

Russian 'Shock Therapy' On the Skids Bonapartist Burlesque

Boris Yeltsin may have hoped that by dissolving the Russian parliament in September 1993 he was clearing the tracks for a rapid transition to a functioning market economy. Today everyone knows better. In the weeks following the storming of the Russian White House, Yeltsin issued a barrage of presidential decrees intended to consolidate his position and accelerate the pace of capitalist restoration. Everything appeared to be going according to his wishes until the December elections for a new parliament (Duma), when the voters delivered a stunning rebuke to the would-be Russian strongman. Candidates identified with Yeltsin's program were overwhelmed by a huge protest vote, the bulk of which was divided between two ex-Stalinist formations and the ultra-rightist Liberal Democratic Party of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy.

In February the newly elected Duma amnestied Alexander Rutskoi, Ruslan Khasbulatov and other imprisoned leaders of the old parliament. Yeltsin tried desperately to block their release, and when that failed, attempted to put a face-saving spin on the whole humiliating episode, with lame assertions that accepting an amnesty meant admitting guilt. Khasbulatov's response, delivered in an interview with *Sovietskaya Rossiya*, sounded anything but contrite. His prognosis for Yeltsin was:

"He is doomed. He will bear responsibility for (Defence Minister Pavel) Grachev with tanks ... Their trial is still ahead.' He added defiantly, 'Remember the president has staged a *coup d'tat*' and mocked Mr. Yeltsin for adopting many of the nationalist and conservative themes raised by the old parliament. 'Ninety per cent of his speech [to the new parliament in February] consists of what I had said at Congresses of People's Deputies.'"

—*Independent* [London], 2 March

Yeltsin's speeches do indeed sound a lot like Khasbulatov's used to. The reason that many of the most prominent Yeltsinite "reformers" (e.g., Yegor Gaidar, Anatoly Chubais and Boris Fyodorov) have been dumped is simple. While the major imperialist powers have been generous with praise and photo opportunities, they have refused to provide any serious economic assistance. While prepared to buy up certain lucrative properties (for example, oil holdings in Kazakhstan), the capitalist multinationals have no intention of underwriting the cost of reconstructing the Russian economy.

Capitalist restoration has been a disaster. Since 1989 gross national product has declined by *half!* Corruption is rampant, violent crime is mushrooming, medical services are collapsing, food and fuel are increasingly scarce and life expectancy is falling. Life is bad and getting worse for all but a tiny handful of parasites and speculators, and the future is bleak. All the government has been able to provide is a series of broken promises.

Yeltsin's biggest political asset has always been his close relationship to the Western imperialists, particu-

larly the U.S., but his inability to gain any tangible benefits from this connection has left him open to charges of being a tool of foreign interests.

"Since neither Mr. Yeltsin nor the West delivered, the managers of the bloated enterprises—what Andrei Shleifer of Harvard University calls 'state dinosaurs'—were able to hold their own with help from Prime Minister Viktor S. Chernomyrdin and the central bank's printing presses.

"The political dance that occupied much of 1992 and 1993 amounted to two steps forward and two back—or as Jeffrey Sachs, also of Harvard, puts it, 'We pretended to help them and they pretended to reform.'"

—*New York Times*, 17 February

The tide is running so strongly that Yeltsin has been forced to embrace the nationalist/corporatist rhetoric of his erstwhile opponents. In turn, the "free world" is swiftly hedging bets on the future of the former superpower. When former U.S. president Richard Nixon visited Moscow in March, he ignored Yeltsin's objections and held a high-profile consultation with Rutskoi. Tricky Dick reported back to the American rulers that:

"The Russia I saw on this trip is a very different nation from the one I visited just one year ago. Optimism about the future is being replaced by pessimism. A strongly pro-American attitude has in many cases become disturbingly anti-American....

"Contrary to some reports in the Western media, the departure of some prominent reformers from the Government does not mean the abandonment of reform. Prime Minister Chernomyrdin will continue to implement free-market reforms. Though the program would be more gradual, Government leaders say, it would also be more comprehensive and not limited to a tight monetary policy."

"All the key opposition figures—and I met with them all, including the Communist leader Gennadi Zyuganov; the Liberal Democratic Party chairman, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, and former Vice President Aleksandr Rutskoi—stated categorically that there can be no return to the Soviet past."

—*New York Times*, 25 March

The reason there can be "no return" is because the degenerated workers' state was destroyed in 1991—the entire administrative mechanism was smashed, the central economic bodies dismantled and the upper levels of the repressive apparatus were purged. A return to collectivized property means a new social revolution, something that Rutskoi and the rest of Yeltsin's rivals (who were in his camp in August 1991) are profoundly opposed to.

Yeltsin's inability to impose his will on a fractious and chaotic Duma, and the incapacity of the latter to put forward any sort of credible political alternative, reflects at bottom the impasse of the counterrevolutionary bloc that triumphed over the sclerotic Stalinist bureaucracy in August 1991. The shoot-out at the Russian White

House last October settled nothing. There remains plenty of potential for future conflicts as the different layers press for their right to impose their own framework on the process of capitalist restoration.

The capitalist restorationists represent a real pot-pourri of ex-bureaucrats, factory managers, hoodlums, hucksters and outright bandits, each with their own schemes for undertaking a little “primitive accumulation:”

“The new breed is short on charm, but their gall is staggering. Their scams range from the petty to the bold, from multimillion-dollar deals to run-of-the-mill embezzlement and fraud. There have been fake lotteries and phony investment schemes. Fake companies have run ads selling nonexistent services. Employment services collect application fees for high-paying but fictitious jobs. Real estate brokers terrorize owners into selling their apartments for next to nothing, and trick buyers into paying for apartments that are not for sale.”

—*New York Times*, 17 March

A Russian Bonaparte?

Yeltsin wants to be a bonaparte. Russian capitalism *requires* a bonaparte, but is as yet so undeveloped and anarchic that it is unable to sustain one. Yeltsin managed to push through a new constitution last December giving the president virtually unlimited authority to issue decrees. But without the means to enforce them, they are just so many pieces of paper. Yeltsin has neither a popular base nor the backing of a powerful indigenous capitalist class. He was backed by the military last October, but only grudgingly, and at the eleventh hour. No element in the governmental apparatus has effective control over the demoralized and restive officer corps inherited from the degenerated workers’ state.

The nascent Russian bourgeoisie today is a lumpen petty-bourgeois social layer that lacks the social cohesion, political self-confidence and, above all, the capital, to function as a ruling class. Their heterogeneity lies at the root of the “democratic” requirements of bourgeois rule in Russia today. The welter of conflicting local and sectional interests of the atomized bourgeois aspirants require some forum for mediation. Without a reliable apparatus of repression, or any serious social roots, the political representatives of the would-be exploiters can only rule by zig-zags, and by playing off some elements against others.

Yeltsin’s recent reverses make it clear that the shootout at the Russian White House last October was not the turning point which many took it to be, but only a dramatic episode in a continuing wrangle within the capitalist-restorationist camp. What was quite clear at the time, however, was that this conflict was one in which the working class had no vital interest. The parliament posed no obstacle to capitalist restoration. It was, after all, the rallying point for the counterrevolution in August 1991. Conversely, Yeltsin’s attempts to extend his authority with a series of dictates in the aftermath of his October 1993 victory did not change the fact that Rutskoi/Khasbulatov and their red/brown

coalition would also have attempted to consolidate their victory by anti-democratic means.

Pseudo-Trotskyists Side with Rutskoi

If two gangs of counterrevolutionaries come to blows, the workers’ movement does not always have a side. When Eden Pastora, a former Sandinista who had joined the counterrevolution, denounced the rest of the *contras* as excessively dependent on the CIA, it was perfectly clear to every leftist that this turncoat did not deserve any support.

But last October, when the Russian “*contras*” fell out, much of the left sided with Rutskoi/Khasbulatov, despite their misgivings about the manifestly reactionary character of much of the parliamentary camp. Two of the more significant centrist currents that sided with Rutskoi against Yeltsin (the British Workers Power group and the Spartacist League/U.S.) have both been uncharacteristically reticent about motivating their positions. In both cases their propaganda is full of ringing denunciations of Yeltsin’s bonapartist appetites and imperialist connections, while carefully avoiding coming out and stating that a victory by the parliamentarians and the red/brown coalition would have safeguarded democratic rights, defended plebeian living standards, or offered any other tangible benefits to the working class. So why take sides?

It is interesting that both Workers Power (and its co-thinkers in the League for a Revolutionary Communist International—LRCI) and the Spartacist League refused to bloc militarily with the Stalinists against Yeltsin/Rutskoi and rest of the counterrevolutionaries in August 1991. In fact, the LRCI supported Yeltsin on the grounds that he was more “democratic” than the Stalinists. Perhaps they hoped to redress that error by opposing him in 1993, despite recognizing that this was a falling out over “the method and the tempo of the restoration process.”

Yeltsin vs. Rutskoi: Democracy Not An Issue

The unappetizing mix of Stalinists without a state, fascists and monarchists, who comprised the old parliament’s main base of support, did not suddenly develop a commitment to the democratic rights of the working class. Many of them did not even pretend to be democrats. Certainly the democratic credentials of the ex-Stalinist parliamentary deputies were dubious. They were elected in 1990 to a relatively powerless subordinate national assembly within the USSR at a time when the Communist Party (CPSU) was still enshrined in the constitution as the leading force in society, and even Boris Yeltsin considered it prudent to hang on to his party card. The CPSU wrote the rules for the election although the party apparatus was deeply fractured; it still managed to arrange things so that it was the only party to field candidates. But, for the first time, various dissident non-party candidates were permitted to run.

The results stunned the CPSU bureaucrats, whose candidates lost almost every contested seat in the major urban centers. In the smaller towns and more remote regions, where the party machine remained relatively

intact, and few oppositionists appeared on the ballot, the official candidates fared much better. These were the “democrats” who ultimately formed the parliamentary opposition to Yeltsin. In August 1991, however, Yeltsin and his two hand-picked lieutenants, Rutskoi and Khasbulatov, stood together with the Russian parliament as the rallying point for counterrevolution against the last desperate gamble of the Stalinists.

Throughout 1992 relations worsened between the parliamentary majority and the president. In March 1993 Yeltsin’s parliamentary supporters (about a third of the total) walked out, thereby creating a constitutional crisis. In an attempt to break the deadlock, Yeltsin called an April 1993 referendum on his leadership, which he won despite vigorous opposition from Rutskoi, Khasbulatov et al. But nothing changed.

The parliamentary deputies were neither members of a great democratic institution, nor could they credibly claim to represent the popular will. Despite his best efforts, Yeltsin was not backed by the bulk of either the Russian officer corps nor the fledgling bourgeoisie. Both the parliament and the president appealed to the popular masses for support, and both were ignored. The conflict between Yeltsin and the old parliament can therefore hardly be characterized as a classical confrontation between bourgeois democracy and reactionary bonapartism.

Rutskoi/Khasbulatov: No Lesser Evil

The other argument (besides democracy) advanced by Rutskoi’s leftist defenders is that the ex-Stalinist hold-overs and their allies posed an objective barrier to the ravages of the market economy. This is simply not the case. One need only compare the results of Leonid Kravchuk’s nationalist/autarkic program in the Ukraine to Lech Walesa’s fire-sale privatizations in Poland to see that both the “fast-track” and the “conservative” road to capitalist restoration spell starvation, disease and destitution for tens of millions of Russian workers. There is no lesser evil between the two wings of the counterrevolution.

The LRCI pretends to believe that Russia is still some kind of workers’ state. This absolves them of responsibility for siding with the counterrevolution in the decisive 1991 confrontation, but, beyond that, does not ap-

pear to enter into their calculations. It even seems that they realize that the position is slightly ridiculous, but find it inconvenient to abandon it, at least just yet. For the LRCI the Russian workers’ state has always been something to be defended in the abstract—but never in the concrete.

Defeat the Counterrevolution— Workers to Power!

The current political situation in Russia (and throughout the rest of the former Soviet Union) is highly unstable. The working class has been profoundly disoriented by the identification of socialism with life under the corrupt Stalinist bureaucracy. Yet they have not suffered a crushing defeat at the hands of their class enemies. The budding bourgeoisies, on the other hand, are still too atomized to consolidate their rule. The illusions of three years ago are gone. In Russia, as in most of the rest of the former Soviet territories, the masses are boiling with desperate anger, fear, bitterness and frustration.

This volatility can be channelled in many directions. So far one of the main beneficiaries of popular revulsion with capitalist restoration has been Vladimir Zhirinovsky. The current profound crisis in Russian society can only be resolved in favor of the working class through determined opposition to *all* the capitalist factions in the USSR. A leadership which aspires to mobilize the working class for revolutionary struggle must possess the political capacity to call things by their proper names and to differentiate between struggles in which the working class has a vital interest (e.g., August 1991) and those (e.g., October 1993) in which it does not.

The current impasse of the capitalist restorationists can only be a transitory phase. But it presents an important opening for independent political intervention by the working class to reverse the reactionary expropriation of collectivized property, to smash the budding fascist organizations, and dislodge the slender tendrils of the infant bourgeois social order before the new ruling class is able to consolidate its rule. The key to successful proletarian struggle against reaction is the forging of a political leadership, rooted in the working class and committed to the internationalist program of the world’s first victorious proletarian revolution—the Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917. ■