

Defend Soviet Workers Against Yeltsin's Attacks! Counterrevolution Triumphs in USSR

The International Bolshevik Tendency published the following statement in September 1991:

The aborted Moscow coup of 19-21 August was so ill-conceived and executed that it almost didn't happen. Yet it will be remembered as one of the decisive events in the history of the 20th century. The victory of the openly pro-capitalist current around Boris Yeltsin after the coup collapsed shattered the state power created by the October 1917 revolution. This represents a catastrophic defeat not only for the Soviet working class, but for workers everywhere.

August's events came as the culmination of recent power struggles within the Kremlin and the country as a whole. But, in a larger sense, they are the final act in the degeneration of the Stalinist bureaucracy, a privileged stratum that usurped political power within the Soviet workers state in the mid-1920s. In place of the democratically elected workers soviets of 1917, the Stalinists erected an authoritarian police state. For the proletarian internationalism of Lenin and Trotsky, they substituted the doctrine of "socialism in one country," which justified betraying revolutions abroad to gain petty diplomatic advantage. Yet, for all its crimes, the Stalinist bureaucracy rested on the collectivized economy created by the October Revolution and, in its own distorted way, it frequently attempted to defend these economic foundations from imperialist pressure abroad and counterrevolution at home. The failure of the August coup ended the rule of this bureaucratic caste, and led to its replacement by a group of fledgling nationalist regimes committed to dismantling the state-owned economy and reimposing the rule of capital.

Over half a century ago, the leader of the Left Opposition, Leon Trotsky, warned that in the long run a social system based on collectivized property could neither be developed nor defended with bureaucratic police methods. The stagnation of the Soviet economy during the Brezhnev years represented a powerful confirmation of this prediction. In an attempt to reverse the USSR's economic decline, Mikhail Gorbachev launched his celebrated market reforms. The economic and political chaos caused by perestroika polarized the Soviet bureaucracy, and the divisions within it became particularly acute during the past year. On one side a wing of the ruling elite—identified with former Moscow party boss, Boris Yeltsin—openly embraced capitalist restoration. On the other side an alliance of military men and party and state apparatchiks, the so-called hardliners, saw the drift toward the market and national disintegration as a threat to their power. Gorbachev acted as a

middleman between these two factions, tilting alternately toward the "reformers" and the "hardliners."

Gorbachev's Zig-Zags

Beginning in October 1990, the "hardliners" unleashed an offensive within the Soviet Communist Party. They forced Gorbachev to scrap Shatalin's 500-day plan for the privatization of the economy. They sent "black beret" units to crack down on the pro-capitalist secessionist governments of the Baltic republics. They engineered a purge in the highest echelons of the party, compelling Gorbachev to remove "reformers" from key party and government posts and replace them with loyal servants of the apparat. These moves drove many leading "reformers"—most notably Gorbachev's foreign minister, Eduard Shevardnadze—into the Yeltsin camp, and caused widespread speculation in the Western media that Gorbachev had retreated from perestroika.

Yet, in the face of huge Yeltsinite demonstrations in Moscow early last spring, and the fear that the imperialists might be even less forthcoming with economic aid, Gorbachev backpedaled, and again tried to mend fences with the Yeltsin forces. He refused to carry the Baltic intervention to its logical conclusion and depose the governments there. He once more began pushing marketization. Most ominously of all from the "hardline" point of view, he accepted the "nine plus one" agreement that would have transferred most governmental powers to the USSR's fifteen constituent republics. Gorbachev's attempts at conciliation only emboldened Yeltsin, who responded with a series of decrees banning the Communist Party from the police force and the factories in the Russian Republic. The "hardliners" concluded that the middle ground occupied by Gorbachev was fast disappearing, and that they could no longer rely upon him to resist Yeltsin. This set the stage for the formation of the Emergency Committee and its arrest of the Soviet president on the morning of 19 August.

The Working Class Had a Side

In light of the coup's abject failure, discussion of the positions of the rival factions may now seem a fruitless academic exercise. Yet only by adopting a correct orientation to past events can the working class arm itself for future struggles. The August coup attempt was a confrontation in which the working class had a side. A victory for the coup leaders would not have rescued the USSR from the economic impasse that Stalinism has led to, nor would it have removed the threat of capitalist restoration. It could, however, have slowed the restorationist momentum at least temporarily, and bought pre-

cious time for the Soviet working class. The collapse of the coup, on the other hand, led inevitably to the counterrevolution that is now in full flood. Without ceasing to expose the coup leaders' political bankruptcy, it was the duty of revolutionary Marxists to side with them against Yeltsin and Gorbachev.

It comes as no surprise that most of the reformist and centrist left has cast its lot with Gorbachev and Yeltsin. These pseudo-Marxists are so fearful of offending bourgeois liberal opinion that they can always be relied upon to take the side of "democracy," even when democratic slogans are a camouflage for capitalist counterrevolution. Somewhat more baffling are the arguments of centrist groups who recognize Yeltsin for the restorationist that he is, admit that his triumph was a grave defeat for the working class, but nevertheless refuse to take sides in the coup. The proponents of this "plague-on-both-your-houses" position include the U.S. Spartacist League and their overseas satellites in the International Communist League, who for years touted themselves as the staunchest defenders of the Soviet Union.

The advocates of neutrality contend that the coup leaders were no less committed to capitalist restoration than Gorbachev and Yeltsin. Some point to passages in the principal declaration of the Emergency Committee in which its leaders promised to honor existing treaties with imperialism and respect the rights of private enterprise in the USSR. Trotskyists, however, have never based their political attitude on the official pronouncements of the Stalinists, but rather on the inner logic of events. Anyone claiming that there was no essential difference between the contending factions would be hard put to explain why the coup leaders decided on such a desperate gamble in the first place. When one faction of the bureaucracy arrests the president, attempts to suppress the leading capitalist restorationists and sends tanks into the streets; when leading members of that faction carry out suicide pacts with their wives and hang themselves when they fail, it is abundantly clear that more is involved than a quibble over tactics.

The reasons for the coup leaders' actions are obvious. They represented the Stalinist faction that had the most to lose from a return to capitalism. They saw the aggressiveness of Yeltsin, the growing power of the pro-capitalist nationalists and Gorbachev's prostration before these forces as a mortal danger to the centralized apparatus upon which their privileges and prestige depended. They acted, if only half-heartedly and at the eleventh hour, to stem the tide.

There can be no doubt that the "hardliners" were thoroughly demoralized: they had lost faith in a socialist future of any kind, harbored many of the same pro-capitalist notions as their adversaries, and were only too willing to stoop to Great Russian chauvinism and even anti-Semitism to protect their political monopoly. But the Trotskyist position of unconditional defense of the Soviet Union always meant defense of the system of collectivized property against restorationist threats *regardless of the consciousness or subjective intentions* of the bureaucrats. The status quo the "hardliners" sought to protect, however incompetently, included the state ownership of the means of production—an objective

barrier to the return of capitalist wage slavery. The collapse of the central state authority cleared the way for the juggernaut of reaction that is now rolling over the territory of the former USSR. To halt the advance of that juggernaut revolutionists had to be prepared to make a tactical military alliance with any section of the bureaucracy that, for whatever reason, was standing in front of its wheels.

Defeat the Counterrevolution!

All is by no means lost for the working class of the Soviet Union. The pro-capitalist governments that have hoisted themselves into the saddle are still extremely fragile, and have not yet consolidated their own repressive state apparatuses. Most of the economy remains in state hands, and the Yeltsinites face the formidable task of restoring capitalism without the support of an indigenous capitalist class. Workers resistance to the impending attacks on their rights and welfare will therefore involve a defense of large elements of the social/economic status quo. The embryonic bourgeois regimes now forming in the ex-USSR can be swept aside much more easily than mature capitalist states.

None of this, however, can change the fact that the workers will now be forced to fight on a terrain fundamentally altered to their disadvantage. They have not yet constituted themselves as an independent political force, and remain extremely disoriented. The Stalinist apparatus—which had an objective interest in maintaining collectivized property—has been shattered. Further resistance by the Stalinists is unlikely, since they have already failed a decisive political test, and those cadre who attempted to resist are now in forced retirement, in jail or dead. In short, the major organized obstacle to the consolidation of a bourgeois state has been effectively removed. Before the coup, massive working-class resistance to privatization would have split the Stalinist bureaucracy and their armed defenders. Now workers struggling to reverse the restorationist drive will face "bodies of armed men" dedicated to the objectives of Western capitalists and their internal allies. This incipient state power must be disarmed and destroyed by the workers.

The transition from a degenerated workers state to a full-fledged bourgeois state is not something which can take place in a month or a year. In 1937 Trotsky predicted that:

"Should a bourgeois counterrevolution succeed in the USSR, the new government for a lengthy period would have to base itself upon the nationalized economy. But what does such a type of temporary conflict between the economy and the state mean? It means a *revolution* or a *counterrevolution*. The victory of one class over another signifies that it will reconstruct the economy in the interests of the victors."

—"Not a Workers' and Not a Bourgeois State?"

It was clear to him, as it is to us, that such a transformation can only occur as the result of a *process* in which the workers state is undermined by degrees. The task of analysis is to locate the decisive point in this transformation, i.e., the point beyond which prevailing trends cannot be reversed without the destruction of the state

power. The momentum toward capitalist restoration had been building in the Soviet Union for the past several years. All available evidence leads us to conclude that the defeat of the coup and the ascension to power of the elements committed to reconstructing the economy on a capitalist basis constituted a qualitative turning point.

Revolutionary activity cannot be undertaken on the basis of pleasant fictions. The fight for the socialist future requires the ability to face reality squarely and “speak the truth to the masses, no matter how bitter it may be.” The victory of the Yeltsinites is a huge defeat for the working class. The attempt to reimpose capitalism in the

Soviet Union will involve attacks on the most basic interests of tens of millions of working people. Yet in resisting these attacks, Soviet workers can rediscover their own heroic traditions. The revolutionary ideas of Bolshevism, which alone correspond to the necessity of historical progress for humanity, can overcome any obstacle. But these ideas only become a factor in history through the agency of a party of the sort which led the revolution in 1917—a party educated in the irreconcilable revolutionary spirit of Lenin and Trotsky. The struggle for such a party, a reborn Fourth International, remains the central task of our time. ■