

Final reflections on the centennial year of the October Revolution

30 December 2017

At the very beginning of the year that is now drawing to a close, the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote: “A specter is haunting world capitalism: the specter of the Russian Revolution.” This statement has been richly confirmed by the manner in which the centenary of the October Revolution was observed by bourgeois historians and journalists. In the first months of the year, the commentary was cynical and dismissive, exemplified by historian Sheila Fitzpatrick’s flippant remark, published this past March in the *London Review of Books*: “Nothing fails like failure, and for historians approaching the revolution’s centenary the disappearance of the Soviet Union casts a pall. In the rash of new books on the revolution, few make strong claims for its persisting significance and most have an apologetic air... Socialism is so much a mirage that it seems kinder not to mention it.”

But as the year dragged on, amidst the growing threat of a cataclysmic war and daily manifestations of global political instability and intensifying social tensions, the tone of the commentary began to assume an ever-darker character. The dissolution of the Soviet Union by the Stalinist bureaucracy in 1991 had supposedly banished the specter of socialist revolution for all time. But as the precise centennial anniversary of the revolution led by Lenin approached, the bourgeoisie found itself asking, like Lady Macbeth, “Yet who would have thought the old man to have so much blood in him?”

In an essay published in the *New York Times* on November 6, right-wing historian Simon Sebag Montefiore wrote: “The October Revolution, organized by Vladimir Lenin exactly a century ago, is still relevant in ways that would have seemed unimaginable when the Soviet Union collapsed.” He observed nervously that the Bolshevik victory continues “to reverberate and inspire” and “looms epic, mythic, mesmerizing.” Montefiore bemoaned the Russian bourgeois Provisional Government’s failure to defeat the revolution by murdering Lenin.

On the same day, in the *Washington Post*, the anti-communist historian Anne Applebaum warned that capitalism remained vulnerable to the threat of socialist revolution, and that governments should not be complacent. Even if revolutionary socialists were still few in number, their potential power should not be underestimated. “Remember,” Applebaum wrote, “at the beginning of 1917... most of the men who later became known to the world as the Bolsheviks were conspirators and fantasists on the margins of society. By the end of the year, they ran Russia.” Thus, the lesson of 1917 is clear: “If a system becomes weak enough and the opposition is divided enough, if the ruling order is corrupt enough, extremists can suddenly step into the center, where no one expects them.”

In contrast to the highly class-conscious bourgeois historians, the representatives of the petty-bourgeois pseudo-left continued to insist on the essential irrelevance of the October Revolution as a theoretical

guide and political model for socialists in the present-day world. Of course, there is nothing wrong in paying a purely ceremonial tribute to Lenin and even Trotsky. But as a *practical* matter, there is little in the theory, politics and experience of Bolshevism and the October Revolution that is especially relevant to the contemporary world. This bankrupt outlook found its most finished expression in a special edition of *Jacobin* magazine marking the centenary of the October Revolution. An essay entitled “The New Communists,” by Connor Kilpatrick and Adaner Usmani, begins with the tagline: “It’s 2017. Time to stop worrying about the questions of 1917.”

This advice is not quite as original as Adaner and Usmani apparently believe it to be. This was the basic conception upon which the “New Left” was based a half-century ago. As in 1968, the call to “stop worrying about the questions of 1917” is directed against the study of the theory, program, principles and strategic lessons of the first and only conquest of power by the working class, led by a revolutionary Marxist political party. A corollary of the “forget about history” approach of the “New Left” and its pseudo-left descendants is that there is to be no examination of the role played by Stalinism, social democracy, centrism and other forms of political opportunism in the derailment and defeat of the many opportunities for the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism by the working class that developed in the course of the twentieth century. Above all, the amnesia promoted by the pseudo-left is directed against the study of and serious engagement with the history and program of Trotskyism and the Fourth International.

The Kilpatrick-Usmani essay abounds with the sort of cynical and superficial arguments that generally characterizes *Jacobin* magazine, which is, predictably, publicized and praised by the *New York Times* as an exemplar of contemporary socialist theory. “Whether or not twentieth-century socialism was fated to fail, we now live in a new era,” the authors write. Without explaining precisely what this “new era” is, or how it is fundamentally different from that of the October Revolution, Kilpatrick-Usmani simply assert: “Today, one hundred years later, the world has turned. [?] Nowhere do the political tasks today look anything like those the Bolsheviks confronted in 1918 [??]. The Bolsheviks inherited a world convulsed by murderous inter-imperialist war; we live in the most peaceful period in recorded history.” [???

These political Rip Van Winkles seem to have slept through the past quarter-century and taken no notice of the two invasions of Iraq, the Balkan Wars of the 1990s, the various bloodbaths instigated by imperialism in Africa, and the general carnage that has been unleashed throughout much of the Middle East and Central Asia as a consequence of the last sixteen years of the “War on Terror.” In this “most peaceful period in recorded history,” several million people

have been killed and injured, and tens of millions have been made homeless and stateless.

“The world’s working classes have moved on,” the theorists of *Jacobin* magazine declare. The time is past for “starry-eyed dreaming.” Instead, “it’s time for us to stop worrying about old answers to old questions and start worrying about the ones working people are asking.” This is not the age of Lenin and Trotsky, but rather of... Sanders and Corbyn! These two pathetic representatives of senile reformism are hailed as the true voices of “tens of millions of people [who] are dead set on changing the world.” Kilpatrick-Usmani fail to explain how this revolutionary aspiration will be accomplished under the leadership of two men who “are dead set” on saving the US Democratic and UK Labour parties, two of the most reactionary capitalist-imperialist parties in the world.

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During the past twelve months, the International Committee of the Fourth International has commemorated the centenary of the October Revolution in a manner that expresses its profound historical and political identification with the events of 1917 and the revolutionary internationalist program of Bolshevism. Our commemoration included the posting on the *World Socialist Web Site* of a detailed weekly chronology of 1917 that traced the major political, social and cultural events of that revolutionary year, both within Russia and internationally. While focusing on the major political and theoretical controversies of 1917, it sought also to provide a sense of the social and intellectual ambience within which the great revolutionary movement of the Russian proletariat unfolded. The International Committee also broadcast nine lectures that examined and explained the critical issues of theory, program and perspective that confronted the Bolshevik Party in the February and October Revolutions of 1917. Finally, in the autumn of this year, the political parties affiliated with the International Committee in North America, Europe, Asia and the Asia-Pacific organized public lectures on the historical significance and lessons of the October Revolution that were attended by substantial audiences of student youth and working people.

Every aspect of the International Committee’s commemoration of the centenary was rooted in an uncompromising defense of a revolutionary Marxist perspective. These include the following essential conceptions:

1) The October Revolution marked the beginning of the epoch of World Socialist Revolution, a historical period of transition from capitalism to socialism, which continues to define the present historical period. The establishment of workers’ power in 1917 and the subsequent formation of the Soviet Union in 1922 were colossal achievements of the October Revolution. However, the establishment and defense of Soviet power, however significant, was only an episode in the World Socialist Revolution. The fundamental betrayal of Stalinism, and the source of all its crimes against the Russian and international working class, was its repudiation of the program of world revolution and its perversion of Bolshevism into a national state-building project. The program of “socialism in one country” announced by Stalin and Bukharin in 1924 was a revival of the national-democratic orientation adopted by Stalin and Kamenev in the immediate aftermath of the February 1917 Revolution, against which Lenin fought implacably following his return to Russia in April.

2) The events of 1917, culminating in the conquest of political power by the Russian proletariat, vindicated the perspective of Permanent Revolution, which had been elaborated by Leon Trotsky in the aftermath of the Revolution of 1905. As Trotsky had foreseen, the carrying through of the democratic tasks of the revolution was possible only through the overthrow of the bourgeoisie by the proletariat and the initiation of socialist policies. The defense of the socialist revolution, in whatever country it may occur, depends upon its extension throughout the world.

3) The victory of the October Revolution demonstrated the necessity of a Marxist vanguard party. Without the long struggle waged by Lenin against political opportunism and the influence of idealist revisions of philosophical materialism, there would not have existed the necessary, highly conscious cadre of Marxist revolutionaries in the working class to give political and organizational direction to the mass spontaneous movement that erupted in Russia in 1917.

4) The necessity of the revolutionary Marxist party, positively confirmed in 1917 by the leadership provided by the Bolsheviks, was negatively confirmed in the defeats suffered by the working class in subsequent decades. Capitalism survived the twentieth century not because of the absence of revolutionary situations and opportunities, but because of the betrayals of the leaderships of the bureaucratically controlled parties and trade union organizations of the working class.

5) The resolution of the crisis of working class leadership, as Trotsky insisted in the founding program of the Fourth International, remains the great historical task that confronts the revolutionary socialist movement.

The International Committee of the Fourth International has every right to look back with pride on the theoretical and political work that it conducted in 2017. Its ability to carry through this ambitious program of political and theoretical education is all the more noteworthy given the fact that it also maintained daily publication of the *World Socialist Web Site*. These achievements testify to the considerable strengthening of the International Committee of the Fourth International as the sole revolutionary Marxist party in the world.

But pride in past achievements is not complacent self-satisfaction. The International Committee sees all the educational work of the past year as essential preparation for the resurgence of international class struggle, which will be the most significant political feature of 2018.

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