

# 1918: The Hungarian Revolution



The history of the revolution which brought down the monarch and saw workers' and peasants' councils spring up across the country, only to be betrayed by its social democratic and Communist "leadership".

On May 1st, 1917 a massive strike wave and demonstration led to the fall of the reactionary government of Count Tisza, on the 23rd of May.

A new government was formed under Count Esterhazy, who attempted to manoeuvre between the classes in an attempt to prevent the situation getting completely out of hand. The government coalition was broadened to include different bourgeois (capitalist) groups, whilst the social democratic SDP leaders supported the government from outside.

The workers rightly interpreted this move as a sign of weakness and pressed home their advantage. The new government was met by a wave of strikes, which broke out spontaneously, in the teeth of the opposition of the "moderate" trade union leaders. One of these Samu Jasza later admitted that:

*"Already in 1917 there were many strikes although the trade unions insisted that there should be no interruptions of work."*

Labour leaders were compelled to "lead from behind", or lose all influence among the workers.

The demand for a "peace without annexations and indemnities" was echoed in the factories, in the villages and in the trenches. The anti-war party of the bourgeoisie, led by Karolyi, the "Hungarian Kerensky", found fresh courage to press their demands. The ferment in the

factories led to a general strike against the war in Budapest on January 18th 1918, which quickly sparked off mass meetings in which many soldiers participated. The January strike wave swept like wildfire through Austria, Hungary and Germany.

The capitalist class was terrified. So were those right-wing labour leaders who had supported the war and opposed every militant movement of the workers. The Social Democratic leaders, overawed by the rapid extension of the general strike, hastened to call it off on the 21st of January, only four days after it had begun. This betrayal only served to deepen the divisions in the ranks of the SDP and greatly increase the strength of the left-wing opposition.

The depth of the revolutionary upsurge can be seen by the awakening of the more backward and inert sections of the oppressed, notably the working-class women whose heroic role in these events is shown by a secret circular of the War Ministry, dated 3rd May 1918:

*"Women workers not only frequently attempt to disrupt factories by interrupting production, but even deliver inflammatory speeches, take part in demonstrations, marching in the foremost ranks with their babies in their arms, and behaving in an insulting manner towards the representatives of the law."*

On 20th June 1918, a new strike broke out as a result of the shooting of workers. Soviets, or workers' councils, were set up to fight for the workers' demands: peace, universal suffrage, all power to the soviets. The strike spread from Budapest to other industrial centres. Yet once again it was called off after ten days by the leadership.

The masses were prepared to fight for power, but found themselves thwarted at every step by their own leaders. But the unbearable conditions of the masses, and the accumulated discontent and frustrations of the past led inexorably to a new explosion in the Autumn of 1918.

With the collapse of the Bulgarian Front, the wave of desertions turned into a veritable flood which engulfed the country. There were sporadic uprisings and mutinies in the army and navy. Armed bands of deserters linked up with strikers and rebellious peasants in clashes with the police and participated in land seizures. When it became clear that the Central Powers were about to lose the war, these mutinies became general. The state apparatus disintegrated and collapsed under its own weight. The government in Budapest was suspended in mid-air. Power had passed on to the streets.

In the midst of strikes, mutinies and street demonstrations, the ruling class was rent with divisions. There were stormy scenes in Parliament. On 17th October a demoralised Count Tisza announced: "We have lost this war." The bourgeois landowning oligarchy, feeling the power slip from its enfeebled grasp looked desperately round for a second line of defence and found it in yesterday's enemy - Karolyi.

On the 28th October there was a mass demonstration in Budapest demanding Hungarian independence. On the 29th October, Hungary was declared a republic. And on the 30th of October there was an uprising in Budapest of workers, soldiers, sailors and students.

The government fell like a house of cards without firing a shot in its own defence. The streets were taken over by the insurgents shouting slogans such as "Down with the counts!"... "No more war!"... "Only the soldiers' council gives the orders!" By the nightfall of October 31st the insurgents had occupied all strategic positions, and freed all the political prisoners.

The Revolution had triumphed swiftly and painlessly. The ruling class, caught off guard and lacking any real base, offered no resistance. It was a spontaneous mass uprising like the February Revolution in Russia, without leadership and without a clear programme. The

Labour leaders did nothing, or else hindered the revolution which they had not wanted and which they feared like the plague.

Karolyi formed a new cabinet, whose members were drawn from the new National Council, composed of representatives of the Party of Independence, the Social Democratic Party, and a group of bourgeoisie radicals. After suing for a separate peace, the new government dissolved the parliament, pronounced Hungary an independent republic with Karolyi as provisional president, and proclaimed universal suffrage and freedom of the press and assembly. The government launched preparations for land reform and promised elections, but neither goal was carried out. On November 13, 1918, Karl IV surrendered his powers as king of Hungary; however, he did not abdicate, a technicality that made a return to the throne possible.

The Karolyi government's measures failed to stem popular discontent, especially when the Entente powers began distributing slices of Hungary's traditional territory to Romania, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia. The new government and its supporters had pinned their hopes for maintaining Hungary's territorial integrity on abandoning Austria and Germany, securing a separate peace, and exploiting Karolyi's close connections in France. The Entente, however, chose to consider Hungary a partner in the defeated Dual Monarchy and dashed the Hungarians' hopes with the delivery of each new diplomatic note demanding surrender of more land.

On March 19, 1919, the French head of the Entente mission in Budapest handed Karolyi a note delineating final post-war boundaries, which were unacceptable to all Hungarians. Karolyi resigned and turned power over to a coalition of Social Democrats and communists, who promised that Soviet Russia would help Hungary restore its original borders. Although the Social Democrats held a majority in the coalition, the communists under Bela Kun immediately seized control and announced the establishment of the Hungarian Soviet Republic.

Meanwhile, the workers were drawing revolutionary conclusions from the whole situation. In Szeged on March 10 the local soviet took control rapidly followed by other towns. Peasants seized the lands of Count Esterhazy, without waiting for government decrees. They had overthrown 400 years of Habsburg rule by their own strength and organisation. The workers' soviets possessed not only small-arms but machine guns and artillery. On the other hand, the government had no armed forces it could depend on to fight its battles for it.

The masses had been through the harsh school of war, revolution, and counter-revolution with a democratic mask, and were now prepared for a decisive show-down. The moderating arguments of the SDP leaders now cut no ice. The workers interpreted them correctly as attempts to divert their attention from the central goal of power. The growing impatience of the workers with the role of the Social-Democratic leaders was expressed in the refusal of Budapest printing workers to print the SDP newspaper *Nepszava*. The printers struck on March 20 - the same day the Allies sent their ultimatum to Karolyi. On the 21st the printers' strike had turned into a general strike, demanding the release of the leaders and the transfer of power to the working class.

This spontaneous movement caused a split in the leadership of the SDP. One section of the leadership, openly identified with the bourgeoisie, was prepared to play the same counter-revolutionary role as Noske and Scheidemann in Germany. Others were more cautious. The Karolyi government was in a state of collapse following the Allied ultimatum.

Their influence among the masses was fast dwindling to nothing. How could they maintain themselves? There followed an event without precedent in history: the SDP leaders, still in the government, went to the prisons to negotiate with the Communist Party leaders, imprisoned with their connivance, shortly before. The Communist Party wasted no time in

making a deal with Karolyi –as usual the desire for political power rode roughshod over everything else. Kun's 133 day old 'Soviet' republic was a fairly close replica of what was then going on in Russia – torture, murder and imprisonment of all those considered a danger to the CP. He was finally forced to flee from the Romanian army as it marched on Budapest.

The workers' councils had been betrayed, and as in Austria and elsewhere, by the so-called 'representatives' of the labour movement – the SDAP and CP. The formation of the councils were the catalyst to revolution, a revolution that was soon betrayed as worker's spontaneity and self-organisation was sacrificed on the altar of partyist and nationalist rhetoric. [In Hungary in 1956](#), though, the councils would resurface.

by Al from Organise! Ireland