

NOTES ON THEORY No. 6

THE SOVIET UNION-SOCIALIST OR NOT ?

In our previous article we showed that socialism is the only system in which the problems of the working class and other oppressed groups will be addressed.

Yet, many socialists are faced with the question: "But is there any country which exists today that can be called Socialist?" This is an important question. Many countries claim to be socialist - but are they? This question is also important because we can learn from the problems and successes nations have had while attempting a change to socialism, the mistakes made, and failures not to be repeated.

In this article we discuss Russia or the Soviet Union. This is the first in a series of articles which will include Eastern European countries, China, Vietnam, Cuba, Mozambique, Angola and Zimbabwe.

How did the revolution in the Soviet Union begin ?

Russia before the revolution was ruled by a Tsar or King. The Russian people were tired of poverty, war and corruption. They demanded a new society. On 22 January 1905, 200 000 striking workers in St. Petersburg marched to the Tsar's palace. Here the workers were met by the Tsar's troops who shot at the demonstrators.



Throughout 1905 the workers unsuccessfully challenged the

Tsar in a series of mass strikes. The workers paid dearly for their failure to defeat the old order. During 1905 and after, there was mass imprisonment, shootings, poverty and police terror - but workers learned from their defeat. They discovered from their own experience of organising strikes that they were able to manage the day-to-day running of society better than the rulers. In Petrograd (one of the major industrial cities of Russia) a workers council or Soviet was formed.

workers councils/soviets

The workers council was the first appearance of democratic power in Russia. How did it work? Workers would elect their representatives at workplaces and communities to discuss and decide plans for production, distribution and on political issues. Representatives had to be accountable to people who elected them. Workers had the right to recall their representatives at any moment.



The chairperson of the Petrograd Soviet explained: "The soviet is in reality an embryo of a revolutionary government. It organises street patrols to secure the safety of the citizens... It takes over... the post office, the telegraph and the railroads . . . It made an effort to introduce the eight-hour day . . . The first wave of the next revolution will lead to the creation of Soviets all over the country".

Kerensky

There were two revolutions in Russia in 1917. The first occurred

in February. It must have been very like the overthrow of the Shah of Iran in our own times. The Tsar's regime had lost the support of virtually the whole population, and was swept away by a vast uprising of workers, peasants and soldiers. Even many from the privileged class es wanted the Tsar to go.

To the new prime minister, Kerensky, the aim was the kind of society existing in Britain today - let the masses vote for whoever they will; let them have their toothless parliaments; let them have their one person vote; the real power would still rest with those who were born to wealth and privilege. Kerensky wanted to make Russia safe for the bosses to make their profits. The workers and peasants had other ideas. They hadn't fought and died in order to suffer more of the same only under another name.

For months there was this uneasy balance of power. First the huge workers' demonstrations and strikes would paralyse the government. Then that same government would be prodded by the bosses into putting the workers in their place with gun and baton. Victory had to fall to one side or the other.



socialist republic

In October, the breaking point came. Kerensky's government was by now totally discredited. On the 17th October armed workers stormed the Palace. The government which took power through the revolution of October 1917 was of a kind the world had never seen before - a workers' socialist republic.

WHAT IS SOCIALISM

PART 2



The peasants wanted to own the land and farm as they liked, free from landlords who demanded rents, taxes and produce.

The workers sensed their power and learned a new philosophy very different to the centuries-old ideas their peasant forefathers had accepted in the unchanging villages. They learned socialism. They wanted to decide how to use what they made. They wanted to elect their own managements. They wanted the marvellous new technology which was rising everywhere around them to be put at the service of every man, woman and child in Russia, not just the miserable, money-grabbing, employing class. The October Revolution was based on the Workers councils or Soviets which were formed throughout Russia. National decisions were made by delegates from local soviets to the "All Russian Congress of Soviets".

The October Revolution raised the hopes of workers and oppressed all over the world. Overnight the success of the revolution changed the size of the audience for socialist ideas. Before this, socialism only appealed to a small section of intellectuals and workers. After 1917 it appeared as a practical possibility to millions of people across the world. Empires felt threatened. Capitalism everywhere trembled!

bolsheviks

The party which led the revolution

was called the Bolshevik Party. How was it formed?. At a congress of the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP) in 1903 in London, there occurred a split. One group led by Lenin was called the Bolsheviks (majority-ites) the other group the Mensheviks (minority-ites). The split was about how the revolutionary party should be structured. Later the disagreements were bigger. From May to October 1917, an intense struggle developed between the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks. The Bolsheviks under the leadership of Lenin and Trotsky (who in May 1917 joined the Bolsheviks) argued for socialist or permanent revolution.

The Mensheviks argued that the Russian Revolution must first pass through stages. The Mensheviks argued that alliances must be formed with the liberal bourgeoisie (capitalists). Trotsky had this to say to the workers: "**Remember 3 commands : distrust the bourgeoisie; control your own leaders; and rely on your own revolutionary strength!**"



the revolution threatened

The new Socialist Republic was invaded by capitalist armies from many countries. These forces

joined up with some military generals of the Tsar. The Red Army was organised to defend the revolution. This war lasted from 1918-21.

The war proved very costly. It killed off a generation of the most politically conscious workers. It ruined Russia's economy. Apart from war deaths, some 9 million people perished from starvation alone.



stalin

In March 1922, Stalin was elected General Secretary of the Communist Party. Slowly Stalin planted his allies as secretaries throughout the Party organisation in order to gain control over it. Stalin worked at changes in the government structure.

Before Lenin's death in 1924, Lenin wrote a "Last Testament" which made one important demand: **Stalin must be removed as General Secretary.** The testament was suppressed.

bureaucracy

What is the bureaucracy? The bureaucracy were the factory managers, technicians, officials in the party and the various government departments, and military officials in the new state who had power, privilege and more money than the workers. These people had an interest in favouring change only if necessary to preserve their power. Stalin got most of his support from these bureaucrats.

WHAT IS SOCIALISM -

Lenin saw this growing bureaucratization as a potential cancer to the new workers' state. Stalin's entire strategy from 1923 to 1930 was built around developing alliances which could isolate Trotsky and his supporters inside the party, army and youth organisations.

party democracy

In October 1923 the struggle for party democracy had begun. Many Bolsheviks demanded democracy, freedom of criticism, debate and better economic planning. They formed the Left Opposition. Late in 1927, the leaders of the Left Opposition including Trotsky were expelled from the Central Committee. Others were expelled from the Communist Party or arrested for circulating Oppositional literature. On 7 November 1927, the Left Opposition attempts to appeal to the masses on the Tenth Anniversary of the October Revolution. Stalinist strong-arm gangs break-up the demonstrations. Trotsky was exiled.

with the Kuomintang Party. With some hesitation, the Chinese Communist Party accepted this. The Kuomintang Party later turned on the Chinese Communist Party and massacred tens of thousands of workers. Stalin and leaders after him advised many Communist Parties throughout the world to form such Popular Front alliances with disastrous consequences for the workers. The Soviet Union's foreign policy was not to help socialists the world over. It was to strengthen the bureaucracy in the Soviet Union. Stalin wanted socialism in one country.

the revolution betrayed

Inside the Soviet Union the working class were too exhausted after the wars and famine to adequately defend the Left Opposition. In the early 30's, Stalin launched a reign of terror against people who disagreed with him. By the end of

once said, "Stalinism is the syphilis (sexually transmitted disease) of the workers movement and it occurs everywhere."

Stalin believed that socialism could be won in one country. He believed that the **state** should plan and run all the factories and farms like one big, country - wide business. This has sometimes been called state-capitalism; others have called the situation a deformed workers' state.

Stalin believed that the state must make sure that the economy was run efficiently enough to compete with other industrialised countries. The plan to radically increase the number of farms and factories in a very short time was made by a few people in the party Head-Office. Workers' organisations, like independent unions were brought under party control and so became vehicles to carry out state policies. Unions became bodies to carry out party directives. All opposition was smashed ruthlessly.



foreign policy

Meanwhile, Stalin's bureaucratic policies gained ground, even internationally. In Britain a General Strike took place. Stalin instructed the trade-union leaders who support him to end the strike. In China, Stalin instructed the Chinese Communist Party to have an alliance

1938 the Stalinist Terror had claimed 3 million victims. In order to stabilise his regime, Stalin was to kill more socialists than the Tsar and all capitalist states put together. Tens of thousands of supporters of genuine socialism were put into prison or labour camps.

In 1940 Trotsky was killed in exile by an agent hired by Stalin. Trotsky

The Soviet Union today

Today in the Soviet Union the standard of living is higher than before. Education and health care is freely available. Every worker is guaranteed the right to work and mass unemployment that exists in many countries is not present in

SOVIET UNION CONTINUED

the Soviet Union. The labour camps is a powerful but distant memory for most Soviet people. Leaders after Stalin like Krushchev have condemned some of the excesses of Stalin.

Besides these positive changes, we see that the Soviet Union still put pressure on the Polish state to crack-down on workers there. Soviet society remains undemocratic and continues to be ruled by a bureaucratic elite which jealously safeguards its power and privileges. As far as democracy is concerned, the Soviet Union has not returned to the stage which existed during Lenin's lifetime.

LESSONS FOR US

The Russian Revolution and its aftermath provides us in South Africa with many rich lessons. Among the most important are:

1) Democracy

Democracy is inseparable from socialism. What happened in the

Soviet Union is something we must avoid. The dangers of Stalinism is always present. Even now we see that democratic debate is not tolerated in some quarters of the liberation movement. The most extreme example of this is the use of the necklace method against some comrades involved in the liberation struggle. Different points of view on the road forward is healthy and differences must be debated and solved in a democratic, comradely way.

Decisions must not be taken from the top down. The leadership must be accountable to its members. Trade unions and community organisations must not become transmission belts for carrying out directives from elsewhere

2) Two-stage Struggle/National Democratic Struggle

The debates between the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks before the revolution is relevant for us. We remember that the Mensheviks argued for a 2-stage struggle: first the struggle

for national democracy and then for socialism. The Bolshevik answer to this is also true for our situation. It is dangerous to separate the struggle into two. The question that can be asked is: What would prevent a group of people coming into power in the first phase from preventing the next phase occurring?

We remember also that Stalin argued for a Popular Front alliance in China and other countries, like Spain. This kind of alliance resulted in disastrous consequences for workers in those countries.

3) Level of Development of Productive Forces

Many of the problems in the Soviet Union resulted because of the small number of workers and the small number of industries at the time of the revolution. In South Africa, on the other hand, the majority of the people are the working class. The level of production is also high. We have an abundance of goods and resources. **Therefore genuine socialism is a real possibility.**

INTERNECINE VIOLENCE CONTINUES

Political killings have become an everyday occurrence in our society. Activists are being killed daily by reactionary groups and organisations. Tragically, there are also numerous instances in which political activists within the liberation movement are being killed in the *name of our struggle!*

Over the past few months, the majority of attacks have been made on members of the Azanian People's Organisation, the Azanian Youth Organisation, the Azanian Students Movement and the Azanian National Youth Unity. The homes of these comrades have been petrol-bombed and various other attacks have been made on their lives. On the 3/5/87, Sandile Leeuw, an Azayo member, was on his way home in Soweto. He was accosted by so-called 'Comrades', who stoned him, stabbed him with a garden fork, shot him and then

'necklaced' him for no reason other than that he was a member of Azayo. This barbarism, together with many other such horrifying atrocities committed, is a clear statement that the broad liberation movement in our country has failed to control, discipline and give clear direction to the youth.

The Khmer Rouge in Kampuchea (Cambodia) are an example of youth who had fought and achieved liberation, but who were misdirected and went on to inflict mass murder on their own people. This was a direct result of a lack of accountability and internal democracy under the control of the working class and peasants. The youth are a powerful force for change, but they have to be guided and disciplined by political organisation totally committed to the principle of democracy and socialist practice under the leadership of the working class.

The way in which we see our struggle, the different strategies and tactics which we employ, are difficult questions which all of us have to address. Solutions are not easy, and can only be achieved through democratic debate and socialist practice. With this in mind, no one organisation can hold that they are the sole bearers of truth. All political organisations within the broad liberation movement have a right to exist.

If these crimes are being committed now, one dreads to consider what would happen once the revolution takes place. The leadership of all political organisations in the liberation movement must take a public stance as well as practical steps to end this internecine violence. Failure to do this will assist the repressive machinery of the state, and will sow the seeds of a future civil war.