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LECTURE 7

PROLETARIAN REVOLUTIONS

7.0 OUR REVOLUTIONARY EPOCH

The 20th Century will go down in history as an age of great revolutions in science, technology, economic structures and socio-political systems.

Transport and communications on land, sea and air have taken a tremendous leap forward from ox-wagons to space rockets. Internal combustion engines, jet propelled planes, television, electronics are marvels of our age. Computers, linked to machines, open up possibilities of industrial automation that will release workers, the machine minders and operatives of today, for creative labour.

Men have landed on the Moon and will travel further through space to more distant planets and even galaxies. The splitting of the atom provides new sources of energy, both for destroying and preserving life. Advances in biological sciences make possible great increases in food supplies and great progress in preventing and curing diseases.

Science, if used in the interests of humanity, provides the means to do away with poverty and ignorance, prolong life and free humans from the physical and mental constraints that held up the progress of the mass of people, workers and peasants, throughout the ages.

To harness science to the service of humanity we need a social order that is free of class divisions and exploitation, a system that will liberate people from all forms of oppression.

South Africa, in the present century, is an intolerable anachronism, a sordid hangover from the colonial past, a medieval relic in the age of space travel, atomic energy and automation. South Africa's super-structure is a burden to our people and an insult to the whole of humanity. It is our historic task to liberate our people, the whole of South Africa, from the crushing load of poverty, discrimination, oppression that the racist bourgeoisie impose to maintain exploitation for the sake of super profits and capital gain.

7.1 REVOLUTIONARY STREAMS

Our revolution will succeed. Of this there is absolutely no doubt. Success is guaranteed by the political, economic and social transformation of the world in the present epoch. Two great revolutionary waves have made our revolution both possible and inevitable.

One is the great Russian Revolution of October 1917 - 60 years ago. It opened a new era - the era of Socialism under the rule of working people, workers by hand and by brain. The other stream is the movement of national liberation. It has emancipated millions of people from direct imperialist domination and colonial rule.

The two streams of revolution are interlocked and intertwined. The Soviet Revolution of 1917 changed the balance of world power and created conditions favourable to the struggle against foreign domination and colonial rule. Communist Parties taught Marxist socialism, organised trade unions, and supported national movements against colonialism.

Socialism spread after the war of 1939-45 to embrace one-third of the world's population. The struggle for liberation reached a new height. Imperialism, suffering severe defeats, withdrew only to continue its exploitation in new, indirect forms.

South Africa's white racist rule stands opposed to both revolutionary streams. Both have combined against Apartheid. But the overthrow of Baaskap is the task of our revolutionary vanguard.

7.3 RUSSIA'S REVOLUTION OF 1905

The revolutionary movement against Tsarism began in 1825. From then up to the assassination of Alexander II in 1881, middle class intellectuals led the movement. Their heroic sacrifices contributed to the growth of political consciousness, but only a working class party could call forth a popular revolution.

A strike wave swept through Russia in 1905 after the severe defeats inflicted by the Japanese in the imperialist Russo-Japanese war. Nearly three million factory workers struck work during 1905, peasants in one-third of the country set fire to the mansions of big landowners, looted stores, killed police. Sailors and soldiers mutinied.

The revolution began on 'Bloody Sunday', January 22, outside the Tsar's Winter Palace in Leningrad (then called St. Petersburg) where Cossacks fired on unarmed people who had gathered to petition the Tsar for democratic rights. They received bullets instead of votes and gained a big political lesson, but at a price of more than 1,000 killed and 2,000 wounded.

"The unenlightened workers of pre-revolutionary Russia did not know that the Tsar was the head of the ruling class of large land-owners, who by a thousand ties were already bound up with a big bourgeoisie ready to defend their monopoly, privileges and profits by every violent means" (Lenin, 1917). The workers used the weapon of political strikes, a proletarian weapon, to achieve a bourgeois democratic system of government.

The Tsar offered concessions: an elected assembly (Duma) having advisory powers only, and a small number of voters. Law-making would remain in the hands of the Tsar: an absolute monarch who "alone promulgates laws, nominates officials and controls them" (Lenin, OUR PROGRAMME, 1899).

The revolutionary Social-Democrats rejected the 'advisory Duma' and forced the Tsar to increase the number of voters, to give the Duma legislative powers.

7.4 SOCIAL-DEMOCRATS: a Revolutionary Party

A number of Social-Democrat and Marxist groups merged in 1898 to form the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP). Its practical tasks were to organise and lead the workers' class struggles:

- (a) for socialism and against capitalism,
- (b) for democracy and against Tsarist absolutism.

The two tasks were inseparably linked - just as our own revolution

struggles against both capitalist exploitation and racist dictatorship. Lenin explained (THE TASKS OF THE RSD, 1897) that "Both economic and political agitation are equally necessary to develop the class consciousness of the proletariat. ...because every class struggle is a political struggle". The Russian worker was bound by a double yoke: capitalists robbed him, police persecuted him. "Any strike against a capitalist results in the military and police being let loose on the workers.

"Every economic fight of necessity turns into a political fight, and social-democracy must indissolubly combine the economic with the political fight into a united class struggle of the proletariat" (OUR PROGRAMME).

To perform its tasks and carry them to a successful conclusion the RSDLP turned itself into 'a party of a new type' with

- (a) theoretical unity based on scientific (Marxist) socialism;
- (b) organisational unity under a single high command (the central committee);
- (c) one programme, with minimum and maximum demands;
- (d) a membership of activists, committed to the party's theory, organisation and programme, belonging to a unit of the party, paying a subscription, and carrying out assignments;
- (e) a party newspaper, carrying out the functions of a collective propagandist, agitator and organiser.

Divisions over the party's theory, programme and conditions of membership split the party into two camps - the Bolsheviks (majority) and Mensheviks (minority). The programme, adopted in 1903, set a minimum target of establishing a democratic republic and the maximum target of a socialist revolution under a proletarian dictatorship. The 8th congress, held in March, 1919 changed the name to Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks), and decided to recast parts of the programme so as to include statements on imperialism and the Soviet Republic.

7.5 FEBRUARY TO OCTOBER

The Bolsheviks worked legally (in trade unions and the Duma) and illegally (forming underground party groups in factories and legal societies). They called for opposition to the imperialist war of 1914-18. Many activists were jailed, exiled or drafted into the Tsarist armed forces. Though few in number, the Bolsheviks formed a network of party cells, held illegal meetings, distributed banned papers and leaflets, and prepared for the coming revolution.

It broke out in 1917 after heavy defeats inflicted on the Tsarist armies, the near collapse of the economy, a sharp fall in living standards, a country wide political strike and revolts of soldiers and sailors. Workers and soldiers formed Soviets, representative councils in which Bolsheviks provided leadership.

A revolutionary crisis broke out. Representatives of the capitalist, landowning class deposed the Tsar, set up a Provisional Government and continued the imperialist war.

Workers and peasants were able to take part in open political struggles.

Revolutionaries released from prison and returning from exile threw themselves into the battle. The Bolsheviks, emerging from underground, resumed publication of Pravda, the party newspaper, and revived party branches. They called on the Soviets to mobilise the people against the bourgeois government, to demand peace, bread and freedom.

The revolution is a bourgeois revolution, wrote Lenin from exile in March. It cannot give peace, bread and freedom. To win these to complete the revolution, to achieve socialism, the workers must take power into their own hands, smash the bourgeois state machinery and arm the people (LETTERS FROM AFAR, March 1917).

Lenin urged that the situation was ripe for revolution: "armed uprising is inevitable and has fully matured". In his Ten Theses (THE TASKS OF THE PROLETARIAT IN OUR REVOLUTION, April 1917) he wrote that the situation was "a transition from the first stage of the revolution, which, because of the inadequate organisation and insufficient class-consciousness of the proletariat, led to the assumption of power by the bourgeoisie - to its second stage which is to place power in the hands of the proletariat and the poorest sections of the peasantry".

The bourgeois government launched a counter-revolutionary attack, resumed the wholesale arrests of Bolsheviks, issued an order for Lenin's arrest - but failed to stop the growth of the Party. It formed new cells, worked widely in the Soviets, trade unions and army, and spread the slogans: All Power to the Soviets, Land to the Peasants, Bread to the Hungry, Peace to the Nations.

The workers and soldiers of Petrograd overthrew the Provisional Government on November 7, 1917. Thus began the Great October Socialist Revolution, the first proletarian revolution. It opened a new era in history.

7.6 CAPITALISM TO SOCIALISM

The critical choice before the Bolsheviks was either to accept bourgeois democracy, their minimum programme, or to strike out at once for the maximum, a socialist republic under the proletarian dictatorship. It was a difficult decision. A premature call for socialism might find the masses unprepared, thereby exposing the Party to ruthless oppression. On the other hand, if the Bolsheviks misjudged the situation, if they allowed the revolutionary wave to reach its peak without moving into action, they might lose an opportunity which would not easily recur.

There were leading Bolsheviks who wanted to postpone the proletarian revolution. Stalin, reporting in August 1917 for the Central Committee to the 6th Party Congress, said: "Several comrades argue that since capitalism is only feebly developed here, it is utopian to raise the question of a socialist revolution. They would be right if it were not for the war, if it were not for the devastation, if the foundations of national economy had not been shaken... Under these circumstances it was impossible for the worker to refrain from interfering in economic life. This is the real reason why the question of the socialist revolution could arise here in Russia".

Lenin analysed the situation at the end of September. Revolution, he said, was an art, a creative act, the result of a deliberate, thought-out strategy. It took note of the position of the ruling class and its

government, the mood of the people, the strength of the revolutionary forces. An uprising in July, when the bourgeois government launched its counter-revolutionary offensive, would have been a mistake: neither the workers, soldiers nor the Bolsheviks were prepared. Now, at the beginning of October, "We have before us all the objective requirements for a successful uprising", at "the crucial point... when the activity of the vanguard of the people is at its height.

But the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party was divided and uncertain. A majority decided in favour of an uprising, yet delayed action, ignoring Lenin's arguments. He thereupon handed in his resignation from the Committee so as to press his views freely "in the lower ranks of the party and at the Party Congress".

This threat jerked the Committee into taking a stand for immediate revolution. Lenin wrote on the evening of November 6: