weighed down by the illusion that they were already living under a communist system and that their best hopes lay in the democratic forms of the capitalist west, with its parliaments and “free trade unions”. The workers in the west have a greater experience of the hollowness of these forms, but the fundamental problem they faced was not different from that of their class brothers and sisters in the eastern bloc: the difficulty of raising the struggle from the level of economic defence to that of a political offensive against capitalism.

The movements of the working class in the 70s and 80s did however have a very significant impact on the evolution of capitalist society. In the 1930s, when the outbreak of an open economic crisis encountered a working class in the throes of a profound historic defeat, there was no obstacle to capitalism’s drive towards war. By contrast, in the 70s and 80s, even though the push towards world war was very strong, the refusal of the working class to sacrifice itself for the interests of the national economy also meant that it would be unwilling to march towards another war. We are told by the experts of the bourgeoisie that, if a third world war never took place, it is because capitalism has learned the lessons from previous wars and has established international organisms like the EU or the UN to keep national rivalries in check. Or that the very existence of atomic weapons was the surest “deterrent” to world war. The idea that the struggle of the working class might be the real deterrent was quite outside the box of bourgeois political thought.

But the barrier to war erected by the proletariat was rarely built in a conscious manner. The inability of the bourgeoisie to mobilise the class for war was one thing, but the working class was equally unable to develop its own political alternative: the world revolution. As a result, since the end of the 80s we have been living through a kind of stalemate in the evolution of society, which is unable to move towards either of these outcomes. Against the background of a long drawn out and unsolvable economic crisis, this situation is condemning capitalism to rot on its feet. With the collapse of the two imperialist blocs, the prospect of world war has now been pushed even further into the distance, but the capitalist war drive continues and accelerates in a more chaotic, but no less dangerous dynamic.

This latest phase in the long decline of the capitalist system, the phase of capitalism’s decomposition, has created additional difficulties of the working class. The campaigns about the “death of communism” were one of the most evident expressions of the ability of the ruling class to turn the decomposition of its own system against the consciousness of the exploited class. Their central theme – the triumph of democracy over totalitarianism – proved once again that the notion that we live under the reign of “democracy” is one of the most powerful mystifications secreted by capitalist society and strenuously maintained by the ruling class. The same theme is being given a fresh injection by the more recent campaigns around the battle between populism and anti-populism, in which both camps sell themselves as expressing the “true will of the people”.

Meanwhile, the very social processes at work in this phase of decomposition continue to operate in a more insidious manner: the tendency of capitalist society to fragment into cliques and gangs at every level, the rise of all kind of irrational fears and fanaticisms, the spreading search for scapegoats...

These tendencies are deeply inimical to the development of international working class solidarity and the kind of global, historical thinking needed to grasp the real processes of capitalist society. And yet: despite the overall reflux in the class struggle since the end of the 80s, we continue to see important upsurges of the proletariat, even if the participants in such movements often do not recognise themselves as proletarians. In 2006, the student movement in France escaped the control of the official unions and, because it threatened to spread to the employed sector, the bourgeoisie was obliged to withdraw the CPE, the law aimed at

rapidly increasing the insecurity of employment. In 2011, in the wake of the revolts in North Africa, Israel and Greece, the “indignados” movement in Spain, like the French students in 2006, revived the memory of 68 by stimulating massive debates about the nature of capitalist society and its total lack of perspective. This was a movement that was very clear about its international nature and where the slogan of “world revolution” was becoming increasingly relevant amongst some small minorities. And, again as in the 2006 movement, the form of organisation adopted by the movement was the general assembly in the streets and the neighbourhoods, outside the official institutions of bourgeois society. In other words, a faint but definite echo of the soviet form of organisation. Of course these movements were short-lived and suffered from innumerable weaknesses and confusions, not least the ideology of democracy and citizenship which was ably exploited by leftist parties like Syriza and Podemos, with their refrain: “assemblies, yes, but let’s use them to regenerate our democratic life, increase participation in parliament and elections...” Sanders and Corbyn are selling the same fraud. But what’s essential about these movements is that they demonstrate that the proletariat is not dead, is still capable of raising its head, and that when it does, it is irresistibly drawn to the revolutionary traditions of its own past.

The proletariat has not said its last word. The changes in the composition of the working class, despite their negative effects up till now, also hide elements which are much more favourable to the perspective of revolution. The young proletarian generations who live in a situation that combines insecure employment with chronic unemployment can in time recognise themselves as part of a class which, as the Communist Manifesto puts it, “*shares the misery of the slave without the security of the slave*”, which “*has nothing to lose but its chains and a whole world to win*”. The present and future situation of the world proletariat more and more reveals what Marx identified as the foundations of its revolutionary nature, its capacity to destroy

capitalism and create communism:

- A class of bourgeois society which is alien to bourgeois society
- A class whose radical chains and universal suffering pushes it towards a radical and universal revolution
- A class which concentrates in itself all the sufferings of the other layers of society without benefiting from any of their advantages, and which can only emancipate itself by emancipating the whole of humanity
- An associated class which can organise society on the principle of association, which goes against the capitalist reign of universal commodification
- A class which can free human morality from its capitalist prison by emancipating the human body from servitude to the commodity and wage labour.

Long live October!

The memory of the October revolution can never really be effaced, any more than you can have capitalism without class struggle. In 1917, humanity was confronted with the choice between socialism or barbarism: either world proletarian revolution, or the destruction of civilisation, perhaps the destruction of humanity itself. In 2017 we are confronted with the same dilemma. Capitalism cannot be reformed, turned green, or given a human face. Its overthrow is long overdue, and any future revolution will not be able to succeed without drawing all the lessons of the gigantic experience our class went through in Russia, as well as in Germany, Hungary, Italy, and the rest of the world a hundred or so years ago. It is the task and responsibility of the minority of revolutionaries, of proletarian political organisations, to study, elaborate, and disseminate these lessons as deeply and as widely as possible.

International Communist Current, September 2017

Partial reading list of ICC articles on the Russian revolution and the international revolutionary wave.

All these texts, and many others, can be found on our website [en.internationalism.org](http://en.internationalism.org). Go to the headings ‘Theory and practice’ or ‘ICC press: International Review’.

- “October 1917, beginning of the proletarian revolution”, parts one and two, *International Review* 12 and 13, first and second quarters, 1978
- The Russian Revolution (part 1): “The first massive and conscious revolution in history” *International Review* no.12 - 1st quarter 1978
- “The Russian Revolution (part 2): The Soviets take power”, *International Review* no.72 - 1st quarter 1993
- “The Russian Revolution (part3): Isolation spells the death of the revolution”, *International Review* no.75 - 4th quarter 1993
- “70 years ago, the Russian Revolution: The most important experience of the world proletariat”, *International Review* no.51 - 4th quarter 1987
- “80 years since the Russian Revolution: The July Days and the vital role of the Party”, *International Review* no.90 - 3rd quarter 1997
- “80 years since the Russian Revolution: October 1917 - a victory for the working masses” *International Review* no.91 - 4th quarter 1997
- “The degeneration of the Russian Revolution”, *International Review* 3, 3rd quarter 1975

- “The lessons of Kronstadt”, *International Review* no. 3, 3rd quarter 1975

International revolutionary wave

- “Germany 1918-19 (i): Faced with the war, the revolutionary proletariat renews its internationalist principles”, *International Review* no.133 - 2nd quarter 2008
- “Germany 1918-19 (ii): From war to revolution”, *International Review* no.134 - 3rd quarter 2008
- “Germany 1918-19 (iii): Formation of the party, absence of the International”, *International Review* no.135 - 4th quarter 2008
- “Germany 1918-19 (iv): Civil War”, *International Review* no.136 - 1st quarter 2009
- “Germany 1918-19 (v): From Noske to Hitler”, *International Review* no.137 - 2nd quarter 2009
- “The Hungarian Revolution of 1919 (i)”, *International Review* no.139 - 4th quarter 2009
- “The Hungarian Revolution of 1919 (ii): The example of Russia 1917 inspires the workers in Hungary”, *International Review* no.144 - 1st quarter 2011
- “The Russian revolution echoes in Brazil, 1918-21”, *International Review* no. 151 - 1st quarter 2013

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