

# Lessons of October: The struggle against imperialist war

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*November 7, 2019, marks the 102nd anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution in Russia, led by the Bolshevik Party. Struggle-La Lucha is sharing this article by Sam Marcy, a leading Marxist thinker and fighter of the second half of the twentieth century, which reviews some of the important lessons of that great workers' and peasants' revolution and its continued significance for the workers and oppressed.*

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It is astonishing that 65 years after the October Revolution in Russia so many profound lessons are still relevant today as they were the day after the victory of the revolution.

Take the question, for instance, of the struggle against war. Its urgency proclaims itself every day in the headlines of the world press.

There have been two world wars; two predatory wars in Asia - in Korea and Vietnam; three wars in the Middle East; a whole series of decades-long interventions both overt and covert in Africa and Latin America; a missile crisis in the Caribbean that threatened a world holocaust; and capping all this, the most recent "Peace. Land. Bread." Women lead the 1917 Russian Revolution. The Bolsheviks said that in the event of an imperialist war, the workers' party would, in accordance with the International's resolution, strive to utilize the economic and political crisis of the bourgeoisie and the war it created to overthrow it. A genocidal war, again in the Middle East, against Lebanon.

Such is the glorious record of the imperialist free enterprise system in this century,

a century of the most stupendous technological and scientific discoveries and inventions, the most splendid achievements which would assure peace and happiness for suffering humanity were it not for the incubus of monopoly capitalism.

The Damocles Sword of nuclear war, which has hung over the planet ever since Hiroshima and Nagasaki, is more threatening than ever.

(Legend has it that Dionysius the Elder (430-367 BCE), a cruel and oppressive ruler, had a sword suspended by a single hair from the ceiling of a banquet hall above the head of Damocles. This was meant to punish the courtier for his servility and excessive obsequiousness and to demonstrate the precariousness of his rank.)

One might well say that the war danger in general and nuclear peril in particular is history's punishment to humanity for the failure of the leadership of working-class parties to assimilate the great anti-war lessons of the October Socialist Revolution.

## **War and revolution**

The war not only contributed heavily to making the revolution possible, it also provoked a revolutionary situation in almost every leading capitalist country in the world.

Most importantly, it brought about revolutionary struggles in Germany, Italy, and Hungary, and caused a tremendous revolutionary upsurge in France. Mutinies in the armed forces followed. It also brought about a rapid leftward swing of the working class in Britain; the great General Strike of 1926 was really a continuation of the consequences of the imperialist war.

Yet despite the unsurpassed suffering of the masses as a result of the havoc wrought by the war, nowhere else in Europe did a proletarian revolution succeed.

The war in and of itself could not have brought the Bolsheviks to power. The war

merely accelerated all the social, political, and economic processes which existed during peacetime.

While the imperialist war interrupted the progress of the working-class movement in Russia, as elsewhere in Europe, once the war was on in earnest, once the carnage and suffering took an ever-increasing toll, the very same processes which had been either submerged or driven underground began to surface and accelerate.

The class struggle, even when it appears to be almost dormant, nevertheless exists. It can be muffled, stifled, mutilated. But the objective process of capitalist exploitation is remorseless and relentless. And in time of imperialist war, it accelerates and intensifies.

War, therefore, is not some utterly external factor which suddenly collapses over the heads of the masses. It is an outgrowth of peacetime tendencies inherent in the mode of capitalist production.

## **Socialist International and World War I**

The reason the war was a central factor contributing to the victory of the October Revolution, but failed to have the same effect in France, Italy, or even Germany, must be traced to the position taken toward the approaching conflict by the great socialist parties of Western Europe in the peacetime period immediately before the war.

It is often mistakenly said that the outbreak of the First World War caught the leadership of the socialist parties completely off guard. It is certainly true that the masses as a whole were taken off guard in the light of the official leadership's default. Large sections of the working class and lower ranking and middle officials of the Social Democratic parties were also taken by surprise.

But certainly the official leadership of the Second International, if it was taken by

surprise, should not have been. It had no cause to be.

The years preceding the outbreak of the war were characterized by considerable anti-war agitation on the part of the socialist parties of Germany, France, and other European countries. There were also a variety of bourgeois pacifist organizations such as exist in many parts of the West today.

However, it was socialist and working-class agitation against the war which was predominant. In a general way the anti-war struggle was carried on as an inseparable part of the struggle against capitalism.

It was, of course, limited by the times, which were considered a period of so-called peaceful capitalist development. It was also limited by the large metropolitan cities where it was strong — Berlin, Hamburg, Paris, Marseilles and, in a different way, London — where the socialist movement was developing agitation against militarism.

It is important to know that there was a strong, working-class peace movement and that anti-war agitation was one of the political aspects of the socialist and working-class struggle. Any talk about the leadership of the Second International being surprised or overwhelmed by a totally unexpected outbreak of war is false.

The Socialist International, as it existed at the time, held frequent international congresses where the anti-war struggle was discussed. There were at least two socialist congresses where the approach of war was very seriously discussed and acted upon with firmness and resolution.

These congresses are of singular significance. They mark the apex of the growth of the socialist and working-class movement in Europe. They demonstrate the highest point of class consciousness and working-class internationalism which the working-class movement had known up to that time.

## **Stuttgart and Basel Congresses**

The first of these congresses was held in Stuttgart, Germany, in 1907. Five years later, in 1912, another congress in Basel, Switzerland, discussed and reaffirmed Stuttgart resolution.

It is extremely illuminating to examine this resolution in detail. It has been quoted many times in the polemics of Lenin against Karl Kautsky, the leader and outstanding theoretician of the Second International and the right-wing Social Democrats during the war.

It is to be noted that the Basel meeting was not regarded as just another congress. It was entitled an “Extraordinary International Socialist Congress.” It was held on November 24-25, 1912, and the Basel Manifesto was subsequently published in the *Vorwärts*, the organ of the Social Democratic Party of Germany.

“If a war threatens to break out,” said the resolution, “it is the duty of the working classes and their parliamentary representatives in the countries involved, supported by the coordinating activity of the International Socialist Bureau to exert every effort in order to prevent the outbreak of the war. ...

“In case war should break out anyway,” the resolution continues, “it is their duty to intervene in favor of its speedy termination and with all their powers to utilize the economic and political crisis created by the war to arouse the people and thereby hasten the downfall of capitalist class rule.

“The congress urged the proletariat ... to devote the utmost force and energy to planned and concerted action. On the one hand,” the resolution continues, “the universal craze for armaments has aggravated the high cost of living, thereby intensifying class antagonisms and creating in the working class an implacable spirit of revolt; the workers want to put a stop to this system of panic and waste.” (Emphasis in original.)

It warns “the ruling classes of all states not to increase by belligerent actions the misery of the masses brought on by the capitalist method of production.”

It continues, “Let the governments remember that with the present condition of Europe and the mood of the working class, they cannot unleash a war without danger to themselves. Let them remember that the Franco-German War of 1870 was followed by the revolutionary outbreak of the Paris Commune. That the Russo-Japanese War of 1905 set into motion the revolutionary energies of the peoples of the Russian Empire. That competition in military and naval armaments gave the class conflicts in England and on the continent an unheard-of sharpness, and unleashed an enormous wave of strikes.

“Furthermore, it would be insanity for the governments not to realize that the very idea of the monstrosity of a world war would inevitably call forth the indignation and the revolt of the working class.

“The proletarians consider it a crime to fire at each other for the profits of the capitalists, the ambitions of dynasties, or the greater glory of secret diplomatic treaties.”

Finally it calls upon the workers of all countries “to oppose the power of the international solidarity of the proletariat to capitalist imperialism.” It ends with a clarion call to the workers: “To the capitalist world of exploitation and mass murder, oppose in this way the proletarian world of peace and fraternity of all peoples!”

### **‘Use war crisis to end capitalist rule’**

It is to be noted that this resolution, passed at both the Stuttgart and Basel congresses, did not confine itself to mobilizing the masses to end the war only after the war is on. It does not merely confine itself to the peace theme. And it doesn’t suffer from separating the economic struggle from the political struggle.

On the contrary, the resolution directs itself to the working class and warns that if war breaks out, then the working class must utilize the economic and political crisis not merely to end the war but to arouse all the people and thereby hasten the downfall of capitalist rule.

This resolution is remarkable because it brought up to date the strategic approach and tactical orientation of the working class in a new period of capitalist development. In the earlier, so-called progressive period of capitalist development, it had been permissible to side with one's own capitalist country if it were acting to complete the bourgeois democratic revolution in the struggle against feudalism, if it were carrying out a struggle essential to the development of a unified capitalist state, in order to attain autonomy within its own borders.

That was the epoch of the bourgeois national revolutions. It was the epoch in which the bourgeoisie constituted itself within the framework of a national state, without which it could not fully develop.

It was therefore a period when the criterion for support of and participation in a bourgeois war was whether or not it promoted a progressive and necessary tendency of the bourgeoisie in the struggle against dangerous feudal remnants and in order to constitute the bourgeoisie in a national, that is centralized, state.

The Stuttgart and Basel resolutions recognized, by implication if not by explicitly saying so, that it was now the epoch of imperialist wars, that the previous progressive period of capitalism had ended. The capitalist class could no longer carry on a war on a progressive basis, and the workers therefore ought not to support it.

These resolutions were also the highest theoretical exposition of the Marxist approach to capitalist wars at the time. Indeed, the very idea of formulating the question of war as it was done at these two socialist congresses was in itself an

expression of the high degree of class-consciousness and working-class international solidarity that the socialist movement had achieved at the time.

## **Significance of Basel still in dispute**

As we noted earlier, Basel was a specially convened congress to consider the war danger. The resolution gave expression, to the fullest extent possible, to the yearnings of the working class for peace and at the same time to their readiness to struggle.

Efforts to downplay the significance of the resolution as merely a ceremonial act lacking in real significance are post-war lies of right-wing social-democrats and bourgeois historians.

The congress was attended by the most important leaders in the world movement. It met at the time of the Balkan war crisis, which, as the resolution pointed out, had a potential of engulfing all of Europe. And it specifically warned the British, French, and German governments that the Socialist International knew what they were up to.

On no account can it be said that the resolution was just one of those things passed at socialist congresses. It wasn't.

It was a question, however, whether the leadership of the Socialist International had the will, determination, and readiness to follow up the mandate given by the International and utilize the crisis created by the war to overturn the capitalist system.

There is another school of thought which, decades after the resolution on imperialist war, minimized the significance of the legacy of Stuttgart and Basel. According to this interpretation, the resolutions were framed by "the leftists."

The insidious thought behind this is that a small group of fanatics positioned themselves in the resolutions committee and put over a line really contrary to the “moderate, reasonable, and pragmatic” positions of the European socialist leaders.

### **Prestige of the left**

It is true, of course, that the resolutions were written by Lenin (on behalf of the Bolsheviks), Julius Martov (who was in the left-wing of the Mensheviks), and Rosa Luxemburg. The truth of the matter, of course, is that Lenin, Martov, and Luxemburg represented the Russian Revolution of 1905 and the great strike struggles that were developing in Russia, especially around the time of the Basel congress.

The Russian revolutionary movement had tremendous prestige on the European continent, very much like the heroic Vietnamese, Cubans, Palestinians, and other oppressed peoples who are carrying on a revolutionary struggle against imperialism. In many ways, Russia at the time was in the category of a somewhat backward country which was oppressing its peoples at home, but was also an oppressor abroad in concert with the other imperialist powers.

The prestige of the left, as represented by the Russian and Polish delegations, was something the opportunists had to reckon with. At the same time, it is to be noted that no one really challenged the validity of the resolutions.

It should be added that in an effort to go even further to the left than the resolution, Jaures from France, in a left opportunist maneuver, tried to amend the key paragraph (relating to the utilization of the economic and political crisis created by the war to overthrow capitalist class rule) by calling the workers to “insurrection.” This was, however, properly defeated.

It was typical of Jaures at the time that he cast himself in the role of being more left

than the leadership, and at the same time was a proponent of ministerialism — the practice of accepting posts in a bourgeois cabinet.

The Copenhagen congress of 1904 had condemned the opportunist practice of taking cabinet posts in a bourgeois government. Jaurès frowned at this manifestation of adhering to orthodox Marxist principles and impugned the motives of the German Social Democratic leaders, especially Kautsky, who, along with the other socialist leaders of the International, at the time still opposed the practice of accepting cabinet posts in a bourgeois government.

"It is all well and good for you, German comrades," said Jaurès, "to speak against accepting cabinet posts in the bourgeois government. Is it because you are unable to get such posts, since no German government would offer any at all?"

Whatever the motivation, the fact remains that all the German Social Democratic leaders, along with most of the French, Italian, Belgian, Dutch, Swedish, and Japanese, when they were able to attend, took the position of the congress as embodied in the resolutions.

## **What made the Bolsheviks different?**

What distinguished the Bolsheviks from the various socialist parties in the Second International in Europe, and their Russian counterpart, the Mensheviks?

The Bolsheviks, especially Lenin, took most seriously that last, exceptionally significant, sentence quoted above. In the event of an imperialist war, the workers' party would, in accordance with the International's resolution, strive to utilize the economic and political crisis of the bourgeoisie and the war it created to overthrow it. Lenin's conception, in particular, gave the workers the opportunity to intensify the class struggle against the bourgeoisie.

War, according to Lenin, was merely a continuation of the politics of the bourgeoisie

by other means. Of course, Kautsky himself knew this very well, as did other leaders. Yet a profound gulf separated the Bolsheviks from the other socialist parties, except for the emerging left wings within the latter. Only the Bolsheviks had pursued a resolute, irreconcilable class struggle against the bourgeoisie and at the same time had fought relentlessly against any softening, watering down, diversion, or distortion of the anti-war thesis in the working-class movement with vigor and perseverance.

## **Struggle against opportunism**

This in essence was what the struggle against opportunism was all about. Opportunism means the sacrifice of the larger issues affecting the working class in the interest of illusory, minor, everyday gains. Opportunism in varying degrees is a common phenomenon in all the labor movements of the world. But it took on an exceptional character in Western Europe in this period when the working-class movement grew in breadth, as Lenin put it, yet at the same time accumulated practices and distortions of socialist tactics in the class struggle that militated against firm adherence to principle.

It was in the struggle against opportunism that the Bolsheviks grew strong.

This was not so in the other European parties. It is true that in 1899 Kautsky and others had taken up the theoretical cudgels to defend Marxism from the revisionism of Bernstein. But by and large that was a long way from a steady, consistent struggle against opportunism and all its manifestations in the trade unions, among the trade union leaders, in the parliamentary fraction of the German Social Democratic Party within the Reichstag, and on the many other fronts.

The trend toward opportunism in practice, as distinguished from revolutionary phraseology, was permitted to grow automatically as though it were an inevitable and necessary accompaniment to socialism and a demonstration of the variety of thought and diversity of tendencies which all contributed progressively to making

social democracy a mighty movement of the working class and its allies.

It was in the fight against opportunism and the struggle to pursue a rigidly working-class approach that Leninist doctrine over the years created a qualitatively different party in Russia than that which existed in Western Europe.

### **National chauvinism vs. revolutionary defeatism**

As is well known, the Socialist International broke down as a result of the war and each of the socialist parties took a chauvinist position toward the war. In Russia itself, the Bolsheviks struggled against the Mensheviks, the social-democratic minority who generally leaned in the same direction as their European counterparts.

The sharpness and clarity with which Lenin fought against the war showed that he had a qualitatively different class approach than did the Mensheviks in Russia or the social democrats abroad. The formula which Lenin devised in the struggle against the war is aptly summed up in his sentence, "The defeat of one's own capitalist government is the lesser evil in the struggle against the war." ("The Defeat of One's Own Government in Imperialist War," Selected Works of Lenin in 12 Volumes, Vol. 5, page 142.)

In this way, Lenin was updating the formula proposed at the Stuttgart and Basel congresses of utilizing the difficulties created by the imperialist war to overthrow the capitalist class.

"A revolutionary class in a reactionary war cannot but desire the defeat of its own government.

"This is an axiom," says Lenin. "It is disputed only by conscious partisans or by the helpless satellites of the social-chauvinists."

Lenin continues, "The opponents of the defeat slogan are simply afraid of themselves

when they refuse to recognize the very obvious fact that there is an inseparable connection between the revolutionary agitation against the government and facilitating defeat."

Further on he says, "To repudiate the defeat slogan means reducing one's revolutionary actions to an empty phrase or mere hypocrisy."

If the French, German, British, Russian, and Italian workers, as well as the Americans and Japanese, Lenin reckons, had all in the course of this imperialist war devoted their energies to defeating the war effort of their respective capitalist countries, it would have been an act of international proletarian solidarity on the part of each of them.

Those who were promoting the defeatist strategy of Lenin were in reality also promoting international solidarity as against the artificial divisions which the world imperialist bourgeoisie had created in the interest of imperialist super-profits.

Other socialist organizations said they were for stopping the war, were for peace. But, with the exception of the Bolsheviks and the Serbian Social Democratic Party, they all said the continuation of the war was necessary in order to stop the aggression of the other imperialist powers. In this way, French workers were ordered to kill German workers, and German workers were ordered to kill French workers, until aggression was stopped and imperialist peace achieved – after an imperialist war.

### **A difference in class approach**

Thus, one of the fundamental and most significant differences between the Bolsheviks and all other socialist organizations was not merely on how to stop the war. It was a different class approach.

With the other socialists, the class struggle stopped with the outbreak of the war

and national unity became the order of the day.

The defense budget took preeminence, just as it does today in all of the capitalist countries. Cuts in the living standard of the workers became necessary to overcome the crisis created by war expenditures. The workers would have to wait for an improvement until after the war – if they were still alive.

With the Bolsheviks, the class struggle did not stop with the outbreak of the war but took on a more intensified and vigorous form and had to be prosecuted to the end.

When the first Russian revolution, which overthrew the czar, broke out in February, there was no thought among the Menshevik leaders of really stopping the war or overthrowing the rule of the bourgeoisie.

But Lenin's way was to continue the class struggle so as to make sure the government would not participate on behalf of the bourgeoisie in the continuation of the war.

On each and every question, no matter how small, the issue always revolved itself around the attitude to the bourgeoisie. How to win the peasants away from the landlords and enlist them on the side of the proletariat. How to rally them all under the banner of the working class and separate them out from the bourgeoisie while isolating the latter.

All throughout the peaceful period preceding the war, during the war, and during the course of the whole revolution, a red thread runs through all of Leninist strategy and tactics. The struggle against the war in peacetime as in wartime is a struggle against the bourgeoisie. It is inseparable from the struggle against capitalism. To defeat the efforts of the warmakers, it is necessary to defeat the ruling class, making no fundamental distinction between the ruling class at war and the ruling class during peacetime.

Further reading: [The Bolsheviks and War](#) by Sam Marcy

