

Kronstadt Rebellion 90 Years On

Reasserting democracy from below

A number of Left groupings recently came together and formed the Democratic Left Front, which espouses a democracy from below. In a lesson from history **Shawn Hattingh** goes back to visit the Kronstadt rebellion where sailors came out to defend worker self-governance. He argues that at this point the Russian revolution lost its socialist democratic bearings and became an oppressive state.

Democracy plus socialism: this vision has inspired both the 1999 revised programme of the South African Communist Party, and the more recent Conference for a Democratic Left process.

While the Soviet model, exemplified by the Stalin period, is widely discredited, the Lenin/Trotsky years remain idealised. Often those involved in Left initiatives continue to see the early years of Bolshevik Communist Party rule in revolutionary Russia as a positive experience to copy in the quest for a participatory society. The argument goes that if it was not for the Civil War and the Soviet Union's isolation, Stalin would never have come to power and democratic socialism would have survived.

This gives the 90th anniversary of the Kronstadt Commune in Russia a special, present day significance. It provides an opportunity to look at arguments that identify democratic, revolutionary socialism with Leninism.

The Kronstadt anniversary also points to the importance of rediscovering a democratic form

of socialism: anarchism. Anarchism defended socialism-from-below, but rejected Bolshevism in favour of self-management and direct, council democracy. Anarchism is the belief that only workers, peasants and the poor can build socialism through self-organisation and direct democracy. These features are incompatible with Bolshevism.

KRONSTADT REBELLION

In March 1921, civilians and sailors at the largest naval base in Russia, Kronstadt, revolted against the Bolshevik state headed by Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky. During the battle thousands died, over 10 000 rebels were arrested and many executed and buried in mass graves whilst others were sent to concentration camps.

The Kronstadt rebels had demanded in the Petropavlovsk Manifesto:

- free and fair elections to the soviets;
- freedom of speech for workers, peasants, anarchists and socialists;
- free trade union activity;
- peasants to control land without wage labour.

These demands were drowned in blood. The Bolsheviks celebrated the crushing of Kronstadt and the road was open for Stalin to take sole power.

Until these events, the Kronstaders were hailed as the 'pride and glory' of the Russian Revolution. They played a leading role in the 1905 and 1917 revolutions. Yet it was these same sailors who revolted against the Bolshevik state. Following Lenin's claims, the Kronstaders were labelled 'counter-revolutionaries' who sought 'soviets without Bolsheviks' and capitalism.

In looking at the reasons for the revolt, however, it is important to examine the nature of the Russian Revolution, the role the Bolsheviks played, and the Kronstaders' aims.

REVOLUTIONARY SOVIETS EMERGE

The Russian Revolution began in February 1917 when workers, peasants and soldiers rebelled demanding bread, peace and freedom. The Tsarist regime collapsed, and a Provisional Government came into power promising parliamentary



democracy. Many workers and peasants, however, had gone far beyond wanting this and were moving towards a social revolution.

From February, soviets (worker, peasant and soldier councils) began springing up. The idea of soviets was popular amongst workers and peasants, who believed that they offered an opportunity to democratise society and create socialism-from-below.

Throughout 1917 workers also began to seize factories, and worker self-management became widespread. Across Russia, peasants were seizing land in a vast uprising; while soldiers began practising democracy and mutinied en masse. Before October, there was a real prospect that the state would be overthrown by direct democracy, not only politically but economically.

ROLE OF BOLSHEVIKS

Although the Bolsheviks espoused the need for the revolutionary emancipation of the working class, their basic belief was that workers on their own were incapable

of achieving a revolutionary consciousness. Lenin argued in 'What is to be Done?' and elsewhere, that workers, left to their own devices, would only fight for better working conditions. To solve this, the Bolsheviks claimed radical intellectuals, organised in a Party, must inject 'revolutionary consciousness' into the working class and lead it.

The Party should also capture state power, and operate a 'dictatorship of the proletariat'. Because the Bolsheviks viewed 'revolutionary consciousness' as identical to the Bolshevik Party line, all other forms of socialism, and parties, were seen as counter-revolutionary and anti-working class.

The 'dictatorship of the proletariat' therefore meant the dictatorship of the Party. Lenin argued that: 'the dictatorship of the proletariat cannot be exercised through an organization embracing the whole of that class ... It can be exercised only by a vanguard.'

In this vision, there was no need for contestation or debate as the Party had a right to sole power, no matter what the working masses did. The Bolsheviks also believed a centralised state was necessary, to nationalise and run all industries, and to educate the working class. These beliefs had a profoundly negative impact on the direction of the Russian Revolution once the Bolsheviks were in power.

The 1917 February revolution caught the Bolsheviks off guard. The Bolshevik idea that workers could not attain a revolutionary consciousness on their own proved wrong. This caused an ideological crisis for the Bolsheviks and they shifted back and forth between different positions throughout 1917/18, often depending on which position offered the best possibilities for seizing power and implementing their programme.

Initially the Bolsheviks supported the idea of a parliamentary

democracy as the maximum goal. As workers and peasants began carrying out the socialisation of land, and workers' self-management and demanding all power to the soviets, some Bolsheviks were driven in a more radical direction. Even Lenin flirted with council democracy. But overall Bolshevik theory remained unchanged, so, while now calling for 'All Power to the Soviets' the Bolsheviks tried to take control of the soviets as a step to state power

BOLSHEVIKS IN POWER

In October 1917, the Bolsheviks formed an alliance with anarchists and Left Socialist Revolutionaries to overthrow the Provisional Government. Many anarchists worked with the Bolsheviks, hoping this would lead to 'All Power to the Soviets'. They hoped the soviets would become organs of worker and peasant self-governance in a stateless socialist society.

These hopes were dashed. The day after the Provisional Government was overthrown, the Bolsheviks started concentrating power in their hands. Lenin appointed a cabinet, the Soviet of People's Commissars, dominated by Bolsheviks and headed by Lenin, Stalin and Trotsky. Remnants of the Tsarist state were incorporated into a new bureaucracy and the soviets were subordinated to this new power.

Within weeks, the Bolsheviks established a secret police: the Cheka which was under the direct control of its Central Committee, and whose purpose was to eliminate anarchists, rebellious workers, peasants and strikers. Freedom of speech was suppressed.

By early 1918, the Bolsheviks faced their first major challenge when they were defeated in elections to urban soviets. From that point the Bolsheviks purged the soviets and soviet

democracy was shut down because it threatened the Party. The Bolsheviks turned the soviets into rubber stamps, packed with handpicked stooges, implementing Party orders from above.

In March 1918 soviets were abolished in the military and officers of the old regime were drafted into the Red Army, under Party commissars.

This all began well before the Civil War broke out in May 1918. The war merely led to an intensification of the Bolsheviks' authoritarian means.

BOLSHEVIK'S ATTACK WORKERS & PEASANTS

The new Bolshevik state systematically attacked workers and peasants. The interests of the state and the popular classes openly diverged. Many workers wanted direct control over their factories and working lives, through factory committees. By 1918 they had begun to try to move towards coordinating the economy from below. The Bolsheviks wanted strict centralised state control of the economy to strengthen the state.

By June 1918, the Bolsheviks decreed the end of worker self-management and re-introduced hierarchies in workplaces by implementing a system of one-man management. Control was passed to appointed managers: former capitalists who became state bureaucrats.

The right to strike was ended, and unions became 'transmission belts' for state policy. Large sections of the economy were militarised and supplemented by forced labour camps. Land was nationalised and crops were forcefully requisitioned, including seed grain. The result was that starvation haunted Russia.

FIGHTING BACK

By 1918, workers and peasants started to resist. For example,

Ukrainian anarchist peasantry and working class took control of much of Russia's largest colony. Fighting for an anarchist-communist society, based on free soviets and communes, their Black Army resisted Bolshevik encroachments while also fighting off counter-revolutionary White Armies. Across the Russian empire, peasant Green Armies emerged, some reactionary, some revolutionary.

In the cities, waves of strikes broke out in 1918, 1919 and 1921, and were brutally suppressed. Besides demanding food, and better conditions, sections of workers also demanded freedom of speech and the release of working-class political prisoners. The Bolsheviks responded with tyranny: martial law was declared in Petrograd in early 1921 and strikers arrested. Hearing about the strike, the nearby Kronstadt sailors decided to send a delegation to investigate.

The Kronstadt delegation was horrified. When they returned, mass meetings were held to discuss what should be done. The goals of 1917 of land, bread, peace through soviet democracy were being trampled by the Bolsheviks. The excuse for Bolshevik repression, the Civil War, made no sense: the war had ended in November 1920.

The Kronstadters, through an open soviet process, put forward a set of demands – the Petropavlovsk Manifesto.

The Bolsheviks began suppressing Party dissidents infected with an 'anarcho-syndicalist deviation'. Lenin and Trotsky knew well that soviet democracy would end Bolshevik power. They believed that no Bolsheviks meant no revolution although Bolshevik actions had already destroyed the aims and gains of the 1917 Revolution.

The Bolshevik propaganda machine painted the Kronstadters as counter-revolutionaries. On the

eve of the Red Army attack on the base, Kronstadters were hoping that workers elsewhere in Russia would join them against the one-party state. This was a forlorn hope. Many Red Army soldiers were forced to fight under threat of death from the Bolsheviks.

CONCLUSION

When Kronstadt fell, the last embers of the revolution died. The Bolsheviks failed to realise that the state – an authoritarian structure that concentrates power in the hands of a small ruling class – cannot be used to create a socialist society.

Anarchists had long pointed out that a 'workers' state' was a contradiction in terms. It would simply be a one-party state, based on forced labour and state-capitalism. History proved them right.

The only way a socialist society could have been created in Russia, or anywhere else, was by workers and peasants themselves, based on worker self-management and direct democracy through organs of self-governance – in other words an anarchist-communist society. In the end it was not the Kronstadters who proved to be counter-revolutionaries but the Bolsheviks.

This lesson is more important than ever. People wanting to build democratic socialism need to be aware that the state itself is neither an ally of the popular classes nor an institution they can use. The masses need to build counterpower, outside and against the state and capital, to create a new society. We need to put faith in workers and the poor to bring genuine socialism about and the task of revolutionaries is to encourage this, not substitute for it. As the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin pointed out 'the authoritarian system of decrees in trying to impose freedom and equality obliterates both.' ^{LB}