

Socialism and the centenary of the Russian Revolution: 1917-2017

3 January 2017

1. A specter is haunting world capitalism: the specter of the Russian Revolution.

This year marks the centenary of the world-historical events of 1917, which began with the February Revolution in Russia and culminated in October with “ten days that shook the world”—the overthrow of the capitalist provisional government and conquest of political power by the Bolshevik Party, under the leadership of Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky. The overthrow of capitalism in a country of 150 million people and establishment of the first socialist workers’ state in history was the most consequential event of the twentieth century. It vindicated, in practice, the historical perspective proclaimed just 70 years earlier, in 1847, by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in *The Communist Manifesto*.

In the course of one year, the uprising of the Russian working class, rallying behind it tens of millions of peasants, not only brought to an end centuries of rule by a semi-feudal autocratic dynasty. The extraordinary leap in Russia from “Tsar to Lenin”—the establishment of a government based on workers’ councils (soviets)—marked the beginning of a world socialist revolution that raised the consciousness of the working class and the masses oppressed by capitalism and imperialism in every part of the planet.

The Russian Revolution—which erupted in the midst of the horrifying carnage of World War I—proved the possibility of a world beyond capitalism, without exploitation and war. The events of 1917 and their aftermath penetrated deep into the consciousness of the international working class and provided the essential political inspiration for the revolutionary struggles of the twentieth century that swept across the globe.

2. The Bolshevik Party based its struggle for power in 1917 on an international perspective. It recognized that the objective basis for the socialist revolution in Russia was rooted, in the final analysis, in the international contradictions of the world imperialist system—above all, in the conflict between the archaic national-state system and the highly integrated character of modern world economy. Therefore, the fate of the Russian Revolution depended on the extension of workers’ power beyond the borders of Soviet Russia. As Trotsky explained so clearly:

The completion of the socialist revolution within national limits is unthinkable. One of the basic reasons for the crisis of bourgeois society is the fact that the productive forces created by it can no longer be reconciled with the framework of the national state. From this follow, on the one hand, imperialist wars, on the other, the utopia of a bourgeois United States of Europe. The socialist revolution begins on the national arena, it unfolds on the international arena, and is completed on the world arena. Thus, the socialist revolution becomes a permanent revolution in a newer and broader sense of the word: it attains completion only in the final victory of the new society on our entire planet. [*The Permanent Revolution* (London: New Park Publications, 1971), p. 155]

3. The fate of the Bolshevik Party, the Soviet Union and the socialist revolution in the twentieth century hinged on the outcome of the conflict of two irreconcilable perspectives: the revolutionary internationalism championed by Lenin and Trotsky in 1917 and during the first years of the existence of the Soviet Union, and the reactionary nationalist program of the Stalinist bureaucracy that usurped political power from the Soviet working class. Stalin’s anti-Marxist perspective of “socialism in one country” underlay the disastrous economic policies within the Soviet Union and the catastrophic international political defeats of the working class that culminated in 1991, after decades of bureaucratic dictatorship and misrule, in the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the restoration of capitalism in Russia.

But the end of the USSR did not invalidate the Russian Revolution or Marxist theory. Indeed, in the course of his struggle against the Stalinist betrayal of the revolution, Leon Trotsky had foreseen the consequences of the national program of “socialism in one country.” The Fourth International, founded under Trotsky’s leadership in 1938, warned that the destruction of the USSR could be prevented only through the overthrow of the Stalinist bureaucracy, the reestablishment of Soviet democracy, and the renewal of the struggle for the revolutionary overthrow of world capitalism.

4. The imperialist leaders and their ideological accomplices greeted the dissolution of the USSR in December 1991 with raptures. The fact that virtually none of them had foreseen this event did not prevent them from proclaiming its “inevitability.” Seeing no further than their own noses, they improvised theories that reinterpreted the twentieth century in a manner that suited their collective class arrogance. All the self-deluding nonsense and stupidity of the ruling elites and their academic hirelings found its quintessential expression in Francis Fukuyama’s “End of History” thesis. The October Revolution, he argued, was nothing more than an accidental departure from the normal and, therefore, timeless bourgeois-capitalist course of history. In the form of capitalist economics and bourgeois democracy, humanity had arrived at the highest and final stage of development. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, there could be no thought of an alternative to capitalism, let alone one based on workers’ power and the socialist reorganization of world economy.

Endorsing Fukuyama’s revelation, historian Eric Hobsbawm, a lifelong Stalinist, dismissed the October Revolution and, for that matter, the revolutionary and counterrevolutionary upheavals of the twentieth century, as unfortunate accidents. The years between 1914 (which witnessed the outbreak of World War I) and 1991 (the dissolution of the Soviet Union) were a misguided “age of extremes” that comprised the “short twentieth century.” Hobsbawm did not claim to know what the future would bring, or whether the twenty-first century would be short or long. He was certain of only one thing: there would never again be a socialist revolution in any way comparable to the events of 1917.

5. Twenty-five years have passed since Fukuyama proclaimed the “End of History.” Supposedly liberated from the menace of socialist revolution, the ruling class has had an opportunity to demonstrate what capitalism could accomplish if allowed to plunder the world as it pleased. But what is the outcome of its orgies? A short list of achievements would include: the filthy enrichment of an infinitesimal portion of the world’s population, vast social inequality and mass poverty, endless wars of aggression that have cost the lives of millions, the relentless strengthening of the repressive organs of the state and the decay of democratic forms of rule, the institution of murder and torture as basic instruments of imperialist foreign policy, and the general degradation of every aspect of culture.

6. A quarter century after the fall of the Soviet Union, it is impossible to deny that the entire world has entered a period of profound economic, political and social crisis. All the unresolved contradictions of the past century are reemerging with explosive force on the surface of world politics. The events of 1917 are acquiring a new and intense contemporary relevance. In countless publications, bourgeois commentators are calling attention nervously to parallels between the world of 2017 and that of 1917.

“Bolshiness is back,” warns the *Economist*’s Adrian Wooldridge in the magazine’s preview of the New Year. “The similarities to the world that produced the Russian revolution are too close for comfort.” He writes: “This is a period of miserable centenaries. First, in 2014, came that of the outbreak of the first world war, which destroyed the liberal order. Then, in 2016, that of the Battle of the Somme, one of the bloodiest conflicts in military history. In 2017 it will be 100 years since Lenin seized power in Russia.”

None other than Fukuyama now describes the United States, which he once hailed as the apotheosis of bourgeois democracy, as a “failed state.” He writes, “The American political system has become dysfunctional,” and “has undergone decay over recent decades as well-organized elites have made use of vetocracy to protect their interests.” Finally, Fukuyama warns: “[W]e cannot preclude the possibility that we are living through a political disruption that will in time bear comparison with the collapse of Communism a generation ago.”

7. For world capitalism, 2016 was the year from hell. All the structures of world politics established in the closing years of the Second World War and its aftermath are in an advanced state of disintegration. The contradiction between the inexorable processes of economic globalization and the confines of the national state is driving world politics. 2016 was the year of the accelerating breakdown of the European Union, exemplified in the Brexit vote and the growth of extreme right-wing nationalist parties.

The past year also witnessed the relentless intensification of military tensions, to the extent that the possibility—even the likelihood—of a Third World War is openly discussed in countless books, journals and newspapers. The innumerable regional tensions throughout the world are developing into an increasingly direct and open confrontation involving the major, nuclear-armed powers. No one can say for sure who will fight whom. Will the United States move first against China, or must that conflict be delayed until after accounts have been settled with Russia? This question is presently the subject of bitter strategic debate and conflict within the highest echelons of the American state. Even among the closest post-World War II allies, the friction of geopolitical and economic competition is fraying alliances. Germany is seeking to translate its economic strength into military power and discarding the last vestiges of its post-Nazi “pacifism.”

8. The crisis of the global capitalist system finds its most advanced expression within its very center, the United States. More than any other country, the United States imagined that it would be the prime beneficiary of the dissolution of the USSR. The first President Bush immediately

proclaimed the birth of a “new world order,” in which the United States would function as the unchallengeable hegemon. Unmatched in its military power, the United States would exploit the “unipolar moment” to restructure the world in its own interests. Its strategists harbored dreams not simply of a new American Century, but of American centuries! In the words of Robert Kaplan, a leading foreign policy strategist:

The more successful our foreign policy, the more leverage America will have in the world. Thus, the more likely that future historians will look back on the twenty-first century United States as an empire as well as a republic, however different from that of Rome and every other empire throughout history. For as the decades and centuries march on, and the United States has had a hundred presidents, or 150 even, instead of forty-three, and they appear in long lists like the rulers of bygone empires—Roman, Byzantine, Ottoman—the comparison with antiquity may grow rather than diminish. Rome, in particular, is a model for hegemonic power, using various means to encourage a modicum of order in a disorderly world... [*Warrior Politics: Why Leadership Demands a Pagan Ethos* (New York: Random House, 2002), p. 153.]

9. Kaplan’s ode to empire, written in 2002, testifies to the semi-deranged state of mind that prevailed in the American ruling class as it launched its “war on terror” and prepared for the second invasion of Iraq in 2003. The American ruling class mistook the approaching abyss for a rainbow. The “unipolar moment” proved, indeed, to be little more than the briefest of historical interludes, and the new “American Century” lasted considerably less than a decade.

The euphoric response of the American ruling class to the dissolution of the Soviet Union expressed a disastrous misreading of the historical situation. The ruling elites convinced themselves that they could employ military power—undeterred by the danger of Soviet retaliation—to reverse decades of erosion of the economic supremacy of the United States. This miscalculation formed the basis of a massive escalation of American military operations throughout the world, which has led to one disaster after another. Fifteen years after 9/11, the fraudulent “war on terror” has left the Middle East in chaos, culminating in the debacle of America’s regime-change operation in Syria.

10. The military disasters of the past quarter century have been compounded by the deterioration of the global economic stature of the United States, which has found ever more direct expression in the decline in living standards for broad masses of the population. According to a recent report by economists Thomas Piketty, Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman, the pretax share of national income received by the bottom half of the population in the United States has fallen from 20 percent in 1980 to 12 percent today, while—in an exact reversal—the share of the top one percent has risen from 12 percent to 20 percent. For four decades, the real incomes of the bottom half have remained flat, while the incomes of the top one percent have risen by 205 percent, and for the top .001 percent by a staggering 636 percent.

The younger generation of Americans is drowning in debt, unable to make enough to start a family or move out of their parents’ homes. While in 1970, 92 percent of 30-year-olds made more than their parents did at a similar age, only 51 percent did so in 2014. Millions of Americans are suffering from inadequate health care. For the first time in more than two decades, overall life expectancy fell in 2015 due to the shocking rise in mortality from suicide, drug abuse and other manifestations of social crisis.

11. As American society has become more unequal, it has become increasingly difficult for its ideologists to maintain the pretense that

democracy still prevails. One of the essential functions of identity politics—centered on race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality—has been to shift attention away from the deep class divisions within the United States. The election of Donald Trump has exposed, in all its disgusting nakedness, the reality of oligarchic rule in the United States. It must be stressed, however, that Trump is not some sort of monstrous interloper in what had been, until Election Day 2016, a flawed but essentially decent society. Trump—the product of the criminal and diseased couplings of the real estate, finance, gambling and entertainment industries—is the genuine face of the American ruling class.

12. The incoming Trump administration, in its aims as in its personnel, has the character of an insurrection of the oligarchy. As a doomed social class approaches its end, its effort to withstand the tides of history not infrequently assumes the form of an attempt to reverse what it perceives as the longstanding erosion of its power and privilege. It seeks to return conditions to the way they once were (or as it imagines they were), before the inexorable forces of social and economic change began gnawing away at the foundations of its rule. Charles I blocked the summoning of parliament in England for 11 years prior to the outbreak of revolution in 1640. When the *Etats-General* assembled in Paris on the eve of revolution in 1789, the French nobility intended to reestablish privileges that had been ebbing away since 1613. The Civil War in the United States was preceded by the effort of the Southern elite to extend slavery throughout the country. The firing on Fort Sumter in April 1861 marked the beginning of what was, in effect, a slave-owners' insurrection.

Trump's pledge to "Make America Great Again" means, in practice, the eradication of whatever remains of the progressive social reforms—achieved through decades of mass struggles—that ameliorated conditions of life for the working class. In Trump's own mind, "making America great" entails returning the country to the conditions of the 1890s, when the Supreme Court ruled that the income tax was communistic and unconstitutional. The institution of the income tax in 1913 and all the ensuing social legislation and regulation that placed limits on the exploitation of workers, the broader public, and the environment, represented, as far as Trump is concerned, an assault on the right of the rich to make money as they pleased. The funding of public education and the establishment of the minimum wage, Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid and other social welfare programs sanctioned the diversion of financial resources away from the rich. Assembling a cabinet comprised of billionaires and multimillionaires, Trump intends to lead a government of the rich, by the rich and for the rich.

Alongside his rich cronies, Trump has brought into his cabinet and selected as his principal advisers a cabal of ex-generals and outright fascists. Their task will be to develop a foreign policy based on the unbridled assertion of the global interests of US imperialism. This is the real significance of the revival of the slogan of "America First." It is the deterioration of America's economic dominance that imparts to its imperialist agenda an increasingly savage character. The Democratic Party—that corrupt alliance of Wall Street financiers and state intelligence agencies—has concentrated its criticism of Trump on his alleged "softness" toward Russia. It need not worry. The Trump administration will continue and escalate the conflict with all countries whose interests—geopolitical and/or economic—clash with those of American imperialism.

13. Both in their international and domestic manifestations, the policies of Trump reflect a convulsive movement of the capitalist ruling elites to the right. The rise of Trump is paralleled by the growth in the political influence of the National Front in France, Pegida in Germany, the Five Star Movement in Italy and the UK Independence Party, which led the campaign for Brexit. In Germany, the ruling class is using the Christmas Market attack in Berlin to escalate the anti-refugee campaign led by Alternative for Germany. The political and economic essence of this

process is embedded in the nature of imperialism, as explained by Lenin:

The fact that imperialism is parasitic or decaying capitalism is manifested first of all in the tendency to decay, which is characteristic of *every* monopoly under the system of private ownership of the means of production. The difference between the democratic-republican and the reactionary-monarchist imperialist bourgeoisie is obliterated because they are both rotting alive... ["Imperialism and the Split in Socialism," in *Lenin Collected Works*, Volume 23 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), p. 106]

All the major imperialist powers are preparing for war, as states representing gigantic corporations and banks battle for control of resources, trade routes and markets. At the same time, the resort to nationalism is aimed at creating the framework for the violent suppression of class conflicts within each country.

14. The same capitalist crisis that produces imperialist war also produces the political radicalization of the working class and the development of socialist revolution. Trump will preside over a country riven by deep and intractable class conflict. Similar conditions prevail throughout the world. A recent study found that a quarter of all people in Europe, or 118 million, suffer from poverty or social exclusion. The poverty rate in Spain is 28.6 percent, and in Greece it is 35.7 percent. These are countries that have been targeted for brutal austerity measures dictated by the European Union and the banks. The number of unemployed young people worldwide rose to 71 million this year, increasing for the first time since 2013. In Venezuela, mass poverty and hyperinflation have led to food riots. In China, growing working-class militancy is expressed in a sharp increase in strikes and other forms of protest. Within Russia, the shock of capitalist restoration and the ensuing demoralization of the working class are giving way to renewed social militancy. The extreme social inequality and the kleptocratic character of the capitalist regime led by Putin are encountering ever-greater opposition.

15. Up until now, the political right, using the demagogic slogans of chauvinism, has exploited social discontent within the working class and broad sections of the middle class. But the initial successes of the reactionary parties of the chauvinist right have depended upon the political cynicism, deceit and bankruptcy of the organizations of what passes for the "left"—the Social Democrats, the Stalinists, the trade union bureaucrats and the array of petty-bourgeois anti-Marxist parties such as the Greens, the Left Party in Germany, Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain. To these one must add the many state-capitalist and Pabloite organizations, such as the International Socialist Organization (ISO) in the United States and the New Anti-capitalist Party in France (NPA). All the political energies of these reactionary organizations of the middle class are expended on falsifying Marxism to disorient the working class and impede the development of its struggle against capitalism.

16. But the pressure of events is driving the working class to the left. Among the billions of workers and young people around the world, there is a growing mood of anger and militancy. There are signs of both a resurgence of class struggle and a renewal of interest in socialism and Marxism. In the United States, 13 million people voted for a supposed socialist, Bernie Sanders, in the Democratic Party primary elections not because of his opportunist politics, but because of his denunciations of the "billionaire class" and his calls for a "political revolution." This is part of an international process, which is dictated by the very nature of global capitalism. The class struggle, as it gains in strength and political self-awareness, will tend more and more to sweep over the borders of nation states. As the International Committee of the Fourth International

noted as far back as 1988, "It has long been an elementary proposition of Marxism that the class struggle is national only as to form, but that it is, in essence, an international struggle. However, given the new features of capitalist development, even the form of the class struggle must assume an international character."

17. Confidence in the revolutionary potential of the working class, however, is not a justification for political complacency. It would be irresponsible to ignore the fact that there exists a vast disparity between the advanced stage of the international crisis of capitalism and the political consciousness of the working class. It must be acknowledged that herein lies a great danger. Without a socialist revolution, the very survival of human civilization is in question. The fundamental political task of this epoch consists of overcoming the gap between objective socioeconomic reality and subjective political consciousness. Can this be accomplished?

18. This question can be answered only on the basis of historical experience. Amidst all the massive upheavals of the twentieth century, there exists one example of the working class rising to the level of the tasks posed by history: the October Revolution. In confronting the great problems of this epoch, it is necessary to study that historical event and assimilate its lessons.

In this centenary year of the Russian Revolution, there is a profound intersection and interaction between contemporary politics and historical experience. The 1917 Revolution arose out of the imperialist catastrophe of World War I. In the political maelstrom that followed the overthrow of the tsarist regime, the Bolshevik Party emerged as the dominant force within the working class. But the role played by the Bolsheviks in 1917 was the outcome of a long and difficult struggle for the development of socialist consciousness in the working class and the working out of a correct revolutionary perspective.

19. The critical elements of that struggle were: 1) the defense and elaboration of dialectical and historical materialism, in opposition to philosophical idealism and anti-Marxist revisionism, as the theoretical basis of the education and revolutionary practice of the working class; 2) the unrelenting struggle against the many forms of opportunism and centrism that obstructed or undermined the fight to establish the political independence of the working class; and 3) the working out, over many years, of the strategic perspective that oriented the Bolshevik Party toward the struggle for power in 1917. In this latter process, the adoption by Lenin of the Theory of Permanent Revolution, developed by Trotsky during the previous decade, was the critical advance that guided the strategy of the Bolsheviks in the months leading up to the overthrow of the provisional government.

20. The victory of the socialist revolution in October 1917 proved that the conquest of political power by the working class depends, in the final analysis, upon the building of a Marxist party in the working class. No matter how large and powerful the mass movement of the working class, its victory over capitalism requires the conscious political leadership of a Marxist-Trotskyist party. There is no other way the victory of the socialist revolution can be achieved.

The recognition of this political imperative will guide the work of the International Committee in this centenary year. As the development of the international class struggle creates a broader audience for Marxist theory and politics, the International Committee will do all that it can to expand knowledge of the Russian Revolution and educate new layers of the working class and youth, politically awakened and radicalized by the crisis, in the "Lessons of October."

As 2017 begins, we call on the many thousands of readers of the *World Socialist Web Site* to become active in the revolutionary struggle and to join and build the Fourth International as the World Party of Socialist Revolution. This is the most appropriate and effective way to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Russian Revolution and the victory of October 1917.

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