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A Worker's Letter to Minister of Justice Aleksander Kerensky

The February revolution in 1917 marked one of the most turning points in Russian history in early twentieth century. The February revolution ended the 300-year old Romanov dynasty. The success of the revolution couldn't have been achieved had there not been many strikes involving a large number of workers. The collapse of autocracy put Russia deeper into crisis. After the revolution, the Provisional Government and the Petrograd Soviet shared the power. The Provisional Government composed of the leading Duma moderates and liberals and the social elite couldn't gain support from the lower classes and was overthrown after a few months. In this essay, I will first explain some history of the Russian working class. Through some workers' letters, I will next analyze the acrimonious feeling of the workers towards the Provisional Government in particular and the noble classes in general.

The history of the working class goes back to Peter the Great in seventeenth and eighteenth century. Peter the Great, with the desire to make Russia one of the main powers, pushed Russia towards Westernization. Westerners came to invest money on Russia to build modern industries. Besides the fast economic and industrial growth that Russia enjoyed during the Westernization process, new classes in the society emerged: the bourgeois and the working class. The bourgeois contained the rich people who were entrepreneurs and industrialists. Under their control was the working class. This class contained millions of workers who had to labor under severe conditions. In nineteenth century, the workers had to work "from twelve to as many as eighteen hours" (Kort 31). Unlike the Western societies, Russia didn't have labor union protecting the working class. Their human rights were denied, let alone their political

participation. Therefore, for a few centuries, the working class was constantly exploited by the bourgeois and the tension between these two classes increased along time.

During the process of Westernization, new streams of idea entered into Russia society. In the nineteenth century, some Russian intellectuals were tired of the incompetent ruling of tsar and committed to making change in Russia and they embrace Marxism, a social theory about class struggle. Marx argued that the working class would be the power to overthrow the bourgeois and achieve a society where there would be no classes and no properties. The Russian workers were soon exposed to revolution idea through their connections to revolutionary groups. As the Russian working class was concentrated in factory areas which sometimes could accommodate hundreds of thousands of workers, it would be a disaster once the strike broke out. The February revolution in 1917 exemplified this fact as hundreds of thousands of workers crowded the streets to demand for food and rights. The exploit of the bourgeois and the state's past brutal mishandling of the strikes that led to many deaths and injuries left a cursing trace on the working classes and therefore, after the February revolution, the working classes could not cooperate with the Provisional Government. While feeling excited about the new turning point of Russia, the workers were angry towards the Provisional Government who, as they believed, were taking the advantage of the situation to entrench its control and exploit over the lower classes. As political participation was no longer limited to a specific class in society, workers could express their opinions through letters and meetings. These letters clearly demonstrated the opinions of the workers toward the Provisional Government and some of which I will analyze now.

The letter to Minister of Justice Aleksandr Kerensky from worker A. Zemskov (Steinberg, 85-91) was

an example. In this letter, the worker gave an argument why the Provisional Government was on the opposite side of the working class and wanted to “express the truth that only a working man capable of speaking the pure truth can feel.” According to him, the Provisional Government was detached from the desires of the working class and went on its old way. The tone of the worker in the letter was full of humble as he understood he was an “insignificant worker” and the Minister was “an individual who professes proletarian worldviews and is a defender of the interests of the working classes.” In the letter, the worker emphasized “freedom.” He argued that the February revolution didn't give the real freedom to the working class and the government was promoting “freedom lies” to blind the people. The worker believed the Provisional Government was “administering the destruction of the old temple of the lie and trying to create a new temple of the new lie.” He argued that by using “coercion,” the government distanced itself from freedom as he believed “where there is freedom, there cannot be coercion, and where there is coercion, there cannot be freedom.” He went on to explain the core reason behind all this: “the bourgeoisie is striving for democratic forms of governance because in them it sees the most convenient method of oppression and exploitation.” He demanded the bourgeoisie to “climb off the workers' back” because he believed the bourgeoisie were “all nothing but greedy predators making off with the products of the labor.” The worker believed that the people “would govern themselves ... and would have no call to create a state.” He recalled the past experience that the proletariat “had been robbed by legal robbers, robbed within the framework of the law” and thus the new state only “protected the property of the upper classes, which was stolen from the working class.” He concluded that “the bourgeois organ couldn't be used for the purpose of liberation” and hence workers couldn't stand on the same line with the Provisional Government.

The worker's letter was a remarkable evidence showing how much the working class became more aware of the current politics. It is obvious that the worker was very fed up with the bourgeois. His arguments in many cases were very pointed toward the bourgeois. He believed that the nature of the bourgeois would never change and he had strong confidence in people to govern themselves without a ruling authority. He rejected the notion of authority and considered it to be opposite to democracy. This was basically Marxism. The worker completely had no trust in the government and we can expect that there were many of the people in the working classes share the same feelings. The letter also showed how naïvely the worker understood about how complex the position Russia was in. Russia was in war, an economic crisis, and division between parties and classes. The lack of knowledge about the situation and the confidence boost after the success of February revolution permitted the worker, and the majority of the working class in general, to put a few steps further to achieve perfect freedom. To the working class, the bourgeois was enemy which brought Russia to this situation. This letter was a warning sign of how impatient the working class was.

We can find similar tension between the working class and the bourgeois in the Appeal to the Petrograd "People's Committee" from a day worker on the Perm Railroad (Steinberg 97-98). "The bourgeois would rather die than give us our freedom ... They were despots and now they're bourgeois."

During March and April 1917, the workers in different factories held meetings to deal with the accusations in the bourgeois press against workers. There are many document recording these events. For example in the Appeal to soldiers from the workers of the A.M. Ouf machine (Steinberg 92-93), the workers told the soldiers that "the workers will labor with heightened energy to supply the army with all it needs to defend the homeland and our hard-won freedom from outside threat." We can also see the

spirit to stand up against the bourgeois in the workers through their declaration: “No! Stand back! For you are our enslavers, for you are living off our labor, you are breathing through us, and it's you who depend on us, not we on you.” Again, the working class showed their confidence of the winner of the February revolution. The workers realized their importance and rising power to deal with the bourgeois.

The power difference between the bourgeois and the working class dwindled quickly. The bourgeois, which had been used to the protecting shield of the tsar prior to 1917, found it hard to garner the support from the lower classes. The working class, on the other hand, was too familiar with the image of the bourgeois exploitation. Exposed to the revolution idea, the working class gained its morale as it realized its historic mission to bring freedom to Russia.

Bibliography

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