“Today’s supporters of Lenin and Trotsky still parade their writings and their politics as relevant to the working class and to socialism. It is still necessary then to expose how fundamentally capitalistic their political approach was when faced with a working class taking power where it mattered, in the workplace, through the factory committees, and in the community, through the local soviets. The negative side of this pamphlet is Bolshevism; the positive side is what workers achieved, and tried to achieve, even in defeat.”

In this pamphlet”

“The Experience of the Factory Committees in the Russian Revolution”
by R.M. Jones
The Experience of the Factory Committees in the Russian Revolution by R.M. Jones

Introduction

“For the Russian workman to live meant simply not to die.” [1] Before February 1917, Russian workers endured military discipline in the work-place with compulsory overtime, a high death rate in industrial ‘accidents’ and hunger once they got home. In 1905 they had taken on the Tsarist monarchy and created something entirely new in that struggle -- the soviet (or council). Twelve years later, after more than two years of war and on a growing wave of strikes, they were ready to overthrow Tsarism. In doing so, they once again created their own organizations -- soviets and factory committees. As they destroyed the old, so they had to construct a new society. For the workers that meant changing the conditions of their lives, especially in their work. “For it is not machines nor factories, but human interrelationships that make the essence of socialism.” [2]

Alongside the Russian workers’ attempts to create socialism -- not as some abstract far-off utopia in a political party program, but through confronting and changing the concrete reality of their everyday life -- were the activities of socialist parties, supposedly sympathetic to working class aspirations. This pamphlet tells the story of the Russian workers’ struggle, in particular the efforts of the factory committees. The success of the Bolsheviks in defeating the working class and crushing all hope of socialism is the other side of the story. Today’s supporters of Lenin and Trotsky still parade their writings and their politics as relevant to the working class and to socialism. It is still necessary then to expose how fundamentally capitalistic their political approach was when faced with a working class taking power where it mattered -- in the workplace, through the factory committees, and in the community, through the local soviets. The negative side of this pamphlet is Bolshevism; the positive side is what workers achieved, and tried to achieve, even in defeat.

The February Revolution

It was the working class women of Petrograd who sparked off the revolution in February. After weeks of strikes with police attacks on factories, the most oppressed part of the working class, the women textile workers, took the initiative. Demands for bread and attacks on bakeries were superseded by a massive demonstration of women workers on International Women’s Day. The women had ignored a local Bolshevik directive to wait until May Day! The early slogan of “Bread!” was quickly followed by “Down with the autocracy! Down with the war!” By February 24th, half of Petrograd was on strike. The workers did go to their factories, not to work, but to hold meetings, pass resolutions and then go out to demonstrate. The Vyborg committee of the Bolsheviks opposed the strikes: “(...) since the committee thought the time unripe for militant action -- the party not strong enough and the workers

Notes
[12] quoted in Ferro (October), p166.
[16] quoted in Ferro (October), p120.
[17] quoted in Ferro (October), p62.
[18] quoted in Ferro (October), p65.
[22] quoted in Trotsky, p1132.
[23] see Carr, pp 71-2.
[28] quoted in Ferro (October), p176.
[32] quoted in Carr, p191. (Carr says this aroused “the most obstinate prejudices” !)
[33] “Piece-wages (...) the most fruitful source of reductions of wages and capitalistic cheating.” “(...) the form of wages most in harmony with the capitalist mode of production.” Capital, Volume 1, Karl Marx, p518, p521.
[34] quoted in Sirianni, p149.
The ‘Decemist’ Volodya Smirnov went further than the Workers’ Group: “There never has been a proletarian revolution, nor a dictatorship of the proletariat in Russia, there has simply been a ‘popular revolution’ from below and a dictatorship from above. Lenin was never an ideologist of the proletariat. From beginning to end he was an ideologist of the intelligentsia.” The workers in Russia in 1917 went further than Lenin intended in his schema of the stages the revolution ought to go through, so he held them back. He wanted the workers to supervise the capitalists who would still run the factories -- a policy of class collaboration. But the real class struggle was fought out with owners sabotaging the economy and workers taking over the factories. Against the socialist aspirations of the factory committees Lenin and the Bolsheviks offered state capitalism. In destroying the factory committees the Bolsheviks ended all moves to socialism; in securing their unchallenged rule, they had to defeat the working class completely, and that they did. The fatal failing of the factory committees was that they left politics to the soviets and the Bolsheviks, concentrating their efforts on economics.

In Spring 1928 a Yugoslav railway man who’d been in Russia during the revolution said “The situation today is very different from what it was in my time; the manual worker is once more caught in the trap, the bureaucrats live as the bourgeois used to live and their wives play a corresponding part. What is needed is a new revolution.” A skilled worker commented: “We live worse now than at the time of our old masters, we would have gone on strike a thousand times. But what can we do now?” Finally, the comment of a textile worker, himself a foreign Communist: “Never in my life have I known such slavery as there is in my factory. If such a thing existed in a bourgeois country, I would have thrown a bomb at it a long time ago!" [37]

The speed and success of this revolution from below took all the socialists -- who had been propagandizing for a revolution for years by surprise. “The leaders were watching the movement from above; they hesitated, they lagged -- in other words, they did not lead. They dragged after the movement. The nearer one comes to the factories, the greater the decisiveness.” [4] Instead of talking and writing, the workers and soldiers just got on and did it. They started to set up their own organizations to meet their needs. The socialists now found the workers behaving in ways they hadn’t expected. “The leaders of the Revolution also did not understand that, once they themselves had invited the people to take over local affairs, the people, who had had enough of being led and regimented, would eagerly respond to the idea of self-government through soviets, of ending the fighting; they would dream of a new life.” [5] The workers would now only accept decisions from above if they agreed with them anyway. Faced with the ‘chaos’ of workers acting for themselves, the Bolsheviks offered state capitalism, an appeal to the army, which didn’t even urge the soldiers to support the workers.

Similarly, the socialists did not listen to the demands rising up from the workers and peasants. The workers called for an eight hour day, an end to piecework, equal pay, an end to child labor, improvements in safety at work and politeness from management! These early demands were a reflection of the desire to humanize work and to give workers some dignity. The women workers likewise demanded equal wages and better conditions and hygiene at work. The new egalitarianism was also expressed in another way by workers: only the present was of importance; no one could claim any kind of superiority or priority by virtue of what they had done in the past. The slate was to be wiped clean: when Khrustalev-Nosav claimed a seat on the executive committee of the Petrograd Soviet on the basis that he had been President of the Soviet in 1905, he was rejected with boos.

The Establishment Of The Factory Committees

An industrialist called Auerbach complained that “the revolution was understood by the lower orders as something in the nature of an Easter carnival: servants, for
example, disappeared for whole days, promenaded in red ribbons, took rides in
automobiles, came home in the morning only long enough to wash up and again went
out for fun.” [6] While some set out to use the new freedom to see how the old ruling
class had whiled away its time, others aimed at constructive tasks. Factory committees
made their appearance: one of the first started on March 2nd when the Petrograd 1st
Electricity Works elected a 24 member council (including 10 Bolsheviks). By the end
of March, similar councils and committees existed in nearly every plant in Petrograd
and Moscow: they were especially strong in the metal works.

The Petrograd Soviet, then controlled by moderate socialists hostile to
workers’ control, set March 5th as the day for a return to work (always the most
important thing -- get the workers working), while trying straightaway to steer the
new factory committees into a ‘helpful’ role. On March 7th it stated: “For the control
of factory and shop administration, for the proper organization of work, factory and
shop committees should be formed at once. They should see to it that the forces of
labor are not wasted and look after working conditions in the plant.” [7] The Soviets
did not fight for the eight hour day that workers were demanding until workers in
Moscow and Petrograd simply stopped after eight hours and left the factories. On
March 10th the Petrograd Owners Association capitulated over the eight hour day,
and in an agreement with the Soviet, ‘permitted’ the formation of factory committees,
while trying to limit them in every way. Moscow saw a longer struggle: when the
local Soviet called for a return to work, the workers stayed out, forcing the Soviet
to declare the eight hour day to be in force from March 21st, at which point the
employers conceded. The Russian workers had won a first battle through their own
efforts, no thanks to the socialist-dominated Soviets. They now had more time to
meet, discuss, read and -- importantly -- take rifle practice.

The factory committees themselves were able to cater for this newfound
spare time: armed workers’ militias were established at factories, education classes
got under way. The committees took on all sorts of tasks without waiting for any
‘permission’ from the Soviets or the Provisional Government. Where no trade
unions existed, they entered into wage bargaining and opened the books of the firm.
The committees supervised the hiring and firing of workers. Given the sabotage
of employers, some of whom simply abandoned their enterprises, the committees
aimed at first to keep production going, getting the materials, maintaining the
machinery, fulfilling orders: in an atmosphere of growing economic collapse, it was
the committees who were playing a constructive role, even if it was as yet a very
partial form of workers’ control. The distinction between control, which implies
supervision and inspection of other people’s decisions, and management, which
implies decision-making, was not lost on the workers though. The factory committee
of the massive Putilov works in Petrograd, elected by 90% of the workforce, stated
in late April: “While the workers of the particular enterprises educate themselves in
self-management, they prepare themselves for the moment when private ownership
of the factories will be abolished and the means of production will be transferred into
the hands of the working class. This great and important goal for which the workers
are striving must be kept steadfastly in mind, even if we are carrying out only small
details in the meantime.” [8]
declared that “(...) the socialist method of production can be made secure only on the basis of the comradely discipline of the workers.” To the unions fell the task of creating this new ‘socialist discipline’. Disciplinary courts of labor in 1920 dealt with 945 recorded cases. About half of these cases related to punctuality; others were about not doing Saturday overtime, not obeying orders or union discipline, leaving work and agitating for a shorter working day. The 9th Party Congress in March 1920 not only fully accepted the principle of one-man management, but even came up with four different ways of instituting it.

The utter feebleness of the emerging ‘opposition’ inside the Bolshevik party was shown by Lutovinov of the “Workers’ Opposition” saying they’d carry out one-man management while disagreeing with it. First the party, and a poor last, the workers. By November 1920 only 12% of nationalized industries had any form of collective management. 1783 out of 2051 large enterprises under Vesenka had one-man management. To overcome absenteeism and ‘inefficiency’ the government had introduced labor books for workers in Moscow and Petrograd (up till then they had only been issued to the old bourgeoisie for compulsory labor). ‘Communist Saturdays’ -- that is, working for nothing -- were instituted with Lenin’s enthusiastic approval. The massive drive for unpaid overtime, with Subbotniki working Saturday unpaid, and Voskresniki working Sunday unpaid, eventually collapsed. Workers were (quite inexplicably!) not too excited. Lenin did try to set an example: he actually worked a ‘Communist Saturday’ on May 1st 1920.

Latter-day Bolshevism’s other favorite, Trotsky, deserves to say a few words at this point. In January 1919 at a Trade Union Congress, he stressed that “At a time when the Trade Unions regulate wages and conditions of work, when the appointment of the Commissar for Labor also depends on our Congress, no strikes can take place in Soviet Russia. Let us put the dot on this i.” Having dotted that i, he proceeded to cross the t in the following year, recognizing “the right of the workers’ state to send each working man and woman to the place where they are needed for the fulfillment of economic tasks”; and “the right of the state, the workers’ state, to declare that (...) the socialist method of production can be made secure only on the basis of the comradely discipline of the workers.” To the unions fell the task of creating this new ‘socialist discipline’. Disciplinary courts of labor in 1920 dealt with 945 recorded cases. About half of these cases related to punctuality; others were about not doing Saturday overtime, not obeying orders or union discipline, leaving work and agitating for a shorter working day. The 9th Party Congress in March 1920 not only fully accepted the principle of one-man management, but even came up with four different ways of instituting it.

The Revolution Defeated

In the debates over the role of the trade unions in a so-called ‘workers’ state’ the party was talking to itself. The class lines had already been drawn with the emasculation of the factory committees and the soviets. On one side stood Lenin, the bureaucrats and state capitalism; on the other were the workers (both Bolshevik and non-party) and socialism. As Lenin took away the factories he gave the workers -- the right to strike! As if the revolution had been all for that. The crushing of the Kronstadt revolt in

The factory committees recognized the need to co-ordinate their activities outside the confines of individual plants. Moves to centralize started when representatives from the committees of the twelve largest metal works met in Petrograd on March 13th, less than three weeks after the revolution. Although this meeting set up no permanent organization, an early April conference of factory committees in Moscow, and similar ones in some provinces, set up co-coordinating centers to establish links between cities. A conference of workers in the factories of the Artillery and Naval Defence Department approved the committees’ role in hiring and firing, seeing the books and so on. Radical committees were ignoring the law and going their own way as circumstances demanded. The conference, held on April 15th, also planned a Chief Centre to co-ordinate the state sector factory committees. At the end of April, the Putilov works committee called for a more broadly-based conference. On May 29th a factory committee conference in Kharkov passed a resolution that the committees should be “organs of insurrection” and that they should seize the factories and manage production. Clearly some workers were thinking ahead and had a clearer notion of what would be required for their aspirations to be satisfied.

By May, the hopes of February were wearing thin: the new government was a failure as far as workers were concerned, and strikes were being met by layoffs. Workers and factory committees found themselves forced to take over factories because of the management’s actions, rather than any commitment to socialism or self-management as such. The ‘First Conference of the Factory Committees of Petrograd and its Environs’, the one called for by the Putilov workers, met from May 30th-June 5th. It had delegates from 367 factory committees representing 337,464 workers in Petrograd (out of a total of some 400,000). The main debate was over who was to run industry: the moderate socialists wanted state control by the government; the workers wanted workers’ control, and in this they were supported by the anarcho-syndicalists and the Bolsheviks, recent converts to the idea. But while workers tended to imagine that ‘workers’ control’ meant they would run things, the Bolsheviks’ conception was rather different. Lenin (no use asking which factory committee he was on) spoke at the conference, and had this to say: “(...) a majority of workers should enter all responsible institutions and (...) the administration should render an account of its actions to all the most authoritative workers’ organizations.” [9] Clearly here there is an administration on one side, and the workers on the other: the division as in any class society. In the Bolshevik resolution that was passed, factory committees were to be “allowed to participate” in control along with the soviets, the unions and representatives of political parties!

A Central Council of Factory Committees for Petrograd was formed with 25 members. Its jobs included getting fuel, materials and machinery, distributing information and setting up a committee to organize aid for the peasants. It was able to help the weaker committees in their struggles, and from then on it was in more or less permanent session. The Petrograd Central Council also sent delegates to other cities. By the end of June there were 25 similar Factory Committee Centers in cities and districts; by October, 65 such centers existed and there had been over a hundred conferences discussing the problems facing the factory committees. The report of the Petrograd conference noted that “(...) at the moment, committees are forced to
intervene in the economic functioning of businesses, otherwise they would have stopped working.” [10]

At the end of June the factory committee at the Brenner factory stated explicitly “In view of the management’s refusal to go on with production, the workers’ committee has decided, in general assembly, to fulfill the orders and to carry on working.” [11] The extreme hostility of the employers to the committees was encouraging an economic collapse, which could only be staved off by the committees linking up locally, regionally and nationally. The Provisional Government, the trade unions and the soviets (under the control of moderate socialists were definitely not sympathetic to the factory committees. The workers had initially identified with the Petrograd Soviet: its weakness and inability or refusal to take up workers’ demands strengthened the committees. As the committees co-coordinated up to a national level, they came into conflict with the trade unions; as they started to act politically, they came up against the ‘socialist’ soviets. The committees had allies in the district committees, set up throughout Petrograd, partly to defend the city. Their authority and effectiveness was such that people turned to them to get things done. They set up canteens, créches, cultural centers; they tackled alcoholism and gambling; they took over empty houses, and tried to organize food supply.

In the large factories the factory committee’s were subdivided into commissions for each part of the plant’s productive activity. For example, the Mednoprokatny metal works had nine such commissions, covering fuel purchase, orders, working conditions, employment and dismissal, a library, demobilization (i.e., the change from wartime to peacetime production), metal recovery, co-ordination, control. Undoubtedly it was the skilled workers who tended to dominate in the committee movement as a whole, and in the individual work-places. They knew how the plants operated, they were more literate and used to organizing themselves through the long years of Tsarist repression. However this is not to underestimate the role of the less skilled. Petrograd’s workforce had doubled during the war, and the recent peasant intake was often more radical, being anti-Tsarist and immediately anti-capitalist. It was these workers who pressed for wage equalization -- and many skilled militants took up the call.

The committees leaned towards the Bolsheviks because they were a good deal more radical than the moderate socialist Mensheviks, and because they ‘supported’ the factory committees. In fact it was the factory committees, at the sharp end of the struggle with the employers, which were the first workers’ organizations to ‘go Bolshevik’. A Bolshevik resolution at the June conference won 335 out of 421 votes. However, it was the workers and not the politicians who were left to sort out the real, practical problems, such as, how to react to the employers’ increasing use of lockouts. One worker, fed up with the endless talking of the political militants, addressed himself to the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks together at a conference: “I’ve had enough of all your talking. You never answer our questions -- what are we to do if a boss threatens he’ll close down? You’re always ready with proclamations and words, but no one will ever tell us what to do in a real case (...) what do we do if the factory shuts down? We are here to decide that, and we’ve been sent here for that, and if you don’t tell us, we’ll go ahead on our own.” [12]

Workers were able to impose themselves occasionally against the growing monolith of Bolshevik state power. During 1918 state-capitalist combines had been set up in the leather, textile and sugar industries based on co-operation between the state and the old owners. The right-wing industrialist Mescherskii wanted to create a similar ‘trust’ in the metal industry, with the factories run by the old bourgeois owners. This was alright by Lenin and Trotsky, and officials of the Metalworkers Union supported the project. Workers were however very much against it. A conference of delegates from affected plants demanded an end to the scheme, and immediate nationalization. As the Bolsheviks were not yet strong enough to crush this sort of thing, the pressure from below put an end to the project.

The civil war undoubtedly strengthened tendencies to central control and planning, involving one-man management and the use of highly-paid technical specialists. Centralization of itself is not a bad thing: the question is, who’s doing the centralizing, and to what end? Again, using the talents of technical staffs was essential, but to what end would their abilities be directed? The peasants were angry that the old exploiters were taken on as managers of the Sovkhozy collective farms. The ‘specialists’ got high salaries, and the managers and directors lived in the luxury of the old landowners’ houses: sometimes the old landowner himself was the director. Lenin’s message to the peasants was “(...) if you yourselves do not know how to organize agriculture in the new way, we must take the old specialists into our service.” While the Lenin of ‘State and Revolution’ said “Smash the bourgeois state”, the Lenin of ‘Will the Bolsheviks retain state power?’ said “Use the bourgeois state, take it over.” Thus Trotsky drew heavily on the Tsarist officer corps for the Red Army.

When Molotov analyzed the personnel of the glavki he found that 57% were definitely non-worker; the other 43% included representatives of the unions, mostly non workers either. He concluded in his report (given in December 1918) that those directing policy were “employers’ representatives, technicians and specialists.” A ‘white’ professor reported in autumn 1919 that “the unprepared visitor to these centers and glavki who is personally acquainted with the former commercial and industrial world will be surprised to see the former owners of big leather factories sitting in Glavkozh, big manufacturers in the central textile organization, etc.” [35] The willingness to use the Tsarist state machinery extended to a Sovnarkom (Council of People’s Commisars) decree in January 1920 regretting that “the old police apparatus which had known how to register citizens not only in the towns, but in the country” had been destroyed by the revolution.

Despite this destructive act by the revolution, the mobility of labor was still achieved. A spokesman from Narkomtrud (the People’s Commissariat of Labor) boasted: “We supplied labor according to plan and consequently without taking account of individual peculiarities or qualifications or of the wish of the worker to engage in this or that kind of work.” He could have been talking about any commodity. The governments wages policy was based on incentives and piece-work; wages were in groups of scales, the highest by far being for technical and administrative people. At the 8th Party Congress in March 1919, the new program...
of National Economy), called for a ‘labor service’ not of course “the kind of labor service which has been applied in the west, not the kind of service which is thought of here by the masses and which says that all must be put to work, but labor service as a system of labor discipline and as a system of the organization of labor in the interests of production.” Not in the interests of workers, evidently: this all required “iron self-discipline” on the part of workers. Vesenka had underneath it a network of glavki (chief committees) and tsentry (centers). These were based on the Tsarist war committees for industry, and operated with help from managements. Larin, the admirer of German capitalism, and Milyutin were two of the leaders of Vesenka, both of them enthusiastic planners. At the end of April, a Vesenka decree outlawed ‘wildcat nationalizations’, but this, like an earlier decree in February was widely ignored. The factory committees did not respond to Vesenka’s ‘authority’: for its part, the Central Council of Factory Committees operated without any official sanction.

The Bolshevik Bosses

In May 1918, when the All-Russian Congress of Councils of National Economy met in Moscow there were delegates from Vesenka, its glavki and tsentry, and the trade unions, but not the factory committees. The door was shutting firmly on the workers, as the committees became mere local branches of a top-heavy union bureaucracy. The unions were subordinate to the state, as agreed at the first All-Russian Congress of Trade Unions. (One anarchist delegate described the unions as “living corpses”; another said that the factory committees were “cells of the coming socialist social order, the order without political power.”) A decree on June 28th 1918 nationalized all major industry, making the state the main employer in Russia; labor was to be a form of service to society, and piece-rates were regarded as normal. As the invasions by Allied Powers and the civil war had only just started, none of what had happened thus far can be blamed on those factors. The application of piece-rates and norms of production meant that workers were driving themselves to ill-health to get a survival wage. Yet at the end of the year, norms were raised throughout industry because the state machine considered wages to be “perniciously high”. In January 1919, the norms were raised by 150% in the metal industry.

These developments started to cause dissent within the Bolshevik party, even amongst those who had never worked in their life. ‘Kommunist’ the journal of the ‘Left Communists’ contained an attack on Lenin by Osinsky. Among other criticisms, Osinsky argued that Lenin’s ‘discipline’ was exactly like that of the capitalists; that only the workers can emancipate themselves; that Lenin confused productivity improvements with working harder and faster, “Socialism and the socialist organization of work will either be built by the proletariat itself, or it will not be built at all; but then something else will be erected, namely state capitalism.” Lenin replied, as he always did when lost for an answer, with a tirade of abuse and nonsense: for instance, statements that the introduction of capitalist authority and labor discipline were an attack on workers’ self-organization were “a terrible disgrace and imply the complete renunciation of communism in practice and

Soviets, Parties & Unions

The Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks were fighting for the leadership of the working class, not to solve workers’ problems. The workers themselves tended to pay little attention to the differences between the various left-wing groups and parties, differences which mattered a great deal to the socialists themselves. Rank-and-file Bolsheviks and Mensheviks had often united in the early days after the February Revolution anyway: as the moderate socialists discredited themselves, the Bolsheviks were able to win more support as the uncompromising party. February had given workers the freedom to combine, and they were able to force concessions from employers and government on the eight hour day, better working conditions, social insurance and so on. When, out of necessity, the move to self-management started, it was not only something alien to the workers’ original demands, but also to every socialist organization, and to the trade unions. By May there were some 2,000 unions with 1.5 million members; by October, two million members. Some of the unions existed in name only, with paper membership; others did nothing. The active trade unions wanted the factory committees to be local branches of the unions and little else.

For their part, the committees, which had been far quicker to organize and take up grievances, were in favor of co-operating with the unions, but certainly not of being subordinate to them.

The unions were dominated politically by the Mensheviks. For them, the revolution was a bourgeois-democratic one, ushering in a period of straightforward capitalism: thus the task was to establish trade unions as in Western Europe to organize and defend workers. They were for state control over the economy, in which there was to be no room for factory committees or workers’ control. As the Menshevik Dalin put it: “The factory committees must see only that production continues but they should not take production and the factories into their own hands (...) If the owner discards the enterprise, it must pass not into the hands of the workers but to the jurisdiction of the city or central government.” Either the capitalists or the bourgeois state were to run industry, never the workers.

A directly contrary view was taken by the anarcho-syndicalists, for whom the factory committees were the beginnings of the future socialist society. Maksimov and the ‘Golos Truda’ group called for “total workers’ control” over the process of production itself. Their critical attitude towards the unions and solid support for the committees gave the anarcho-syndicalists some influence on workers, particularly in Vyborg and Kronstadt. However their antipathy to centralization left them vague about how the factory committees should link up across the country.

The Bolsheviks occupied what appeared to be an ambiguous position, shifting their emphasis from the committees to the unions, from workers’ control to state control. This was partly a reflection of the differences between the party leadership, which (apart from Lenin) was unsure as to what it wanted at first, and the rank-and-file members, who, many of them being workers, were active in the factory committees. Lenin’s April Theses set the tone for his line of thought: “Not the ‘introduction’ of socialism as our immediate task, but immediate transition merely to
control by the Soviet of Workers’ Deputies over the social production and distribution of products.” In ‘Pravda’ on June 4th Lenin was to repeat that workers’ control would be carried out by the soviets: the factory committees didn’t rate a mention. For Lenin, workers’ control was a form of accountancy, and socialism merely state control of production. Many militants in the party thought a decisive transformation of society was at stake. Navinov, a Bolshevik worker on the Central Council of Factory Committees, said at the first conference of Petrograd factory committees; “Control must be created from below and not from above, created democratically and not bureaucratically, and I call upon you to take this mission upon yourselves. Only we workers can achieve what is necessary for our future existence.” [14]

The Bolsheviks had helped set up the Central Council of Factory Committees, but were using the committees in the struggle to win control of the trade unions from the Mensheviks. At the All-Russian Trade Union Conference in June, Milyutin, the Bolshevik representative, said that the committees should be union cells, and workers’ control would be exercised by the unions and the soviets. It has to be said that before February no Bolshevik had given any thought to workers’ control and the problems attached to it: however their basic political assumptions were already starting to drive them against the real workers’ movement. As the committees themselves were not always united, and were unclear over their relationships with other institutions and workers’ organizations, the conflict did not assume a concrete form until after October.

In 1905, the Soviet of Workers’ Deputies had risen out of a general strike. In 1917 this creation was resurrected, but with a difference: socialists set up a Provisional Executive Committee of the Soviet both independently of and in advance of the workers. A leadership established itself that had no workers in it. These first Soviet leaders were moderate socialists, who hoped in fact to phase out the soviets as the apparatus of a bourgeois-democratic republic was created. Some minor soviet elections occurred as early as February 24th; city-wide elections were held on the 28th in Petrograd, the day after the Provisional Executive Committee was formed. These elections allowed for one deputy per thousand voters, or one per small factory, with one per company of soldiers (usually 250 men). Thus the large factories containing some 87% of workers had 424 delegates, the small factories with the remaining 13% had 422, and the soldiers had some 2,000, by mid-March. Not only did the soldiers have an excessive influence in the Soviet, but also the workers’ delegates were frequently not workers, but middle class radicals of one sort or another.

The Petrograd Provisional Executive Committee started with 42 members: this initially included seven workers and eight soldiers who were all soon ousted. The Bolshevik Shlyapnikov had successfully proposed that each socialist party should have two seats automatically on the Executive. In the event, all of them practical propositions, for workers to run the economy and move to socialism. Given the way Lenin ignored these attempts, it was a real nerve of him to say to the 3rd Congress of Soviets in January 1918: “In introducing workers’ control, we knew that it would take much time before it spread to the whole of Russia, but we wanted to show that we recognize only one road -- changes from below; we wanted the workers themselves, from below, to draw up the new basic economic principles...” In fact Lenin’s state capitalism with a decorative bit of workers’ control added was behind the workers’ struggle. Workers had their own plans and a superior conception of socialism born of necessity: stripped bare of rhetoric, all Lenin had was ‘Power to the Party’.

It did not take long for Lenin to state clearly the capitalist content of his socialism. In March 1918, he demanded ‘one-man management’ on the railways: for him, collective self-management was rudimentary, and had to be superseded by one-man management. In ‘The Current Tasks of the Soviet Power’, Lenin wrote “Any large-scale machine industry -- and this is precisely the material productive source and basis of socialism -- calls for unconditional and strict unity of the will which directs the simultaneous work of hundreds and thousands and tens of thousands of people (...) Unqualified submission to a single will is conditionally necessary for the success of the process of labor organized on the pattern of large-scale machine industry.” [32] Why workers should bother to fight and die for this is not explained.

In 1915 the then Menshevik Larin wrote an article enthusing over the German war-state: “Contemporary Germany has given the world a pattern of the centralized direction of the national economy as a single machine working according to plan.” Lenin took up this theme with his observation that socialism had been realized politically in Russia and economically in Germany. By April 1918, Lenin exhorted “Yes, learn from the German! History proceeds by zigzags and crooked paths. It happens that it is the German who now, side by side with bestial imperialism, embodies the principles of discipline, of organization, of solid working together, on the basis of the most modern machine industry, of strict accounting and control.” That all this labor discipline might have anything to do with the ‘bestial imperialism’ did not enter Lenin’s mind: for him, the only thing wrong with German state capitalism was that it was a bourgeois-imperialist state; add a ‘proletarian state’ and you have socialism. Capitalist methods of production can only create capitalism, but Lenin thought they could support ‘socialism’ too. To make his point firmly, Lenin referred admiringly to a Tsar. Russian socialists had to “study the state capitalism of the Germans, (...) adopt it with all possible strength, not to spare dictatorial methods in order to hasten its adoption even more than Peter hastened the adoption of Westernism by barbarous Russia, not shrinking from barbarous weapons to fight barbarism.” For the workers this meant more work and harder work, and more organization (by others).

The 7th Party Congress in March 1918 demanded “the most energetic, unsparingly decisive, draconian measures to raise the self-discipline and discipline of workers and peasants.” Milyutin, in a session of Vesenkha (the Supreme Council...
elect a managing council of 25-60 members, including representatives of technical and administrative staff: this would set up an executive of 3-15. There would be direct elections to regional bodies leading up to a Central Mining Council. The right of recall by workers who elected a delegate to any council at whatever level was spelt out clearly, and trade union and state bodies were excluded. Again we can see the constructive attempts of workers to develop practical structures that gave them control, as against the government’s plans. In their attitude to the technical staffs, workers were not usually hostile, even though the technicians wanted a strong state control to guarantee their position and were against workers’ control. Many though were willing to work with the committees, who needed to make use of their abilities.

The trade unions saw as their major task increasing production through more organized and disciplined labor. They were eager to help set piece-rates, norms and bonuses, to raise productivity and impose discipline. In this they were supporting Lenin. In September 1917 he called for “universal labor service” (presumably not so universal as to include himself and other top Bolsheviks); in January 1918 in an unpublished article he wrote that “workers who slack at their work” should be “put in prison”. For Lenin only “the declassed petty bourgeois intelligentsia (...) does not understand that the chief difficulty for socialism consists in guaranteeing the discipline of labor (...)”: socialism’s ‘chief difficulty’ thus appears to be the same as capitalism’s! Lenin’s solution was the same as capitalism’s: “Piece-rates must be put on the agenda, applied in practice and tried out; we must apply much that is scientific and progressive in the Taylor system (...)” [31] Lenin, not the workers, decides what is put ‘on the agenda’, but the workers, not Lenin, will try out the piece-rates.

This attitude was reflected at the 1st All-Russian Trade Union Congress held in January 1918. The factory committees were attacked for not being organized, or disciplined or experienced enough. Members of the Central Council of Factory Committees were not there to argue their case. The Bolshevik Gastev proposed a resolution that was passed almost unanimously which argued for the industrial reconstruction of Russia with foreign capital, for the implementation of Taylorism (piece-rates, time and motion studies etc), for the raising of productivity and discipline, for workers to be moved as required, and for private ownership to remain. This approach was agreed in March at the 4th Conference of Trade Unions.

The Bolsheviks proceeded to Bolshevize the non-Bolshevik trade unions by breaking up meetings, setting up rival unions and appointing officials from above, so that all unions would adopt Gastev’s capitalist approach. Protests from workers about the lack of independence from the state of the unions grew in the spring of 1918. The factory committees still tried to be constructive. While answering the slanderous attacks made on them by the unions, the committees proposed unity with the trade unions, so as not to have two workers’ organizations in conflict. The proposal had conditions attached: there should be compulsory membership so that all workers would be part of the decision-making process; the factory committees would act as local branches; the summit of the union would be a conference of factory committee delegates, which would then elect an executive to act like the Central Council of Factory Committees.

The dominating role of the Mensheviks and the Social Revolutionaries, another moderate socialist party, was reflected in the way that the Petrograd Soviet urged a return to work in March before the Provisional Government conceded the eight hour day, or made any move towards peace and a settlement of the land question. It was mass action and the threat of a general strike that had gained workers the shorter working day. The Soviet similarly tried to limit workers’ control by setting up ‘Labor Mediation Boards’ to settle disputes. It tried to restrain anti-war demonstrations. The moderate socialists were after all looking to the bourgeoisie to institute western-style capitalism, not to the workers to create socialism. Despite that, the Provisional Executive Committee found itself under intense pressure from the workers. It was forced to take over the State Bank, the Treasury, Mint and Printing Office; post and telegraph offices, railway stations and other printing works were also seized. As early as March 6th, meetings of militant workers were demanding that the Soviet take power. However these early demands for “all power to the soviets” were opposed by many workers, most soldiers and overwhelmingly by the socialist leaders of the Soviet itself. The Bolsheviks at this stage supported the idea of the Soviet supporting the Provisional Government.

By June there were 519 soviets, 28 of which were working class alone, 101 were workers’ and soldiers’, 305 were workers’, soldiers’ and peasants’, the rest being all-class. The majority of these soviets were run by non-working class party activists. Once party militants got into these higher soviets, they controlled the other posts. For instance, Anisimov, the chairman of the soviet of district committees was not elected to any district committee at all -- he had been selected by his Menshevik colleagues. In the view of these socialists, clearly some were destined to rule, others to be ruled. The Bolsheviks too were happy to build up majorities for themselves by similar methods. For workers though these city soviets tended to be too slow to help tackle their pressing problems. The local soviets and factory committees acted on their own account without approval from above to get things done. Sometimes they merged at this local district level. Here workers were able to conduct affairs, leaving the intellectuals to speech-making in the city soviets. The local soviets took on economic, political and social problems: food, housing, justice and culture all came within their orbit. They guarded their local autonomy, but were prepared to unite -- from below -- and an inter-district conference was held in Petrograd. This brought them into conflict with the executive committee of the city Soviet. Similarly in Moscow, the local soviets were much more radical than the Menshevik-run city Soviet.

The Peasants Take The Land

While the workers and soldiers were issuing demands for others to meet, and slowly realizing that only they themselves could attain their ends, the peasants were taking direct action. Peasant risings and land seizures were widespread. The peasants carried out their own agrarian reform measures and ignored the Provisional Government which was set against the seizure of land. Peasant committees were formed at the village, volost, uezd (district) and guberniya (regional) levels. Decisions tended
to flow upwards: those coming down were only obeyed if they were agreed with. The arguments within the Social Revolutionaries, the peasant party, were no longer of real concern to the peasants. What mattered to them was that the decisions they were taking and the regulations they were adopting on the land issue should be irreversible.

The image of the peasants as a mass of ignorant anti-socialists, in a sea of which Russia’s workers would drown, is quite wrong. They set to running their own affairs with enthusiasm: illiteracy was no bar to their abilities. The 45 elected members of the Peasant Committee of Novochastly uzed said they would “organize the new society”. The Peasant Convention of Penza on May 15th was composed of illiterate peasants with a single literate teacher to take down their resolutions. They called on owners “to apply its decisions and freely give their property to the (volent) land committee so as to avoid illegal occupation by individual peasants” [15] The convention set out to control rents, sort out the amounts of land each person or family unit could have, supervise the harvests and ensure an efficient utilization of the land. The peasant assembly of Samara showed the peasants’ great impatience with the politicians over the land question. A peasant shouted at a Menshevik “We always have to wait, you ass, don’t play the fool with us.” They paid scant regard to the ‘legality’ of their actions -- “That bunch of lawyers again,” said one, “saying they’re on our side, but we know different; they’ll betray us.” [16] Lenin’s Decree on Land could do no more than recognize a fait accompli: 65 out of 70 peasant soviets had already divided the land.

The peasants were quick to throw off the shackles of religion. A priest moaned: “My parishioners will nowadays only go to meetings of the soviet, and when I remind them about the church, they tell me they have no time.” [17] A peasant told a priest straight to his face why: “For centuries a few nobles and landowners subjected millions of poor people, bled and sweated them -- and you priests said it was right, chanting in chorus ‘Long life to the Tsars and our leaders’; yet, now that the people has power and is trying to establish equality, you, the ‘Holy men’ will not recognize us.” [18] The workers knew the importance of the peasantry for the success of the revolution. The Petrograd conference of factory committees debated the agrarian issue with a view to sealing relations with the peasants. The Petrograd workers created special commissions in the factories to gather scrap metals and damaged pieces for a project they called ‘Worker to Peasant’, making agricultural tools for the peasant committees. Delegates were sent into the countryside to negotiate directly, worker to peasant, over grain deliveries. There is no reason to suppose that workers and peasants could not have developed a workable relationship: workers’ self-management was no threat to the peasants.

The July Days

June saw strikes among the most exploited workers -- dyers, clerks, laundry workers, and the unskilled. A combination of inflation, lock-outs and frustration with the government and soviets was raising the temperature. A demonstration on June 18th
The Central Council of Factory Committees distributed a “Practical Manual for the Implementation of Workers’ Control” in late November 1917. This advocated that each factory should have commissions to organize production, to handle the conversion of production from war to peace, to get supplies of fuel and raw materials and so on. Such commissions would in all probability use the knowledge and abilities of technicians and specialists, but these would have no power of decision at all; this was in marked contrast to Lenin’s schema. The factory committees should unite upwards: in local, regional and national federations, thus posing a direct challenge to the Bolshevik state. Then the Central Council drew up a Model Statute for factory committees as a direct response to the Bolsheviks’ “Counter-Manual” and draft instructions. This envisaged that the committees would be integrated into an economic council system, with People’s Economic Councils in every district, city and region. These councils would be elected at conferences of factory committees, and their members would all have to be from a factory committee.

This plan was fully developed and drawn up in December. The local councils would unite the factory committees, transport workers and those in commerce and agriculture. The regional councils would each year elect a Supreme Economic Council. Each People’s Economic Council would deal with all the economic activity in its locality. This flood of ideas and plans from the workers in the factories showed that the workers knew that socialism would be empty and meaningless if it was anything other than their own activity. They were trying concretely to tackle the massive problems facing Russia; so too were the Bolsheviks, but from a different class viewpoint. A much modified version of the Economic Councils idea was introduced in such a way as to weaken the factory committees by gradually establishing a centralized top-down control and strangling local initiative.

The majority of factory committees approved of the Central Council’s proposals and rejected the Bolshevik All-Russian Council of Workers’ Control. Factory committees in the metal industry complained that the ‘Counter-Manual’ “shackled the hands of the workers” while the ‘Practical Manual’ “allowed the workers great room for self-activity and made them the practical rulers of the factories.” [26] In the period following the October Revolution, greatly increased factory committee activity was necessary to face the employers’ tactics of sabotage, closures and refusal to pay wages. Hundreds of firms were taken over by workers who had no alternative if they were to protect their livelihood. The Bolshevik government and the trade unions were against such seizures by workers: incredibly, the Supreme Economic Council threatened to cut off funds to such firms. Many such workplaces were managed by collegial boards of workers, technicians and administrators, all under the watchful eye of the factory committee. By mid-1918, factory committees were involved in the management boards of some three-fifths of all plants, and in areas such as the Urals and the Donetz basin it was more.

The committees were facing enormous difficulties in a period of economic collapse that was not of the workers’ making. The committees made any number of constructive efforts to overcome the chaos. The Central Council of Petrograd committees co-ordinated work to organize deliveries of drugs, yarn, machine oil etc to the provinces and Finland. Just before the October Revolution, the first All-

saw a striking slogan on a banner from one factory -- “The right to life is higher than the rights of Private Property”. This stood out amongst the morass of party slogans, which were basically ‘Down with the Government’. It was the workers who saw the issue in more fundamental terms. With the Putilov works coming out on strike, the skilled metal workers were now joining the movement. The Bolsheviks urged restraint. Lenin was moved to say in ‘Pravda’ on June 21st: “We understand your bitterness, we understand the excitement of the Petersburg workers, but we say to them: Comrades, an immediate attack would be inexpedient.” Many rank-and-file worker Bolsheviks complained at this, not liking having to play “the part of the fire hose”. At a meeting at the Putilov works a Bolshevik said workers should wait for the Party to state whether a demonstration was opportune or not, and got a sharp reply: “Again you want to postpone things. We can’t live that way any longer (…)” [19] In weighing up the Bolshevik attitude, workers bore in mind that the February strikes had been against the ‘leaders’ advice, and that action from below had won the eight hour day.

In early July, the factories came out and the Red Guards were armed and ready. On July 3rd, the Bolsheviks did all they could to hold back the machine-gun regiments, and Tomsky complained at a Bolshevik conference “The regiments which have come out have acted in an uncomradely manner, not having invited the Central Committee of our party to consider the question of a manifestation.” He urged the issue of an appeal to hold back ‘the masses’. Lenin spoke to demonstrators on the morning of the 4th, stressing the need for a peaceful march, to the amazement of the armed sailors, who were looking for an endorsement of action. The march was purely a working class affair, thousands pouring out of the poor districts of Petrograd, with the demand “All power to the soviets!” But the Soviet wasn’t so keen: a worker had to shout at Chernov, one of the moderate socialist leaders of the Soviet -- “Take power, you stupid bastard, it’s being handed to you on a plate.”

Instead of taking power, the Soviet leaders and their socialist allies in the Provisional Government organized loyal troops to put down the advocates of such a course! Some 400 workers and soldiers were killed to allow the moderate socialists to appear respectable to the bourgeoisie. As the party untainted by this and similar events, the Bolsheviks were bound to attract workers’ support. Having successfully reduced the July movement to a demonstration, the Bolsheviks got on with ‘organizing’. At the height of the July Days, Kamenev said “Our present task is to give the movement an organized character.” Winning votes and positions was the parallel of this approach. When the Bolsheviks won control of the workers’ section of the Petrograd Soviet, in Trotsky’s estimation this was on a par with achieving socialism itself: “From the lips of the Bolshevik orators the demonstrators learned of the victory just won in the workers’ section, and that fact gave them as palpable a satisfaction as would an entrance upon the epoch of soviet power.” [20] Despite their restraining influence, the Bolsheviks found themselves subject to repression at the hands of the socialists, who banned their papers and arrested leading party militants where they could. The moderate socialists doubtless believed their own propaganda, that it was ‘agitators’ that had stirred up trouble in the workers. Their own failure to meet the people’s demands was left out of account. The theme of
the repression was well expressed by the White General, Kornilov, at the end of July: “We need three armies -- in the trenches, one in the factories or the rear, and one in the railways to link them (...) all three must be as disciplined as the front-line one.” Before long, Trotsky would be saying the same thing.

Building Up To October

The repression after the abortive July Days was aimed primarily at the workers, as capitalists and bourgeois politicians alike demanded an end to ‘anarchy’ in the factories. There were attacks on the right of factory committees to meet in working hours; the Committee of United Industrialists proposed that committee members get no pay for time spent on committee business; some employers stopped paying workers for the hours they were on militia duty; some refused to let the factory committees meet on the firm’s premises. Plants closed down, partly because of the owners’ deliberate policy, but also because of fuel and other shortages as the country’s railway system reached breaking-point. Orders were turned down by bosses, lock-outs used, and some employers tried moving their plant and machinery to less radical areas to start afresh. The Petrograd Manufacturers’ Association campaigned for piece-wages and ‘open shops’. All this was part of the attempt to suppress the committees and workers’ control. The motto of the bourgeois appeared to be: “May the country perish if it no longer belongs to me.”

Some local soviets were forced to take over organizing the supply of goods and essentials, as commerce collapsed. They did not find the socialists in the government either helpful or sympathetic. Skobelev, the Menshevik Minister of Labor, who had already put out a circular at the end of August that said that any meeting in working hours was illegal, circulated a notice from industrialists in the Urals which condemned “any interference by the factory committees in the management of an enterprise (...).” In the face of the attacks made on them, workers noted the ineffectiveness of the higher soviets and the trade unions. Increasingly, they were having to look to themselves.

The most effective way to do this was through the factory committees. In August, the second conference of the Factory Committees of Petrograd and its Environs met. This did much to regularize the way the committees were organized. The General Assembly of all the workers in a factory was the highest organ and the backbone of the movement. From this was elected the factory committee. A General Assembly could only be overruled by the Central Council of Factory Committees, a body built up from all the factories. The General Assembly had the right to recall and re-elect the committee at any time. For a factory committee to be a valid one, 50% of the workforce had to vote. Sub-committees were to exist for the different departments within a factory, or to carry out specific tasks. “The factory and shop committees are not created out of temporary meetings. The masses elect to these committees those who at home in the everyday life of the factory have demonstrated their firmness, their business-like character and their devotion to the interests of the workers.” [21] At this conference, it was the Bolsheviks who again said that the job of the committees was to supervise, not to initiate decisions; the anarchists defended Council would have separate divisions corresponding to different parts of the economy, each division to be overseen by control commissions composed only of workers, these forming a control commission over the whole Council. The Council would regulate industry, transport and agriculture, and would be able to take over private firms. This constructive attempt to grapple with the problems of the economy, thought out by those most affected, was turned down flat by Lenin, who had his own “workers’ plan” In the form of a draft decree which accepted economic conditions and relations that the factory committees were trying to go beyond. His decree in effect intended the committees to be subordinate to the unions. Lenin also refused to let the committees borrow money: the effect of this is looked at further on. On day one of Bolshevik rule, the workers’ own plan was rejected.

Undeterred, the Central Council tried another plan on November 3rd, this time to set up an All-Russian Council for the Regulation of Industry. This plan differed from the earlier one: it excluded the unions, whose leaders had stood with Lenin. The Central Council’s leaders saw that the unions were too remote from the workers, that they were unable to counteract the employers’ attempts to sabotage factories. Similarly, the plan now left employers out of consideration and tried to ensure that the factory committees could not be integrated into the state. The Central Council was already drawing well away from Lenin’s conceptions, and moving rapidly to the realization that the workers alone had to run industry, Lenin’s ideas were standing still: “It was assumed without question that the employers and technical staffs would continue to operate the enterprises under the vigilant eye of ‘workers’ control’. [24] In late October a Bolshevik trade union spokesman, Lozovsky, said “It is necessary to make an absolutely clear and categorical reservation that the workers in each enterprise should not get the impression that the enterprise belongs to them.” [25] However for the workers, the revolution meant that the productive forces of the country were now theirs.

The draft decree on Workers’ Control published in November set up an All-Russian Soviet for Workers’ Control. However this only had five representatives from the factory committees, who thus became a tiny minority. Workers’ control was to be carried out by elected bodies, either factory committees alongside management or general assemblies of all workers: these bodies would have access to the firm’s accounts and other information (which a lot of factory committees already had), and their decisions would be binding. There were, though, two enormous ‘huts’ in the proposals. Firstly, the trade unions centrally could overrule any factory committee decisions, and secondly, in any enterprise “important to the state”, the committees were answerable to state bodies for keeping order and doing as instructed. These two things negated any positive aspects of the decree. More detailed instructions to supplement the decree were drawn up by a small committee of three Bolsheviks and two left Social-Revolutionaries: ‘every cook to govern’ indeed! Eventually the new government produced its “General Instructions on Workers’ Control”, which came to be known as the “Counter-Manual”. Its overall intention was to turn the factory committees into powerless local union branches. Its standpoint is captured in Article 7: “(...) the right to issue orders relating to the management, running and functioning of enterprises remains in the hands of the owners.”
Committee proposal for a Soviet of People’s Commissars, whereby “control over the activities of the government is vested in the Congress of Soviets and its Central Executive Committee”. Seven Bolsheviks from the party’s central committee were nominated, and thus Lenin and Trotsky came to sit at the top, never having done a day’s work in their lives. The “workers’ government” was now composed of middle-class professional revolutionaries.

The Bolshevik party leadership at that time was composed of well-educated militants, generally in their mid-thirties on average. Most had some personal means, and thus no need to work, either sustained by family wealth or party funds. Some took jobs to ‘get into industry’ (an updating of the old Narodnik idea of going to the people: this is still much copied by today’s imitation Bolsheviks). In their origins, the Bolsheviks ranged from the aristocratic, like Chicherin, to the bureaucratic, like Lenin and Kollontai, via the landed bourgeois (Smilga), the commercial bourgeois (Yoffe) and the higher industrial bourgeois (Pyatakov). These were the sort of people used to being a ruling class.

It was the Red Guard who peremptorily closed down the Constituent Assembly, the Western-style parliament. While the Assembly members and the socialists (including some Bolsheviks) were shocked, the population as a whole was completely indifferent to the end of another talking-shop. The Red Guardist Trifonov had wanted to turn the Red Guard into a militia under the control of the factory committees that all workers would pass through. But after October the Bolsheviks did not trust the Red Guard, as it was an armed force independent of the party, and Lenin said that “the place for the best workers is the factory.” The workers in general used the Bolshevik slogans, except the call for nationalization, where workers were for control by the factory committees. Even at the moment of revolution, when the Bolsheviks were able to ride the waves, the conflict between them and the workers was there in potential. In some other ways the workers went further than the Bolsheviks. It was workers who were insistent on the closure of all bourgeois papers, and compulsory labor or expulsion for the bourgeois. But the party won the day: in 1916 the constitution of the new state was ratified with the words “the party leads and dominates the entire apparatus of state.” The workers, for all their efforts, remained workers.


In his pamphlet ‘State & Revolution’ written before October, but not published till 1918, Lenin had called for ‘every cook to govern’, for workers to plan the socialist society. The militant activists in the factory committees were aware of the need to co-ordinate their activities and centralize. The very day after the October Revolution, representatives from the Central Council of Factory Committees met Lenin and some Trade Union leaders to propose a Provisional All-Russian People’s Economic Council. Here was a genuine plan from elements of the real working class vanguard. They suggested that this Council should have as two-thirds of its members, workers’ representatives from the factory committees, trade unions and the Soviet’s Central Executive Committee, and one-third drawn from the owners and technicians. The
counterrevolutionary propaganda; arsenal workers and clerical employees controlled
the release of arms and ammunition; the Petrograd lighting station factory committee
liaised with other committees to get coal and grease for turbines to get round the
employers’ sabotage; a conference of artillery factory workers called for a soviet
government, and set up a group to study the transition to peaceful production.

Meanwhile, Lenin was writing on the evening of October 24th --“Who is
to seize the power? That is now of no importance. Let the Military Revolutionary
Committee take it, or ‘some other institution’, which will declare that it will surrender
the power only to the genuine representatives of the interests of the people.” [22] Not
‘the people’, not even ‘representatives of the people’, but ‘representatives of the
interests of the people’: that is, the Bolshevik Party led by Lenin. Lenin’s program
for revolution adopted the demands of the mass movement -- replace the existing
government with a soviet system, end the war, give the land to the peasants, establish
workers’ control -- only to dilute the demands and hold back the movement. Workers’
control, for instance, was to be nothing more than “a national, all-embracing,
omnipresent, most exact and most conscientious accounting of production and
distribution of goods,” and the existing state machinery would be taken over for this.

[Soldiers, Militias & Red Guards]

When the soldiers heard the news of the February Revolution “All the soldiers said,
‘Thank God! Maybe now we will have Peace.’”, as a delegate to a conference of
soviets in March reported. As army discipline collapsed, the soldiers’ demands were
for dignity and respect, to be treated as humans, not insulted by their officers or
addressed in the familiar form reserved for pets and children, not to have to salute,
and for the same political and civil rights as any private citizen. Above all, they
wanted an end to the war. They elected soldiers’ committees which controlled arms,
and sent representatives to soviets. One million soldiers simply deserted the front
to get back home and take their share of the land. After April, the soldiers started to
back the workers; some took part in the July Days. After that, attempts were made
by the authorities to restore discipline in the army. However, the soldiers’ distrust of
their officers had gone too far by then. As the future creator of the Red Army -- and
future employer of Tsarist officers -- noted: “The workers on the other hand, along
with the ‘dark’ rank-and-file, saw every possible danger exactly in the ranks of those
brilliant officers.” The soldiers’ committees started to demand land for the peasants,
the abolition of private property, the setting up of workers’ militias, and workers’
control. Bolshevik popularity increased amongst them because the soldiers thought
they too wanted peace.

In the early days of the revolution, in February and March, 30,000 revolvers
and 40,000 rifles disappeared from military stores, and many found their way into
the hands of workers. The first workers’ militias were started by printers. Usually set
up by non-party workers in some secrecy, they were intended to defend the factories.
The Workers’ Guards in the plants gave factory committees the power to enforce their
decisions on reluctant employers and managers. Red Guards also acted to prevent
sabotage by the bosses and their agents. When attempts were made after the July
Days to disarm workers, they surrendered useless rubbish and kept the worthwhile
weapons. After the abortive Kornilov coup, workers kept rifles constantly by their
side at work. Working women set up Red Cross divisions in the plants and lectures
were arranged on the care of the wounded. Factory committees gradually got material
together for makeshift hospitals and ambulances. The Vyborg factory committees had
their own military-revolutionary committee. This set up patrols of the district, got
keys for all the drawbridges’ and studied the weak points in the districts defense.

The arming of the workers was too extensive for the authorities to do
anything about it. At the time of Kornilov’s attempted coup, they had to rely on the
workers. Railwaymen tore up tracks to stop Kornilov’s men, and armed themselves;
postal clerks held up communications; soviets in large stations misdirected trains and
regiments. The pressure from below rebuilt local soviets to face the reactionaries.
The workers’ militias and Red Guards were close to the factory committees and local
soviets. Service in them was worked out by lots, so that all workers spent at least
some time in them. Factories worked extra hours to produce arms and ammunition.
While those with arms drilled in the handling of weapons, the unarmed learned other
useful military skills such as building fortifications. The 40,000 strong Red Guards
kept order in the working class districts, stopping theft, protecting strikers and
demonstrators, supporting and defending the factory committees physically.

October 1917

The insurrection that gave power to the Bolsheviks was strictly speaking the work of
the Military-Revolutionary Committee of the Petrograd Soviet. Although only small
numbers were actively involved initially, the total lack of opposition to them, the
absence of support for the Provisional Government meant they could not be described
as a minority. Support for the action came rushing in after the event from the Soviet
of Petrograd Trade Unions and the All-Russian Soviet of Factory Committees
amongst others. The factory committees rallied to the Bolsheviks because the latter
appeared to support the workers’ aspirations. The committees had been active in the
July Days, had helped organize armed guards, and were involved in the Military-
Revolutionary Committee. Skrypnik, a Bolshevik on the Central Council of Factory
Committees had told the party’s Central Committee that the workers were ready
for a revolution, and if there wasn’t one soon, the committees would swing to the
anarchosyndicalists. Mass meetings in Petrograd called for the Second All-Russian
Congress of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies to form a government. This was a clear
ratification of the seizure of power. If October was ‘easy’, it was because all the work
had been done beforehand. The Provisional Government was utterly discredited, and
Bolshevism’s reactionary aspect had not been revealed.

Despite the mass of workers and soldiers thronging the Soviet Congress
on October 25th, the presidium was elected on the basis of 14 Bolsheviks, 7 Social-
Revolutionaries, three Mensheviks and one Internationalist. The Bolsheviks then
traipsed out their worker-candidates Lenin, Trotsky, Kamenev, Zinoviev and so on.
When it came to forming a government, Kamenev read out a Bolshevik Central