THE POLITICAL LESSONS OF THE OCTOBER REVOLUTION BY PHIL SHARPE

Introduction

The centenary of the October revolution will result in many articles. Some of them will be very critical, and others will be merely an expression of support for this event. We want to promote an analysis that is more substantial than uncritical glorification and the re-writing of history. Instead we aim to establish the most important political lessons of the October revolution from the viewpoint of the attempt to realise genuine and democratic socialism. The Democratic Socialist Alliance supports the October revolution, but we are aware that in terms of its theory and practice the concrete expression of the revolution always had serious flaws and problems. We wish to outline these limitations whilst still defending the historical validity of the October revolution. The fact that a hundred years have occurred since this event indicates that is possible to apply the wisdom of hindsight, and so avoid being defined as either an uncritical supporter or alternatively as a hostile opponent. It could be argued that Karl Kautsky has already carried out exhaustive criticism of the October revolution in terms of the defence of the standpoint of democracy as against the application of dictatorship. (1) This approach has its merits, but his work is written by someone who is hostile to the revolution and so does not consider that it had any chance of success. In contrast, our approach is to suggest that if the policies we advocate had been applied it would have been possible to undermine the development of Stalinism.

The primary problem for the Soviet regime was that because of unfavourable conditions the attempt to develop the Commune state was being undermined by repressive policies, the necessities of war, and the overall isolation of the revolution. It could have been possible to realise a more successful revolutionary regime, and so overcome the limitations expressed by the utilisation of coercion that undermined the generation of advance towards the realisation of the emancipation of the workers and peasants. Indeed one important problem was that the policy of war communism meant that the peasants were considered as being antagonistic to the aims of the regime, and so they were no longer considered as indispensable allies of the economic objectives of the regime. This process of alienation of the peasants from the aims of the state was also being created in the relations between the workers and the state. The state was becoming a guardian of the economy created by the aftermath of the revolution.(2) The beginning of this process of the alienation of the workers and peasants from the state was created by the unpopular treaty with German imperialism, and the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly.(3) But the primary aspect of this process of degeneration was the decline of the democratic and popular character of the Soviets and the failure to develop viable forms of workers control.(4) This meant that the possibility to promote genuinely emancipatory aspects of a new form of society were being compromised by the restrictions imposed by the actions of the state. Bukharin defended this situation with his view that the proletarian state was the most active expression of the generation of socialism via the role of nationalisation and the beginnings of planning. (5)

By the middle of 1918, Lenin was already expressing doubts about the ability of the working class to organise and administer society. The optimism of the booklet 'State and Revolution' was over. (6) The result of these developments was that Lenin had effectively defined the dictatorship of the proletariat as the rule of the party by 1919. (7) The context for this justification of elitism was the draconian requirements of civil war, growing unrest within the working class and peasantry, and the deteriorating economic situation. This crisis situation was politically expressed by the end of the unity between the Bolsheviks and the Left Social Revolutionaries in 1918, and the systematic beginning of Red Terror. Increasingly during 1918 the Soviets ceased to be an expression of democratic popular activity of the working class and instead were bureaucratised by the domination of the Bolsheviks. (8)

Why did this process of political degeneration occur so quickly? It could be argued that the Bolsheviks established a principled relationship with the Soviets during 1917, and this development enabled a genuine process of revolutionary change to occur. The character of the revolution was based on 'All Power to the Soviets'. Hence it would be a caricature of events to suggest that what had occurred was merely a coup. However, the Bolsheviks were already undergoing a serious political crisis caused by the serious defeat inflicted on them by the Soviet elections of the spring of 1918. But the major problem was the introduction of war communism in 1918, which justified the armed seizure of grain from the peasantry. This policy justified bureaucratic and repressive measures in relation to agriculture, and was carried out alongside extensive nationalisation and the end of the attempt to establish workers control of production. (9) The problem with war communism was that it was a policy which underestimated the importance of the changes that had occurred with the development of the process of land reform in 1917. This had led to the growth of the middle peasantry, and the diminishing influence of the kulak and the capitalist farmer. The result was the development of small-scale and self-sufficient farming, and therefore the only basis to promote trade with the city was by means of incentives and not by measures of compulsion: “In that case, one must ask whether the New Economic Policy or something very much like it, rather than being the retreat that Lenin called it, was actually the only democratic policy that could have been implemented.”(10)

In other words the illusion of the Bolsheviks that it was possible to establish socialism by methods of compulsion led to economic problems and the increasing alienation of the peasantry from the revolutionary regime. The result of this situation was not the reversal of policy as an expression of the influence of the discontent of the peasants, and instead the justification of the view that the opposition to the approach of war communism was caused by the activity of the kulaks. (11) Only the development of mass peasant discontent led to the ultimate reversal of policy in 1921. This disaffection of the peasants went along widespread opposition to the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly in 1918. For some reason the Bolsheviks did not recognise that their strong vote in elections to the Constituent Assembly indicated the powerful support for the urban areas for the revolution. They could have utilised this development in order to propose coalition government with the Socialist Revolutionaries who did well in the rural areas. Instead of this compromise possibility they instead effectively dissolved the Assembly in terms of the pretext that the Soviets represented a superior form of popular democracy. (12) An alternative to this intransigence would have been to try and achieve a compromise form of government based on the unification of the role of the Soviets and the Constituent Assembly. Of course, it is possible that negotiations of this kind would not have been successful, but it would then have been possible to blame the Social Revolutionaries for this impasse. Instead the rigid policies of the Bolsheviks only generated the alienation of the peasants from the revolutionary regime, and this development was intensified by the introduction of war communism. It was the inflexibility of the Bolsheviks that led to the effective end of the worker-peasant alliance and so undermined the popular basis of the regime. This meant coercion became the increasing basis to uphold an increasingly isolated regime.

If the Bolsheviks had introduced credible and sensible economic and political measures the result could have been the successful creation of a worker and peasants alliance. This process would have been appropriate in order to create a popular regime with majority support; this would represent the most favourable situation for waiting for the development of international revolution that could have enhanced the material basis of the possibility for socialism. Instead the inflexibility and wrong policies of the Bolsheviks meant the creation of a regime with minority support, and this could ultimately only uphold itself in terms of the role of coercion: “What is politically not unacceptable from a revolutionary democratic point of view is the type of gambling that involves highly voluntaristic social and economic policies. Given the economic backwardness of Russian society, such policies could not possibly have been carried out without the systematic mass coercion and oppression of at least a major part of the exploited and oppressed classes (e.g., the peasantry). Again, the notion that democratic working class rule could survive in such a situation is surely utopian.”(13)

The point being made is that unfavourable circumstances did not preclude the possibility of introducing alternative economic and political policies which could have produced majority support for the revolutionary regime. In these circumstances the implementation of coercion could have been lessened, and restricted to the military purpose of civil war. But the theoretical flaws of the Bolsheviks, who equated war communism with the advance of socialism, facilitated the introduction of policies which led to the role of compulsion and coercion. This does not mean that a minority regime is in and of itself problematical. It may be necessary, as Lenin was aware, to support the Brest Litovsk treaty despite popular opposition. (14) What is being criticised is policy errors that could have been avoided if the influence of dogma had been overcome. In this context the demise of workers control was very controversial. Lenin always considered that the major institutional aspect of the promotion of a new society would be the role of the Soviets in relation to the formation of the Commune state. Hence workers control was understood to be an expression of the role of the factory committees, and was often considered to be a syndicalist deviation. Furthermore, after the revolution it was argued that the working class was influenced by localism and so was unable to establish wider social goals in relation to the requirements of production. In other words the workers were not considered to have the cultural and administrative capacity to organise production. Lenin considers that there is no alternative than to introduce one man management: “In regard to the....significance of individual dictatorial powers from the point of view of the specific tasks of the present moment, it must be said that large scale machine industry – which is precisely the material source, the productive source, the foundation of socialism – calls for absolute and strict unity of will, which directs the joint labours of hundreds, thousands and tens of thousands of people. The technical, economic and historical necessity of this is obvious, and all those who have thought about socialism have always regarded it as one of the conditions of socialism. But how can strict unity of will be ensured? By thousands subordinating their will to the will of one.”(15)

The problem with this argument is that it becomes additional justification for the organisation of society by an elite and consequently dismissing the alternative of working class administration of production. The process of nationalisation of the economy went alongside the undermining of workers control and instead supported the establishment of traditional forms of management. But it was not inefficiency that led to localism, but instead economic scarcity that led to the hoarding or resources. The point is that the Bolshevik government was never concerned to promote workers control in terms of the role of factory committees, and instead used the trade unions in order to undermine the role of economic democracy. Hence the aim of the Soviet government was to replace workers control with increasingly hierarchical forms of management: “In the last analysis, the key political problem was that Lenin and the mainstream of the Bolsheviks, or for that matter, the Mensheviks, paid little if any attention to the need for a transformation and democratization of the daily life of the working class on the shop floor and in the community.”(16) Hence Lenin did not elaborate the importance of workers control when envisaging the character of socialist society. There was never an attempt to connect the role of the Soviets with the factory committees and unions in relation to considering the functioning of socialism. Instead the conception of socialism was connected to the role of the state, and the importance of nationalisation. This emphasis was enhanced during war communism, and the importance of one man management was increasingly defended. Such a perspective was connected to a modest conception of the role of the trade unions in order to promote the realisation of production targets. The trade unions became generally conceived as the transmission belts for the economic targets of the party, and their capacity to defend the independent interests of the workers was only given secondary consideration. Lenin's view that trade unions should defend the workers against the interests of the state was effectively a formality. Only a few people like Osinsky articulated in a principled manner the necessity for factory committees of the workers in order to administer their workplaces.

The Bolsheviks also utilised the fact of private ownership of newspapers in order to restrict the publication of newspapers. By the end of the civil war most publications had been effectively banned, apart from party literature. Widespread censorship was also introduced for books. The ideological justification for this censorship activity was that there was one revolutionary standpoint which could be most effectively upheld by means of banning and restricting the promotion of reactionary views. This standpoint is unprincipled because it denies the fact that opinions within a class, or society in general, are diverse and so there are no objective criteria that can justify bans and restrictions. Instead the criteria of class is utilised in order to justify censorship. This effectively means that the level of political freedom is less than that which is exercised within an advanced bourgeois democracy. It is possible to argue that the period of civil war may justify some limitations on press freedom, but the general situation should be that the rights and access to the utilisation of the press should be extended and not restricted. This point can only be emphasised in the period of the development of the internet and world wide web.

The most controversial policy in relation to the Bolshevik regime refers to the role of state coercion. To what extent was the utilisation of repression justified by the fact of civil war, and to what extent was it an outcome of the authoritarian tendencies of Bolshevik ideology? The Cheka was founded in December 1917 to tackle the issue of subversion against the state, and it became an instrument for widespread coercion in relation to suppressing the attempt by the Left Social Revolutionaries to overthrow the Bolshevik regime in 1918. The utilisation of repression in order to undermine this revolt was understandable, but the Cheka also became an instrument in order to repress individual dissent and expression of oppositional views. They were responsible for putting people into prison and labour camps without the prior procedure of trail, and the utilisation of the Red Terror was used in order to suppress opposition to war communism. In other words the role of coercion became part of the daily life of Soviet society under Lenin and was even used against the Left wing of the Mensheviks despite their critical support for the Soviet government. (17)

It is perfectly legitimate for a revolutionary government to be prepared to repress a counter-revolutionary uprising after the realisation of political power by a socialist regime. Indeed any bourgeois political order would maintain armed forces for military operations, or in response to civil disorder. In this context the role of state coercion would not be considered as bringing about the demise of democracy and individual dissent. However, when state repression becomes a regular occurrence, as under the Bolshevik regime, the result is the repudiation of popular democracy and the undermining of civil liberties. The constant resort to the forces of the Cheka meant it was impossible to conduct daily life without the threat of repression being undertaken by the secret police. Indeed, it could be argued that the role of the Cheka means that the state was no longer subordinated to the popular forces of society, and instead the state has acquired power and domination over society. This situation is an indication that the social formation does not represent a healthy workers state. Instead special armed forces are required in order to maintain the stability and durability of the Soviet regime. The repressive norms of political and daily conduct were at variance with those that would be expected for a genuinely popular and democratic society. Indeed a regime that expected to function without resort to terror would not have created the Cheka, and the utilisation of coercive state intelligence would have been restricted to the arena of civil war. Some level of coercion would be expected in terms of the civil war conflict, but the creation of a secret police in order to carry out systematic repression of the general population would have been something that represented a complete contradiction for a society that was aiming to construct socialism.

Similar points can be made about the failure to construct a legal system. The very revolutionary character of the regime was utilised in order to oppose the creation of a legal order based on an independent judiciary and the principle of innocence before proven guilty. Hence the very conception of human and legal rights was replaced by the vague notion of revolutionary class justice. But the result of these innovations was that court procedure was not at the highest level of impartiality and fairness. (18) This situation did not mean that the legal procedures of Leninism and Stalinism were identical. Stalinism meant systematic bias in the legal system in order to implement the whims of a despot. But the legal regime of Leninism was still based on the rejection of the juridical advances of bourgeois democracy. The justification of class bias was no substitute for an impartial legal system. Instead of undermining the advances of Western legal systems it would have been preferable for the revolutionary regime to adopt and copy their procedures. However, ultimately this was an unrealistic aim because the system was based on reliance on the role of terror. This situation meant the utilisation of impartial forms of law could not be realised.

In other words the systematic application of terror and coercion, and the rejection of genuine economic and political democracy, meant that the regime could not be defined in terms of a principled attempt to promote socialism. However this did not mean that the Soviet government was unprincipled, or merely a cynical attempt to impose the rule of an elite in the name of the people. Instead the revolution led by the Bolsheviks was genuinely proletarian in terms of its aims and interests. The major aim was to construct a Commune state, which meant working people would administer the state in the interests of the whole of society. Lenin declared at the Fourth Congress of Soviets that: “Yes, our people have a very heavy burden to bear, the burden they have themselves taken up; but a people that has been able to establish Soviet power cannot perish. Again I repeat – there is not a single politically conscious socialist, not a single worker among those who think over the history of the revolution, who can dispute the fact that Soviet power – despite all the defects and that I know only too well and fully appreciate – is the highest type of state, the direct successor to the Paris Commune.”(19)

But the reluctant understanding that the revolution may be isolated for a considerable period quickly dilutes and compromises this conception of the role of the Commune state. Instead the Commune state is re-defined as the state of the vanguard – the party – which must promote the possibility of socialism against the supposed disorganisation of the petty peasant owner. In this context the development of socialism becomes a task of the proletariat learning from the capitalist experts: “For socialism is not a figment of the imagination, but the assimilation and application by the proletarian vanguard, which has seized power, of what has been created by the trusts. We, the party of the proletariat, have no other way of acquiring the ability to organise large scale production on trust lines, as trusts are organised, except by acquiring it from first class capitalist experts.”(20) The perspective of Soviet participatory democracy being the basis of the state is now effectively rejected. Instead the state is defined as the party, and the aim is to develop the productive forces in technocratic terms and without the application of workers control. It is effectively admitted that the dictatorship of the proletariat will be a minority regime, and therefore compulsion and instruction will be required in order to realise its goals. Hence the state is the instrument of the aims of the working class, but it is no longer the state of the working class.

This demise of the popular character of the regime means that the rationale is being elaborated that will accept terror as being an instrument of the aims of the state. This is the outcome of the fact that the dictatorship of the proletariat whether at the level of work or political structures is exercised by individuals. (21) The point is that without the legitimacy of popular democracy means that the carrying out of the decisions of the state requires compulsion, and this becomes the expression of terror in 1918. Both war communism, and the decisions of the Soviet government, require the application of coercion, and the result is that the formation of the Cheka is reinforcement for this situation in which policy requires the application of the force by the state. Hence the loss of confidence by the Bolsheviks in the working class soon after the revolution means that they conceive the possibility to maintain state power in terms of the rule of the state over society. The instruments of this rule are no longer the Soviets, whose elections are rigged by the Bolsheviks, and instead they rely on the role of the Cheka and the repressive role of war communism. The depth of the political crisis was indicated when Bukharin the left critic of the Brest Litovsk treaty became an uncritical supporter of war communism. His view that the state created socialism had become the effective ideology of the Bolsheviks. The fact that this approach was a regression from the standpoint of 1917 was not recognised. Hence the Workers Opposition of 1920 only partially called for the reintroduction of the politics of the period of the revolution. This ideological crisis meant that it was left to Martov, a Left wing leader of the Mensheviks, to reconstruct a revolutionary programme for socialism. (22)

However, it is possible that the introduction of the New Economic Policy could have led to a new constructive period in the history of Bolshevism, and so led to the avoidance of Stalinism. The NEP could have resulted in the revival of the worker-peasant alliance because of the concessions made to the peasantry concerning trade. This development would have been connected to the regeneration of the peasant soviets, and the encouragement of the prospect of popular democracy. Workers would also have been motivated to produce goods for the countryside. The economic basis would have been provided for the creation of political stability until the development of the international revolution occurred despite its prolonged character. Lenin provided the justification for this approach when in a speech in 1921 he admitted that war communism had important limitations and the aim of a direct transition to communism was flawed. (23) It was admitted that the objective material conditions did not exist for communism, and instead capitalism under the supervision of the state must be cultivated. But this development would be a process of involvement of the role of the state, the workers and peasants. The point is the influence of commodity production cannot be overcome by what he defines as 'frontal attack'. Instead the involvement of the workers, and the consent of the peasants, must be obtained if the economic conditions to promote communism are to be advanced. The immediate aim is to recreate the proletariat which has been undermined by the disruption of the civil war years. The state has to utilise the role of capitalism – private trade – in order to create the material condition for social advance. This perspective represents a process of consultation and the end of compulsion and repression: “The whole question is who will take the lead. We must face this issue squarely – who will come out on top? Either the capitalists succeed in organising first – in which case they will drive out the Communists and that will be the end of it. Or the proletarian state power, with the support of the peasantry, will prove capable of keeping a proper capitalism along state channels and to create a capitalism that will be subordinate to the state and serve the state.”(24)

Lenin is not afraid of the prospect of the development of state regulated capitalism if this could mean increasing the influence of the ultimate aim of socialism which is to be advanced in terms of the role of consent and not coercion. However, Samuel Farber has indicated, this NEP turn was not accompanied by the necessary political proposals for the restoration of democracy. Hence he argued that a New Political Policy should also have been introduced, and this would have included the end of the banning of all parties that accepted the Soviet system such as the Menshevik Internationalists. (25) The labour camps should have been closed, and the Cheka placed under stricter judicial supervision. The holding of free and fair Soviet elections would have increased the support of the non-Bolshevik socialist organisations, and so negotiations should have been held to form an all Socialist government which was accountable to the Soviets. This process would have been based on an acceptance that the aims of the Communist International were not to be compromised, and the NEP was to be continued.

Farber argues that the failure to accept this approach was because the Bolsheviks under Lenin never overcame their Jacobin limitations and adherence to rule by a revolutionary elite. This has some truth, but his standpoint also underestimates the possibilities that NEP represented for the democratic evolution of the Bolshevik regime. Lenin outlined that it would not be possible to create economic improvements and the realisation of connected aims without free political discussion: “There must be collective discussion, but individual responsibility. At every step we suffer from our inability to apply this principle. The New Economic Policy demands this line of demarcation should be drawn with absolute sharpness and distinction. When the people find themselves under new economic conditions they immediately discuss what would come of it, and how things should be reorganised. We could not have started anything without this general discussion because for decades and centuries the people have been prohibited from discussing anything, and the revolution could not develop without a period in which people everywhere hold meetings to argue about these questions.”(26) If Lenin was serious about this commitment to open and free discussion about economic issues, the process of political meetings and participation could not be limited to these aspects. Increasingly people would also have discussed political questions, and the pressure for relaxation of the political system would also become unstoppable. Hence the very fact that participation in the process of economic decision making was accepted by Lenin meant that the prospect to transform the political system would also been generated. The point is that Lenin is equating the introduction of the NEP with the end of coercion as the basis of economic policy. This acceptance of change means that modification of the political system will become raised. Unfortunately this possibility was never realised because the party became preoccupied with the struggle between the various factions, and especially Stalinism versus Trotskyism. Hence NEP was of a temporary character, and the political system continued to uphold one party rule. The promise of Lenin's NEP was not established because of the tragic fact his legacy was never properly understood, not even by Bukharin. The victory of Stalin meant the promise that NEP could create a new democratic form of socialism was rejected, and instead the methods of economic coercion were reintroduced in the name of modernisation.

THE CONTEMPORARY LESSONS OF THE OCTOBER REVOLUTION

The most important lesson that can be made from the October revolution is that the formation of a single party state as the outcome of a revolutionary process of change is unacceptable and unprincipled. This does not mean that a particular party might not become the most important expression of leadership for revolutionary change because of its superior capacity for leadership, theory and understanding of strategy. But these qualities should not become the pretext to justify the repression of other parties in the immediate post-revolutionary period. We have learnt from the very experience of the Russian revolution that single party rule can justify only repression and despotism. But most importantly the generation of a monopoly of political power will result in the denial of the free expression of different viewpoints. The view that the single revolutionary party can represent what is historically necessary in order to create socialism has been totally discredited by the experience of Stalinism. However we may define Stalinism it represented a degeneration that meant the possibility to develop an authentic socialist society was undermined. Hence political and intellectual freedom is a vital aspect of any system that aims to create communism. This condition means freedom for various political parties to function including those that support the restoration of capitalism. We have to have the historical confidence that a genuinely successful and democratic socialist society will not promote support for the restoration of capitalism. If this aim does become popular it will be because the attempt to promote the realisation of socialism has become problematical, because of economic limitations such as the inability to meet needs and provide sufficient goods. However, it is to be hoped that the development of a functioning industrial democracy will enable these issues to be resolved without the prospect of the restoration of capitalism occurring.

It could be argued that acceptance of the prospect of the restoration of capitalism represents a concession to bourgeois ideology. However, if this possibility was not accepted then the options available under the socialist system would be restricted. This would mean the unnecessary restriction of political freedom, and the ultimate possibility of the formation of one party rule. It could be argued that the present system of bourgeois democracy does not allow for the possibility of transition to socialism. This is true, and is why revolution will still be required in order to generate the potential for socialism. But the point is that the political system under socialism should be more democratic than what is apparent under capitalism. The political character of bourgeois democracy is designed in order to maintain the economic system of capitalism, and to preclude any other options being realised. This type of restriction should be rejected under socialism, and so the democratic right to support the reintroduction of capitalism should not be repressed. However, it is to be hoped that socialism will be genuinely democratic and economically effective, and so there will be no rational and logical reason for the majority of people to aspire for its re-introduction.

The success of the revolutionary change may result in the development of counter-revolution. It is to be hoped that this prospect of armed revolt may be overcome by the utilisation of the role of a standing army or armed militia. In other words the creation of a special organ of terror should be rejected, and the role of organised coercion in order to maintain public order should be rejected. People should be encouraged to utilise the free press and internet in order to express their opinions. In other words society will be very democratic, and it is to be hoped that this fact will meant people do not resort to armed force in order to exert political influence. The prospect to change the composition and character of the government will be decided by the role of democratic annual elections, which will be conducted according to the principles of proportional representation. There will also be the right of recall of those that have been elected to the legislative organ.

It is likely that the process of revolutionary change will not occur in terms of the election of a Parliamentary government because this institution is generally in favour of the existing system. Instead a mass movement of the working class is likely to create workplace political organisations that elect representatives. These organs of popular democracy will attempt to overthrow the existing system and create a new political regime with the aim of promoting the realisation of a socialist society, which means the interests of working people and material needs and the general welfare is ensured. One of the immediate problems that this revolutionary regime will have to tackle is the problem of the division of political sovereignty between Parliament and the workplace political institutions. Lenin concluded that it was principled to dissolve the Constituent Assembly because the Soviets represented a higher form of political democracy within the dictatorship of the proletariat. He concluded: “Every direct or indirect attempt to consider the question of the Constituent Assembly from a formal, legal point of view, within the framework of ordinary bourgeois democracy and disregarding the class struggle and civil war would be a betrayal of the proletariat's cause, and the adoption of the bourgeois standpoint.”(27) This conclusion would be anachronistic in relation to the political conditions of the present. On the one hand parliamentary institutions are centuries old, and have the support of many people, who would regard their disbandment as an anti-democratic act. On the other hand, the workplace institutions express the forces of the emerging revolutionary power. Hence it would be necessary to decide the future of this tense relationship in terms of the resolution of the problematical co-existence of these two forms of conflicting democracy. One possible resolution is to hold a referendum concerning their relationship, or to agree that the government should represent the workplace institutions with Parliament as an advisory organisation. Whatever is decided, the possibility to change this political relationship should always be possible under the constitution that is adopted. Elections to Parliament could also be held soon after the workplace organisations have come to power in order to try and obtain majority support within Parliament for the revolution.

Whatever the outcome of the discussions about the relationship between the workplace organisations and Parliament, the rights of political parties will be upheld and a constitution will be adopted that provides legal status to these rights. Hopefully the conflicting claims of bourgeois democracy and popular democracy will be resolved by means of negotiation and compromise rather than by the utilisation of armed force and civil war. Hence the representatives of capital will accept that the revolutionary transformation was a genuine expression of the popular will, and so recognise that change to reverse this development has to come about by means of electoral struggle and peaceful methods. If civil war does occur, the revolutionary government will do its utmost to ensure that civil liberties are not undermined, and that the importance of military defence does not result in the justification of dictatorship and coercion. The revolutionary government has an interest in ensuring that a peaceful situation is maintained after the successful struggle for power because this will ensure the most optimal political conditions in which to build socialism.

It could be argued that the most difficult aspect of promoting the success of socialism is the realisation of economic tasks. The ability of capital to supervise production and the generation of wealth has led many working people to question their own ability to organise and administer an economy. Furthermore, Capital has responded to the challenge posed by alternatives in order to adapt to them and so perpetuate its duration as Meszaros explains: “To sum it up in one sentence: the transition to socialism has become incomparably more complicated in view of the fact that capital, in response to the challenge presented by the development of the socialist movement, acquired a 'new rationality' as a form of self-defence and a way of counter-acting or neutralizing the gains of its adversary.”(28) In this context, capital is able to assume forms within the socialist mode of production that undermine its functioning and realisation of the overcoming of the alienation of labour. The result is the specific reproduction of the domination of capital within the relations of production of post-capitalist societies. It is only possible to overcome this problem in terms of the development of genuine industrial democracy, which means that the imperatives of capital can be overcome by the participatory role of labour. However, there is an ideological problem in that labour is often reluctant to assume the initiative in the relations of production because of the influence of bourgeois political economy. It is accepted that only the domination of capital can ensure the most effective utilisation of resources and generate the highest quality of goods. Hence the possibility to develop the capacity of labour to accept that it is able to utilise economic resources in the most effective manner is very complicated. This undermining of the acceptance of the domination of capital requires an ideological revolution combined with the practical role of labour in organising the economy. Hence nationalisation of the economy by the state is not sufficient. This situation could become the basis for a new form of the durability of capital if the management continue to dictate to labour concerning productive tasks. Meszaros describes the situation in the USSR in which: ”An absolutely unquestionable, de-personalized political authority – the party of the party-state – must be superimposed over the individual political personnel under the post-capitalist rule of capital, articulated in the form of the strictest hierarchical command structure, orientated towards the maximal politically extraction of surplus labour.”(29)

Therefore the question as to whether labour can acquire the ability and confidence to overcome the alienating influence of capital is the problematical historical question. We know from history that proletarian revolution is possible, and that the political power of working people can be established despite terrible flaws and distortions. What we do not know is whether a socialist economy can be constructed because of the problems imposed by the ideological influence of capital and the attraction of new hierarchical forms that result in the renewal of the influence of capital. However instead of being pessimistic, and so accommodating to the very historical claims of capital, we can instead advocate what we know to be the most principled possibility to overcome the domination of capital within the relations of production, which is the role of industrial democracy. We have learnt from historical experience that the socialist economy is not defined by nationalisation or even planning – although they may be important forms of post-capitalism. Instead socialism is defined by working people coming together and discussing how to develop an economy in the most democratic and participatory manner. In this context, there are no successful precedents because the working class has never been able to control the priorities and aims of an economy. The nearest that we have been able to realise socialism has been the party state of Lenin. This is why despite its faults the Soviet regime represented immense historical progress. But this regime was limited by flaws which we should try and understand in order to rectify them in the future.

Bolshevism was not genuine Marxism in the sense that it was unable to realise the goal of Marxism, which is that self-emancipation can only be the task and perspective of the working class. For all of its merits, the Bolsheviks could only envisage the realisation of socialism in terms of their guidance and supervision. This approach was understandable for its time when the material and cultural conditions were unfavourable for the development of socialism. However we have to rise above these historical limitations and conceive of the role of the party as a guide to the primary revolutionary activity of the working class. Lenin grasped this relationship in 1914 when he considered that the end of imperialist war and the advance of socialism could only become possible on the basis of a spontaneous revolt of the working class: “What we are discussing is the indisputable and fundamental duty of all socialists of revealing to the masses the existence of a revolutionary situation, explaining its scope and depth, arousing the proletariat's revolutionary consciousness and revolutionary determination, helping it to go over to revolutionary action, and forming, for that purpose, organisations suited to the revolutionary situation.”(30) However this understanding of the relationship between party and class became compromised because of the difficulties in maintaining socialist principles in backward revolutionary Russia. Thus we can only support the legacy of Bolshevism in the most critical manner.

FOOTNOTES:

(1)Karl Kautsky: Terrorism versus Communism, Ann Arbour, 1924

(2)Sean Matgamna :The Russian Revolution and Marxism, The Fate of the Russian Revolution, Phoenix Press, London, 1998 p19-23

(3)Tamas Krausz Re-constructing Lenin, Monthly Review Press, 2015 p209-233

(4) ibid p286-294

(5)Phil Sharpe: A Critique of Bukharin's Economics of the Transition Period, in Socialist Standpoint March 2016

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(8)Krausz op cit p328-335

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(20)Lenin: Left Wing Childishness and the Petty Bourgeois Mentality, volume 27 p350

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(22)This point will be the subject of a separate article on Martov.

(23)Lenin: Second Congress of Political Education Departments volume 33 p62-64

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