

Worker Support for the Bolshevik's October Revolution

The revolution that took place in February of 1917 deposed a tsarist regime and began Russia's road towards a socialist state. Yet during this time the Bolshevik party exerted very little power and influence in the country. However, by late October of the same year, under chants of "All Power to the Soviets," the Bolsheviks were successful in wresting control of the Russian government. The rise of the Bolshevik party was buoyed by the support they generated among many of the proletariat, who supported them for political, economic, and social reasons. Worker radicalism and support for a socialist revolution reached a crescendo in the months preceding the October Revolution of 1917, although there still existed worker factions that were staunchly anti-Bolshevik before and after the revolution. Primary documents, such as worker resolutions and first hand accounts, can shed light on the internal and external forces that influenced the various working class groups during October and November of 1917.

In October of 1917 the majority consensus among workers was that the Provisional Government was ineffective, and political change was needed to improve the increasingly dire situation in urban Russia. By October 25th in Moscow alone, thirty-eight plants representing 54,000 workers had already written resolutions calling for transferring all power to the soviets.¹ Serving as a snapshot of the workers' revolutionary desires, the workers of the Putilov metalworking plant published a resolution on October 24th signaling their approval of the Military Revolutionary Committee (MRC).² The MRC, created by the Bolshevik-dominated Petrograd Soviet, was organized for "the protection of the city" due to a

¹ Koenker, Diane. Moscow Workers and the 1917 Revolution. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981, pg. 73

² Putilov Workers (workers), "Putilov Workers on Creating a Military Revolutionary Committee" (October 24, 1917), in Jonathan Daly and Leonid Trofimov, Russia in War and Revolution, 1914-1922, doc. 46, p. 108

lack of “confidence in the [Provisional] Government and its military leaders.”³ The establishment of this revolutionary committee essentially handed military control of Petrograd to the Bolsheviks and can be seen as the first steps of the Bolsheviks seizing power. Thus, the resolution by the Putilov workers is important because it demonstrates how radically loyal these workers, numbering 4,500 from the largest metalworking plant in Petrograd, were to the Bolshevik cause.

The Putilov metalworkers supported the formation of the MRC because it would bring under control military leaders who had previously “revealed themselves to be leading counterrevolutionaries during the Days of July 3 and 5.”⁴ The workers further urged the MRC to “disarm the officer training schools,” which produced officers loyal to the Provisional Government and hostile to the Bolshevik Party.⁵ These statements by the workers hint at the source of their dislike of the Provisional Government and their loyalty to the Bolshevik agenda; this source was the July Days. In early July soldiers and workers, fed up with the government’s war effort, rose up in spontaneous demonstrations that were condemned by the Provisional Government, Mensheviks, and Social Revolutionaries. While the Bolshevik leadership actually tried to hold back the demonstrations, they realized that the many of the protesting workers were pro-Bolshevik and displayed this support by using Bolshevik slogans. The July demonstrations were ended violently by government troops, and the Bolsheviks were forced into a period of temporary hiding. With these events, the Bolsheviks established themselves as a true revolutionary party who were on the side of the working class, while the other socialist parties began to be associated with the Provisional Government. Accordingly, many worker resolutions were subsequently published to condemn the actions of the Provisional Government, Social Revolutionaries,

³ “Creation of the MRC” (October 23, 1917), *Izvestiia*, from <http://www.soviethistory.org/>

⁴ Putilov Workers (workers), “Putilov Workers on Creating a MRC” (October 24, 1917), in Daly and Trofimov, doc. 46, pg. 109

⁵ *Ibid.*

and Mensheviks. The resolutions vowed that the “working class cannot remain silent ... [seeing] the open campaign by the counterrevolutionary bourgeoisie against the entire working class.”⁶ Additionally, the Bolsheviks gained further support after the Kornilov affair, in which the Soviets and the Bolsheviks were called upon by the Provisional Government to mobilize and protect Petrograd against a military coup led by General Kornilov. All in all, these events raised support for the Bolsheviks among the Russian people and contributed to the widespread Bolshevik following among workers in October, as evidenced by their great successes in soviet elections all over the country.

The workers from the Putilov metalworking plants and others truly supported the Bolsheviks and their mission to bring “All Power to the Soviets”. While written resolutions can only be interpreted as opinion and not a commitment to action, these Putilov workers proved their revolutionary loyalty by joining the MRC-controlled worker’s militia, the Red Guard. The Red Guard was responsible for occupying the Winter Palace during the October revolution and also successfully defended the city from Kerensky’s attempt to recapture Petrograd. Philips Price, a witness of the revolution, recalled meeting soldiers who identified themselves as “from the Putilov works,” and described the dedication and power of these factory workers turned militia: the streets “were full of armed detachments of Red Guards from the factories, marching in the direction of the ... new front” to counter Kerensky’s force.⁷ The Putilov workers were not alone in their revolutionary actions either, as the Red Guard has been estimated to have had upwards of 100,000 men during the Bolshevik Revolution.⁸ The important role of the Red

⁶ Chairman (workers), “Resolution of a meeting of workers in 27 small enterprises from the Peterhof district of Petrograd” (July 27, 1917), in Mark D. Steinberg, Voices of Revolution, 1917, doc. 58, pg. 388.

⁷ Price, Philips M, “My Reminiscences of the Russian Revolution , Chapters 9 and 10” (1921) in Morgan Philips Price, Dispatches from the Revolution: Russia, 1916-18, pg. 89

⁸ Collins, D.N., “A Note on the Numerical Strength of the Russian Red Guard in October 1917.” (Oct 1972) Soviet Studies, Vol. 24, No.2, pg. 270-280.

Guard during the revolution also underscores the significance of the Kornilov affair, which rallied workers to the Bolshevik cause and provided arms to the Red Guard.

The descriptions of the existing government as “counterrevolutionary bourgeoisie” and “betrayers of workers” demonstrated the apparent hatred these workers had for the Provisional Government and anyone who opposed the Bolshevik revolution. This resentment stemmed from economic and political frustration, and the Bolshevik leadership was able to use these factors to help radicalize the working force. From the beginning Vladimir Lenin sought to characterize the Bolsheviks as the only true revolutionary socialist party. In his writings and speeches, he reproached the other parties for catering to the bourgeoisie, accusing the Popular Socialists and Socialist-Revolutionaries of yielding “to the influence of the bourgeoisie and [spreading] that influence among the proletariat.”⁹ Lenin provided a contrast to this bourgeois mentality by promising worker control over their enterprises in virtually all fields in his Draft Regulations on Workers’ Control.¹⁰ Lenin also attempted to stir up public outrage against the government by claiming that “Kerensky is again negotiating with the Kornilovite generals and officers to lead troops against the Soviets,” and Kerensky “deceived the people” by not convening the Constituent Assembly by the deadline promised.¹¹ By characterizing the Provisional Government and other socialist parties as friendly to the bourgeoisie, and implicating government involvement in the Kornilov affair, Lenin was able to successfully turn public opinion against the government and gain support for his Bolshevik-led socialist revolution. Thus, it may not be a coincidence that the reasons Lenin provided for revolution seemed to be reflected in the documents written by many workers.

⁹ Vladimir Lenin, “The April Theses” (April 7, 1917), <http://marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/apr/04.htm>

¹⁰ Vladimir Lenin, “Draft Regulations on Workers’ Control” (October 26, 1917), <http://marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/oct/26.htm>

¹¹ Vladimir Lenin, “To workers peasants and soldiers”(October 12, 1917), <http://marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/oct/12.htm>

Despite widespread worker support for the Bolsheviks in the month of October, the workers were not united in their political views at any time. One group, the workers of the Kushnerev Printing Works, was especially opposed to the Bolshevik takeover of power in October 1917. Citing the loss of freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, freedom to strike, and universal suffrage, they likened the Bolshevik rule to the “terrible days of the last autocrat,” the Tsar Nicholas II.¹² The printers, who generally were one of the most educated worker groups and supported the Mensheviks, also chided the new Bolshevik government for their anti-war position and willingness to negotiate a peace treaty with the German Emperor Hohenzollern, whom they called “a usurper of human rights.”¹³ The printers were suspicious of one-party rule and demanded that the government recognize and seat the Constituent Assembly, which would have the authority to establish a new form of Russian government. Interestingly, the Bolsheviks at this time were engaged in a debate about whether or not they should honor the Constituent Assembly, which they had promised the people as part of their platform. Above all, the Kushnerev printers worried that the revolution would derail the progress of the country by disorganizing the proletariat, causing death, and clearing the way for counterrevolution. The Russian printers did not begin to oppose the Bolsheviks only after they assumed power; most never supported the Bolsheviks at all. In the aftermath of the July Days, the Russian Printing and Publishing Company referred to the events as “the most grievous and shameful page in Russian history,” especially because they believed it made the socialists vulnerable to counterrevolution and innocent blood had been spilled.¹⁴ Threats towards unity of the socialist parties, the preservation of the socialist dream in Russia, and prevention of bloodshed were the primary concerns of the opponents of the Bolshevik rise to power.

¹² Kushnerev Workers (workers), “Resolution of the Kushnerev Printing Works” (November 1, 1917), in Steinberg, Voices, doc. 104, pg. 273.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Likhtenshtein, A. (worker), “Resolution of Russian Printing and Publishing Company” (July 13, 1917) in Steinberg, Voices, doc. 56, pg. 186.

While workers such as the printers had opposed Bolshevik power from the beginning, other workers were beginning to shift their support away from the Bolshevik party by November 1917. Of chief concern to these workers were the prospects of seizure of governmental power by a single political party and its efficacy compared to the promised election of a Constituent Assembly. For example, the workers of the Baltic Shipbuilding Works issued a resolution in early November urging the new government to unite with other socialist factions to create a “unified socialist authority” which could resist counterrevolutionary measures and prevent future bloodshed.¹⁵ The Baltic workers also demanded the delivery of Bolshevik promises, such as an end to war, workers’ control, and the organization of a Constituent Assembly. It is likely that these shipbuilding workers had previously favored a soviet revolution by the Bolsheviks, but it is fascinating that once the Bolsheviks were in power the concerns of these workers were almost identical to those of the Kushnerev printers, who had opposed Bolshevik power all along.

The analysis of worker attitudes during the months of October and November of 1917 are based almost exclusively on worker resolutions and letters. While the majority of worker sentiment before the Bolshevik revolution may have supported a soviet takeover of power, it is plausible that many worker groups, especially those who were more educated, did not agree with a one-party takeover of the government. This would explain the outpouring of support for soviet power before the revolution as well as the presence of post-revolution resolutions requesting a constituent assembly. Nevertheless, the worker population across Russia had a variety of differing political views, from passionate Bolshevik followers who supported them pre-and-post revolution, to the printers who supported the Menshevik philosophy, and everything in between.

¹⁵ Palitsa (worker), “Resolution of the Workers of the Baltic Shipbuilding and Machine Works” (November 2, 1917) in Steinberg, Voices, doc. 105, pg. 273-275.

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