

Punching Holes in Russian Capitalism

Seeds of the 1917 Revolution are Sprouting Again

Allan Antliff

During the 1917 Russian revolution, anarchists urged workers to take control of their lives by turning the capitalists out and seizing control of the means of production, the better to reconstruct society along anarchistic lines.

In some instances, property was communalized and a post-capitalist social order began to emerge. One such experiment was initiated by Boris Yelensky, an anarchist who returned to Russia in February 1917 after a lengthy exile in Chicago: Yelensky made his way to his home town of Novorossiysk in August where he formed an anarchist propaganda group.

He later related the activities of this group to Kropotkin during a visit to his residence in Dimitrov in 1919 (Kropotkin returned to Russia in 1917 and died there in 1921). “We decided,” he told him,

“...to start propagandizing the workers, urging that a Regional Economic Soviet (council of workers) be organized to coordinate production and distribution. We felt that the Soviet should consist of two delegates from each section of work; and that these should take over the work place -and make it communal property devoted to maintaining the life and welfare of the community. Since we believed in equality for every human being, we would recommend equal pay for every worker, with 25 percent extra above the basic pay for each dependent in the worker’s family. We decided to accept any of the administrative or engineering staffs who wished to join us, on an equal basis, without any retaliation for what they had been before the revolution.

“We had further agreed to propose to the Regional Economic Soviet that they contact cooperatives of the region and try to arrange with them that they take over all the distribution of Products made in the shops and factories and that the Regional Soviet should organize the care for the old and the sick, who were unable to work. I told Kropotkin that this, in brief, was what our group proposed to the first conference of delegates from- the shops and factories; that all our recommendations were accepted, and that this resulted in the establishment of the Economic Soviet in the city of Novorossiysky.”

—Boris Yelensky, “A Visit with Kropotkin,” *The Match*, August, 1974

Kropotkin responded that the experiment at Novorossiysky “proved to him that he was right in his ideas and theories; that they could be applied in real life, and that in the proper environment, human beings can indeed change and create a free society.”

Indeed, a free society does require a “proper environment” to develop, namely a revolution against capitalism that treats people as autonomous, and attributes to them a concern for human dignity and an ability to respond rationally to whatever problems they confront.

Although the arrangement at Novorossiysky was crushed by the Bolsheviks as soon as they established control in the region, I evoke 1917 because the seeds of just such a revolution are again stirring in Russia.

Today, the focal points are places like the Vyborg Pulp and Paper mill in the town of Sovietsky, located near Russia’s main railway and highway links to Scandinavia. On 9 July 1999, eighty masked police gunmen accompanied by the local prosecutor and other officials attempted to storm the Vyborg plant, which had been occupied by workers for over eighteen months.

They were aided by a private armed militia in the pay of the mill's owners, which captured the plant's elected director and tried to force him to call off the occupation. The director stood firm and the workers, using the plant's alarm system, mobilized the town's populace and beat off the attack. Fighting was fierce and two workers were seriously injured.

The Vyborg plant had been declared bankrupt in 1996, a process which has become standard under Russian capitalism. Firms are run into the ground through neglect and then asset-stripped and auctioned off at low prices. Profits made are salted away abroad while the local community is left to starve.

What made the Vyborg situation different was that the workers, following similar actions in Samara, Tula, and other regions, refused to accept the capitalist shell-game and, in January, 1998, seized control of their plant. They formed a workers' committee, elected their own (unpaid) plant director, and began running the plant themselves.

The company that had hoped to profit from Vyborg's bankruptcy, Nimonor Investments, promptly sued the workers' committee and their trade union. Though the courts ruled in favor of Nimonor, the company has to date been unable to drive out the workers whose resistance remains firm even in the face of the latest attacks.

The workers' hand is strengthened by support from local and regional workers organizations as well as the community at large (the mill produces the town's electricity).

This gives them a means of blocking all traffic on the Russia-Scandinavia highway and railway, a tactic which proved its effectiveness during country-wide strikes by Russian miners and others in the summer of 1998 (in Canada, similar tactics have long been a mainstay of First Nations struggles where hydro lines are vulnerable).

The latest assault on the Vyborg workers comes hard on the heels of an unprecedented victory by the workers of the Yasnogorsk (Tula region) machine plant, who also took control of their factory when a bankruptcy threatened. Nearly all their demands were met after a long occupation during which the workers ran the plant, shared the profits communally, and fed the town.

Russia's International Monetary Fund-sponsored capitalists (mostly former Communist Party functionaries) are terrified that protest occupations like these will evolve into fully anarchistic, anti-capitalist insurrections. Clearly, the state hopes to hold the line at Vyborg using violent methods taken straight from the books of its counterparts in Mexico and elsewhere.

The Vyborg workers are appealing for international solidarity in support of their efforts. Their plant has just been sold to Alcem UK Ltd., a company linked to some of the most mafia-ridden sectors of the Russian economy.

Vyborg workers are interested in any information regarding the true identity of Alcem UK Ltd., its major shareholders, trading partners, government contacts, etc.

To send or receive information contact: ISWoR via email: antek@aol.com.

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Fifth Estate #354, Spring, 2000

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