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NOTEBOOKS

# Factory Committees and Workers' Control in Petrograd in 1917

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## Preface

The October Revolution has traditionally been portrayed by the right as a cruel experiment inflicted upon the unwilling peoples of Russia by a band of fanatics, predominantly intellectuals, inspired by the theories of Karl Marx. One of the aims of this study is to put to rest this misrepresentation, which is today more widely accepted than ever: a reflection of the present balance of forces in the world. No single aspect of the history of 1917 is more thoroughly at variance with this myth than the experience of the Petrograd factory committees.

Neither the creation of factory committees nor the struggle for workers' control that the committees led figured in the programmes of any of the socialist parties, including that of the Bolsheviks. They originated and developed "from below". They were a practical response by workers to the looming economic crisis and the factory closures that it threatened, in face of the inactivity and active sabotage on the part of the factory owners and the coalition government of liberals and moderate socialists.

No other aspect of the revolution displays so forcefully the role played in it by the independent creativity and initiative of rank and file workers. At the same time, the movement for workers' control exemplifies the role of the Bolshevik Party, as an organic, democratically organized part of the working class, in giving rank-and-file initiatives organizational form and practical goals, and in linking them to the overall struggle for working-class political power.

In their struggle to wrest economic power from the bourgeoisie, the workers were painfully aware of their weakness, of their unpreparedness for the task of

running the factories and the economy, and of the general backwardness of Russia as a basis for building socialism. If they went ahead nevertheless, it was not, as right-wing historians argue, out of irrational utopian urges — though most workers were socialists and shared socialism as an ultimate goal. It was rather from an understanding that the only alternative was to accept defeat of the democratic revolution. At the same time, the workers' fear before this leap into the unknown was tempered by the hope, widespread in the working class, that aid would be forthcoming from revolutions in more developed capitalist countries.

A second aim of this study is to make more accessible to socialists the experience of the Russian labour movement. The Russian experience has not lost its significance despite the profound changes that separate us from the revolutionary upsurge following the war of 1914-1918. It reminds us that capital's ultimate and most basic line of defence against the labour movement remains its control of the means of production and distribution.

Unlike the bourgeoisie, which had already attained economic dominance within feudal society before the bourgeois revolutions, workers are unable, because of the very nature of capitalism, to gain control of the principal means of production and distribution before their seizure of political power. Any major labour upsurge, let alone revolutionary movement, inevitably confronts capital's unwillingness to maintain production, both because of declining profitability and because economic sabotage is an indispensable weapon against the workers' movement.

The movement for workers' control was a concrete response by Russian workers to this central problem. A careful analysis of that response on the basis of the experience of Petrograd, the capital and largest industrial centre of Russia, explains why workers, who greeted the February 1917 overthrow of the Tsarist regime as a bourgeois-democratic revolution, one that would not fundamentally alter capitalist property relations, decided over the course of the following months that it was necessary, first to severely limit capital's economic power and finally to seize this power completely for themselves.

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This study is based almost entirely on published Russian, contemporary primary sources. At the time of my research, I had access to only limited archival material, but it played a critical role in confirming the validity of the published materials. These include protocols and documents of worker assemblies, of factory committee meetings and of the Petrograd and Russian Factory Committee Conferences in 1917; protocols and documents of soviet, government, trade-union and party meetings; contemporary newspaper accounts (in the left and moderate socialist, as well as the bourgeois, press); and memoirs written mainly in the first few years following the revolution. The few secondary sources used date mainly from the 1920s, a period when honest treatment of the labour movement was still possible, and

from the 1960s and early 1970s, a period of increased freedom for Soviet historians of the revolutionary period.

Because almost all the sources for this Notebook are accessible only to scholars proficient in Russian, all footnote references have been put at the end of the text, where they will not get in other readers' way. Only notes that may be helpful to the general reader have been placed at the bottom of the pages. Readers who are less familiar with the dates and names of Russian revolutionary history are urged to consult the Chronology that precedes Chapter II and the Glossary at the end of the Notebook. Those who want to learn more about the "history from below" of the Russian revolution or about experiences with workers' control under capitalism are urged to consult the Suggestions for Further (Non-Russian) Reading.

I have made use of all the evidence available to me. I have not selected evidence with a view to supporting a particular point of view. My purpose was to shed light on the nature of the movement for workers' control and its role in the radicalization of the workers in 1917. At the same time, it is impossible to write about important historical events without having a point of view. My profound sympathy for the workers of Petrograd and their struggles is obvious in the pages that follow. However, the impossibility of being neutral in the study of history does not rule out an objective understanding of that history.



## I.

## The Enigma of the Factory Committees

One of the most striking — and characteristic — traits of the revolutionary process among the Petrograd workers in 1917 was the vagueness of their conception of the “social” content of the revolution, even in face of their growing political radicalization. At the end of August, when the majority of the capital’s workers had already embraced the demand for soviet power, and with General Kornilov\*\* marching on Petrograd at the head of what was universally perceived as a bourgeois-inspired and —supported counter-revolution,<sup>1</sup> a meeting of the workers of the Old Baranovskii Machine-Construction Factory still couched its call to arms in uniquely democratic terms:

*Believing in our bright future, we raise high the banner of Freedom — Long live the Great Russian Revolution. To the defense, comrade workers and soldiers, of Freedom, so dear to us, against the executioners who would lead it to slaughter....<sup>2</sup>*

There is no mention here of socialism nor even of more limited social goals. Yet this was one of the most radical factories in Russia, situated in the red Vyborg District. Even as late as October, with the insurrection in progress, the general assembly of the Treugol’nik Rubber Factory declared simply, “At the first call of the Soviets of Workers’, Soldiers’ and Peasants’ Deputies, we will come out in the defense of freedom and a durable peace of the peoples.”<sup>3</sup>

Nor was this vagueness limited to the rank and file. During the debate on workers’ control at the First All-Russian Conference of Factory Committees in Petrograd a week before the insurrection, Lin’kov, a Menshevik delegate from Tver, complained: “In order to correctly decide the issue of workers’ control of production, we must clarify once and for all for ourselves whether the Russian Revolution is a social revolution or not. We always put this fundamental question to the Bolsheviks, but they never give us a serious answer.” For the Mensheviks, at least, it was clear: “We say that our revolution is not social but political with a social leavening, so to speak: in it, questions of enormous political significance are posed.”<sup>4</sup> For Zhuk, an anarchist delegate from the Schlüsselburg Power Factory, the matter was equally

clear: “We are living through a social revolution.”<sup>5</sup> But Skrypnik,\*\* a Bolshevik member of the Central Soviet (CS) of Factory Committees,\*\*\*\* was less definite: “Workers’ control is not socialism. It is only one of the transitional measures that brings us nearer to socialism.”<sup>6</sup>

“Exactly what would the Bolsheviks do with the state? What programme would they carry out?” asked Sukhanov,\*\*\*\*\* writing of the immediately pre-October period. “I emphasize that the Bolsheviks had no such ideas and plans.... Only ‘materials’ for a programme existed.”<sup>7</sup> An extraordinary congress of the Bolshevik party was scheduled for October 17-18 specifically to discuss the materials left from the April Conference and to adopt a programme. In reporting on this projected congress to the Bolshevik Petrograd Committee on September 24, Sverdlov\*\*\*\*\* noted in particular that “there is insufficient clarification of the economic question... and this is the cause of many complications.” The problem was, he explained, that everyone in Petrograd was overburdened with current work.<sup>8</sup> But this congress never took place. In the Bolshevik paper *Rabochii put’* on October 6, Larin\*\*\*\*\* complained that in place of an economic programme the Bolsheviks had only an empty space.

\*\*\* Nikolai Skrypnik, a leader of the factory committee movement, would later be a leader of the Ukrainian Communist Party. He committed suicide in 1933 after trying and failing to hinder Stalin’s purge of the Ukrainian party.

\*\*\*\* The Central Soviet of Factory Committees (CS) was the permanent leadership body of the Petrograd Factory Committees, elected at the First Conference of Factory Committees in May-June 1917. By contrast with the moderate-dominated Central Executive Committee of Soviets, the Central Soviet of Factory Committees was under strong Bolshevik influence from the beginning, as shown when the Bolshevik resolution won 335 out of 421 votes at the Conference of Factory Committees that elected it. After the July Days Lenin even thought for a time that the factory committees rather than the soviets might be the basis of a working-class insurrection.

\*\*\*\*\* Nicolas N. Sukhanov was a Menshevik Internationalist journalist, initially a leader of the Central Executive Committee of Soviets, a member of the Economic Department of the Petrograd Soviet, and author of a seven-volume memoir on the revolution.

\*\*\*\*\* Yakov Sverdlov was chairman of the Bolshevik Central Committee and a key party organizer. After the October revolution he became president of the Central Executive Committee of Soviets, but died during the civil war.

\*\*\*\*\* Yu Larin was a left-wing Menshevik who joined the Bolshevik party in the summer of 1917. He was active in the trade-union movement. In late 1917 and early 1918 he was one of the Bolshevik “comrades on the right” who shrank from direct economic confrontation with the bourgeoisie; but by late 1918 he became one of the most zealous defenders of “war communism”.

\* The term “social” is used here in the contemporary sense as broadly “economic” and, more strictly, as “affecting property relations”.

\*\* Kornilov was a young general who became Russian commander-in-chief, and leader of the failed right-wing coup of 27-31 August 1917. The coup was supported by many liberals and at least initially welcomed by Prime Minister Kerensky. Its defeat by soldiers and armed workers, including Bolsheviks released from prison, helped create the conditions for the Bolsheviks to win a majority in the Soviets and overthrow Kerensky’s coalition government. After escaping from prison Kornilov died in 1918, fighting alongside the Whites in the civil war.

## The Gap between Practice and Consciousness

Yet in practice, the workers in numerous factories had long since begun to challenge the factory owners' prerogatives through the independent initiatives of their factory committees. As for the Bolsheviks, their role in the factory committees was a predominant one almost from the start. In the early spring the party whole-heartedly embraced the demand for workers' control, a demand that had originated from below in the weeks following the February Revolution. Shortly after the October Revolution, the factory committees, strongly backed by the worker rank and file, were already insisting on the broadest freedom of action vis-a-vis management. At the end of January 1918, the Sixth Petrograd Conference of Factory Committees called on the government to prepare to completely take over the factories. By June, the Decree on Nationalization had been issued, and the revolution was about to move into "War Communism", which, whatever its immediate practical goals, came to be widely viewed as a direct leap into socialism. In this way, in the months following the October Revolution, consciousness not only caught up with practice but overtook it, in the sense that a highly centralized coercive wartime regime of extreme scarcity was seen as approaching the ideal of a communist society.

The gap between consciousness and practice that existed throughout 1917 implicitly challenges the view of the labour movement in 1917 as driven by chiliastic and utopian yearnings or by anarchistic motivations.<sup>9</sup> This view has only recently begun to be questioned in the West, thanks to the growing interest in "history from below". Its origins can be traced back to Menshevik explanations for the revolution's abandonment of its original liberal-democratic framework and for the Bolshevik success in the labour movement. According to the Mensheviks, the workers' extremism reflected the dilution of class consciousness resulting from the mass influx during the war of peasants into the factories, as well as the generalized ideological influence on the workers exerted by an overwhelmingly petty bourgeois society. "In contrast to what characterized the nineteenth century," wrote Tsereteli,\*

*it was no longer the advanced, not the most experienced and organized elements of the proletariat that called the masses to insurrection. Just the opposite: these elements used all their influence to hold the toilers back within the framework of democratic action. The forces upon which Lenin and his general staff based themselves were the least conscious, least experienced elements,*

\* Tsereteli was a Georgian Menshevik, a former deputy in the Tsarist Duma (parliament) and a distinguished orator, who became a central figure in the coalition government. At first Minister of Posts and Telegraph, then Minister of Interior, he was a leader of the Central Executive Committee of the Soviets until November 1917.

*those who had not gone through any school of political struggle.*<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, explaining the workers' failure to embrace the "consistent proletarian" position of the Menshevik Internationalists,\*\* Sukhanov wrote:

*Our proletarian-Marxist position did not find a place for itself within the raging elemental storm [stikhiia]. Our "intermediate" group was easily worn thin amidst the huge rolling swells of the oncoming civil war.... [Behind the Bolshevism of 1917] was an unbridled anarchistic petty bourgeois storm which was eliminated only when Bolshevism again had no masses behind it.*<sup>11</sup>

## Bolshevik "Maximalism"?

What this interpretation cannot explain is the general absence in 1917 of verbal or written expression by the workers or their Bolshevik leaders of such social extremism. Sukhanov himself, one of the more lucid chroniclers of the revolution, is far from consistent on this issue. Despite his insistence on the "unbridled anarchistic storm" as the social force supporting Bolshevism, he observes that

*in direct form, the Bolsheviks did not talk of socialism as the aim and task of the soviet government at that time [the October period] and the masses supported the Bolsheviks and were not thinking of socialism.... In general, the central leaders had firmly decided on a socialist experiment.... But before the masses they did not dot the i's.*<sup>12</sup>

However, given the alleged maximalism of the masses, one can only wonder at the reasons for this reticence of the leaders. In even more contradictory fashion, Sukhanov observes that "socialism is primarily an economic problem, but here both Lenin and Trotsky had indeed not developed an economic programme." And what they did have was "really not different from the economic programme of May 16 of the old Executive Committee [of the Petrograd Soviet].... For Konovalov,\*\* the latter was tantamount to socialism. But in essence it was far from socialism." True, control "was a cardinal point at all workers' meetings. But this 'socialism' was still

\*\* The Menshevik Internationalists were left wingers in the Menshevik Party: they rejected the positions of the Menshevik "defensists" as well as those of the Bolsheviks on soviet power. They advocated a coalition government of the socialist parties, but refused to join the coalition formed by the Bolsheviks and Left Social Revolutionaries after November 1917. Their positions were thus ambiguous and they failed to win significant worker support. Their most prominent leader was Yurii Martov.

\*\*\* A.I. Konovalov, a liberal industrialist and banker, was Minister of Trade and Industry in the Provisional Government (who before the war had given some financial support to the Bolsheviks). He resigned from the coalition government in late May 1917 in protest against economic "anarchy", and was replaced by the engineer Pal'chinskii. He became Minister of Trade and Industry again and Deputy Prime Minister in September 1917, and in that capacity in November surrendered to the Soviet on behalf of the Provisional Government.

very timid and modest. It went in a different direction but still not farther than the right Menshevik Groman\* with his 'regulation' and 'organization of the economy and labour'.<sup>13</sup> In any case, it was hardly the stuff to enthuse workers allegedly nurturing "apocalyptic hopes" and "visions of a workers' paradise", let alone an "unbridled storm".

How did the workers perceive the social nature of their revolution? And how did this conception evolve over the course of the revolution? This paper seeks to explore these questions by focusing on the issue of economic regulation and its practical expression in 1917 — workers' control. Of all the public issues that preoccupied the workers in the revolution, the threat of economic collapse, which made itself felt from the

\* Groman was a Menshevik economist who headed the Economic Department of the Petrograd Soviet.

spring of 1917, and the necessity of economic regulation as the sole means of averting disaster were surely the most "social". Not only did they play a crucial role in the workers' support for the October Insurrection, but they were the basis from which the revolution in Russia left its original liberal-democratic framework to launch itself into the "socialist experiments" so feared by the moderate socialists.

Limitations of space do not allow a detailed treatment of this topic, which to be fully understood must be viewed within an historical perspective and as an integral part of the totality of socio-political relations that constituted Russia in revolution.<sup>14</sup> What I propose here is an interpretative essay, focusing on the major stages of the development and on the dynamics of the workers' conception of the social nature of the revolution.



Poster for International Women's Day - the day Petrograd's women workers began the revolution



# Chronology of the Russian

## May-June 1896

General textile strike in St. Petersburg (renamed Petrograd at the start of World War I), the first large-scale, co-ordinated labour action, which resulted in legislation shortening the work day. This was the first time any social group had been able to force the hand of the autocratic state through direct confrontation.

## January 9, 1905

Bloody Sunday. Government massacre of peaceful worker demonstrators petitioning the Tsar for economic and democratic reforms. Workers all over the country responded in a massive strike wave that opened the Revolution of 1905, during which soviets made their first appearance.

## November 1905

Petrograd workers launched a strike for the immediate introduction of the eight-hour day. The state and capital co-operated in a lockout of more than 100,000 workers. This was the beginning of the defeat of the revolution, which was assisted by the arrival of loyal troops from the Far East as the war with Japan ended and by the start of a severe economic depression.

## April 1912

Massacre of striking workers in the Lena Goldfields in Siberia, coinciding with the end of the depression. Workers all over Russia, and especially in St. Petersburg, responded with a massive strike wave, in which political and economic demands were inextricably combined.

## 1912 - August 1914

Major labour upsurge, following the 1907-11 period of reaction, directed equally against the Tsarist state and against capital. The Bolsheviks became the dominant political force in the labour movement. On the eve of the war, Petersburg was the scene of pitched battles, complete with barricades, between workers and police. Many observers found the atmosphere reminiscent of 1905, except that now the polarization between the workers and the bourgeoisie was much deeper.

## August 1914

Outbreak of war. An initial patriotic upsurge in society (much less among industrial workers), military mobilizations, and severe repression cut short the revolutionary movement.

## August 1915 - February 1917

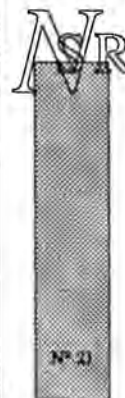
Continued growth of the increasingly politicized strike movement, fired by deteriorating economic conditions due to a war that was viewed as imperialistic, as well as by severely repressive political and factory regimes.

## February 1917

The strike movement culminated in a spontaneous general strike of Petrograd workers, who won over the garrison. From there, the revolution spread rapidly, practically without bloodshed, to the rest of the country. Officially, power was in the hand of a Provisional Government formed by liberal politicians, representatives of the propertied classes, who had reluctantly rallied to the revolution once it had been accomplished. But the government's official programme was dictated by the Petrograd Soviet, an elected assembly of worker and soldier delegates. The moderate socialist leaders of the Soviet were instructed by the Soviet to "control" the bourgeois government. Real power was in the Soviet's hands, which alone enjoyed the confidence of the soldiers. The Soviet's programme was the immediate proposal of a democratic peace, free distribution of the landed estates to the peasantry, an eight-hour workday, and a democratic republic.

## April Days

Publication of a secret government note to the Allies promising that Russia would respect all (imperialist) treaties and pursue the war to a victorious conclusion sparked off demonstrations in Petrograd against and for the government, causing the first limited armed clashes of the revolution. To bolster the government, the moderate socialist leaders of the Soviet formed a coalition government with the liberals. Workers initially supported this, believing that it would



# Revolutionary Movement

make more effective the soviet's control of the liberals. But they soon realized that the moderate socialists were prisoners of the liberals who were hostile to the Soviet's programme and the workers began to demand the direct transfer of power to the soviets. At the same time, economic dislocation deepened in the face of government and owner inactivity and sabotage, giving rise to the movement for workers' control. By early June, the Bolsheviks were a majority in the workers' section of the Petrograd Soviet.

## July Days

On 3-4 July, workers and soldiers demonstrated to pressure the moderate leaders of the Central Executive Committee of Soviets to take power. The government, supported by some of the moderate socialists, responded with repression against the labour movement and the Bolsheviks. A period of reaction set in for several weeks.

## August 27-31

Kornilov Uprising. General Kornilov, supported by the liberals, marched on Petrograd in a coup attempt aimed at crushing the soviets and other worker organizations. But his troops melted away en route, as the workers of Petrograd mobilized to defend the revolution.

## September

New elections to the soviets yielded Bolshevik majorities in the soviets of workers' and soldiers' deputies of almost all industrial centres. The Bolsheviks were the only party advocating soviet power. Peasants were seizing the land, not waiting for an agrarian reform that was constantly postponed by the coalition government, and the soldiers were beginning to desert en masse from the front.

## October 25

Seizure of power by the Petrograd Soviet. The next day, the All-Russian Congress of Soviets of Workers' and Peasants' Deputies, endorsing the insurrection, took power and adopted decrees on land, peace and workers' control. Negotiations between the Bolsheviks and the moderate socialists on the formation of a coalition socialist

government failed, as the moderates rejected the principle of soviet power, i.e., of a government without representation of the "progressive bourgeoisie". Only the Left Social Revolutionaries, an essentially peasant-based party close to the Bolsheviks, agreed to join a coalition.

## November 12-14

After three postponements by the Provisional Government, the Soviet government held elections to the Constituent Assembly. The Bolsheviks won 23.6 per cent of the overall vote and an overwhelming majority among workers. The populist Social Revolutionaries were the largest party with 40.9 per cent (the Mensheviks received 3 per cent, the liberals and rightist parties 8.4 per cent, and the national and Muslim parties 20.1 per cent), but a significant part of the Social Revolutionary vote (more than half) was actually cast for Left Social Revolutionaries, who were unable to run a separate list because their formal split with Right Social Revolutionaries had occurred only in September.

## January 5, 1918

Dissolution of the Constituent Assembly once it became obvious that the moderate majority returned in the elections would reject soviet power and opt again for coalition government with the liberals.

## May 1918

The number of employed industrial workers in Petrograd dropped to 143,000, from 406,000 at the start of 1917 and 340,000 at the start of 1918, as the economic collapse gathered force. By September 1918, only 120,000 factory workers were still employed in Petrograd. Hunger was becoming chronic in the cities.

## May 1918

An uprising of Czech troops in transit through Russia marked the start of foreign intervention. Civil war lasted until the end of 1920 and made impossible any serious attempts to resolve the economic crisis.



## II. February: A "Constitutional Regime" in the Factories

Alongside their general political goals in the February Revolution — a democratic republic, non-annexationist peace policy, land reform\* — the workers had a series of specific economic demands which were an integral part of their conception of democracy: the eight-hour day, a wage "befitting a free citizen" and a "constitutional regime" in the factories.

Since 1905, the eight-hour day had been a major demand of the labour movement, one of the social-democratic "three whales",\*\* and it was perceived as a "political demand" by all sides. "We have received the eight-hour day and other freedoms," declared a worker delegate to the Conference of Factories of the Military Authority on March 24.<sup>15</sup> This is why the Petrograd Soviet's call for a return to work on March 7 without the legislative enactment of this reform aroused such opposition among the workers. "When I told them of the decision," explained a soviet delegate, "in my heart I felt that we could not do this: the workers cannot win freedom and not use it to ease the burdens of their labour, to fight capital."<sup>16</sup>

The vast majority of workers did not heed the Soviet's call. At one textile mill, a Menshevik mechanic argued for a ten-and-half-hour day in solidarity with the Allies and urged the workers to consider what their English comrades would think. To this, one of the women replied: "We have sacrificed so much. Do we really have to wait for instructions from abroad?" The meeting voted to end the strike only upon winning the eight-hour day.<sup>17</sup> Only 28 factories of the 111 on which the Petrograd Society of Factory and Mill Owners had information had returned to work by the seventh, and most of these had introduced the eight-hour day "without preliminary permission" [*yavochnym poriyadkom*].<sup>18</sup>

### The New Russia

The general strike that grew into the February Revolution was thus at once a political strike against the autocracy and an economic strike against capital. After the abdication of the Tsar, in many factories the workers returned only long enough to formulate their demands to management and to vote to stay out until they were met.<sup>19</sup> The wage demands too were seen as part of the democratic revolution. "The conditions of

\* Although obviously an economic measure, land reform was directed against property that was essentially feudal in origin: land reform was therefore considered a part of the democratic revolution.

\*\* The "three whales" were the pillars of the Bolshevik programme before 1917: a democratic republic, the eight-hour day, and land reform.

predatory exploitation that existed in the feudal system of Russia cannot exist in the New Russia," declared the Narvskii District Soviet on March 6.<sup>20</sup> Enactment of a minimum wage was an insistent demand at the March 20 session of the Petrograd Soviet on the workers' economic situation. The delegate from the Putilov Shipyard\*\*\* summed up the discussion:

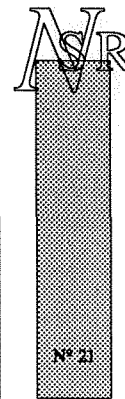
*Now it is the duty of the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies to enter into our situation and review all tariffs, rework them to create for us a bearable existence, and not to be surprised that we present such demands. And so we want a commission to be formed here to investigate the situation and enter into negotiations with the administration which together with the entrepreneurs, under the flag of patriotism, stripped the workers naked, since they all believed that a worker is created in order that they may drink his blood drop by drop, squeeze out all the juices, and then throw him overboard like a useless object. Now, comrades, it isn't so: when the workers have awoken from their sleep of toil, they demand a just wage and put forth just demands, and the entrepreneur cries — "Help, they're robbing us!" Comrades, you probably don't share their horror. You understand the situation of all the workers and you will probably tell them: No. You oppressed the workers, you fleeced them, and in the future you have to pay only that which the labour is worth.<sup>21</sup>*

If this formulation remains comfortably within the framework of a capitalist economy, this is perhaps less clear of the demand for a "constitutional regime" in the factory. This demand too, however, was not new. It was fundamentally a response to the arbitrary factory administration and to the police functions it fulfilled for the Tsarist state. The workers had experienced this factory regime as a particularly onerous form of economic exploitation and political oppression, but also as an especially intolerable moral affront to their dignity as human beings.

### Purge of the Administrators

Upon returning to the factories, one of the first acts of the workers was to begin a purge of the administration. At first this took the traditional form of riding out the accused party in a wheelbarrow, but eventually the procedure became less violent and more orderly. The explanations the workers gave for these actions fell roughly under three categories:

\*\*\* The Putilov Shipyard was part of a giant factory complex in Petrograd that employed over 30,000 workers. Initially a Social Revolutionary stronghold, it was a center of Bolshevik activity from the spring of 1917 on, particularly during the July Days and the resistance to Kornilov.



1) The individual in question had been a tool of the autocracy. Indeed, the relationship between the factory administration and the Tsarist repressive apparatus can only be described as symbiotic: the former regularly reported on "trouble-makers" and locked out political strikes, while the latter placed the police and the army at management's disposal to deal with economic strikes.<sup>22</sup>

The workers of the boiler-making shop of the Baltic Shipbuilding Factory explained the removal of their shop manager in the following terms:

*We find that he fulfilled sooner the functions of a purely police administrator than those of a foreman and shop manager, wanting to turn the above-named shop into a house of silence or a disciplinary department, where with aching heart one could hear his answers: "I'll send you to the front! I'll use military authority!" From the above one can see his devotion to the old reactionary regime.*<sup>23</sup>

2) The individual acted in an arbitrary, despotic fashion, exploiting the workers beyond measure and trampling upon their dignity. Foreman Volkov, declared the workers of the paint shop of the Baltic Factory,

*is the chief culprit of our oppression and humiliation which we have suffered over the past years.... The voice of our comrades whom he mocked calls to us for revenge. From the very first days of his rule when he put on his idiot's mittens of violence, he showed his base soul. In 1915 many of our comrades suffered in their self-respect, and thanks to his contrivances were thrown out of the factory in the most shameless manner.... They [Volkov and his superior] forgot 1905. In 1909 he began his shameful programme of reducing wage rates to the impossible eight-nine kopeks, without taking into account the conditions of work.... We all experienced this horror all the time until the last days of his arbitrary rule.*<sup>24</sup>

In passing, it is worth noting that the Tsar's Minister of Trade and Industry had qualified the workers' demand for polite address as "political".<sup>25</sup>

3) The individual was technically unfit for his post. If the first two motives were not new, this one was. It indicates an important, if still uncrystallized, shift in consciousness produced by the February Revolution. And typically, it was rarely offered alone but most often to bolster at least one of the other reasons. At the First Power Station, the workers decided to remove the board of directors as "henchmen of the old regime, and recognizing their harmfulness from the economic point of view and their uselessness from the technical."<sup>26</sup> Department head Lyashchenko at the Baltic Factory was "poorly versed in the technical tasks of his post" and spent at most only two-three hours a day in the shop. At the same time, he was accused of "limitless exploitation", replying to all requests with the threat of jail or the front, and "he set up a system of spies and took care that among his

aides there should be none but a monarchist organization."<sup>27</sup>

## Election of the Factory Committees

The other aspect of the factory reform was the election of factory committees, one of whose basic functions was to represent the workers in dealings with the administration and with outside bodies. The right to such representatives had been officially granted as far back as 1903, though in highly circumscribed form. But in view of the resistance of the owners backed up by the state, with few exceptions the workers had been unable to exercise this right except by force and only for brief periods in 1905-6 and 1912-14.<sup>28</sup>

The other long-standing aspiration the factory committees were to realize was the establishment of "factory self-government" [*zavodskoe samoupravlenie*],<sup>29</sup> or as it was more commonly called in March 1917, the right to "manage the internal order of the factory" [*vedat' vnutrennyim poriyadkom zavoda*].<sup>30</sup> The provisional committee of the Radiotelegraph Factory listed the following areas in which it intended to work out norms and rules:

- 1) length of work day
- 2) minimum worker's wage
- 3) mode of payment for labour
- 4) immediate organization of medical aid
- 5) on the insurance of labour
- 6) on the establishment of a mutual aid fund
- 7) on hiring and firing
- 8) resolving various conflicts
- 9) labour discipline
- 10) on rest
- 11) on guarding the factory
- 12) on food
- 13) rights, duties, elections and existence of a permanent factory committee<sup>31</sup>

The factory committees were thus intended to put an end to the arbitrary powers which management had used to oppress and exploit the workers: arbitrary firing of "trouble-makers", the hiring of "foreign elements" hiding from the draft, playing favourites, arbitrary assignment to skill categories and payment for work, arbitrary and oppressive use of fines, etc. This added up to the establishment of a "constitutional regime" in the factory.<sup>32</sup>

These activities of the factory committees were not, however, intended to challenge the right of the capitalist administration to manage the economic and technical sides of production — nor did they do this in practice. The more radical, though itself far from socialist, demand for workers' control was not put forth in the private factories in this period.

## The Committees in the State Factories

This was not true, however, of the state factories, where after the February Revolution the workers in many cases either fully assumed management responsibilities or else participated in management with the remnants of the old administrative personnel — in most cases army officers and literally servants of the old regime. “On receiving the order of the Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies on the resumption of work on March 7,” reported the committee of the Patronnyi Factory,

*the workers met on the morning of March 6 in their general assembly, and in view of the fact that none of the higher ranks was at the plant and that they could not but have known of the [Soviet’s] call to resume work at the factory since it was published in all the papers, the workers’ general assembly decided to begin work independently from March 8.<sup>33</sup>*

But this was only part of the story, since on March 7 the workers decided not to accept back the majority of officials.<sup>34</sup> Several months later, in a report on its activities, the committee of the Okhta Power Factory noted:

*At first the tasks of the factory committee were unclear and it was forced to move gropingly. It took upon itself not only the functions of control but also the duties of administration. Such cases occurred, of course, also in other factories.<sup>35</sup>*

Immediately after the February Revolution, there was a widespread feeling in the state enterprises that with the democratic revolution their factories belonged to the people. It seemed only natural that the workers in these factories should at least participate in management. Similar attitudes were in evidence on the railroads and in the post and telegraph system.<sup>36</sup> However, by the end of March, the workers in the state factories had withdrawn from management, rejecting any responsibility for production and asserting only the right to “control” (i.e. monitor) management. Accordingly, the Instructions on the Activity of the Factory Committees passed by the Conference of State Enterprises of Petrograd on April 15 gave the factory committees broad rights of control, including complete access to information and documents, as well as the right to remove “administrators who cannot guarantee normal relations with the workers”. But they concluded:

*Not desiring to take upon ourselves the responsibility for the technical and administrative organization of production in the given circumstances until the full socialization of the economy, the representatives of the general factory committee enter the administration with [only] a consultative voice.<sup>37</sup>*

## Why the Retreat?

What had happened in the interval? The chairman of the Admiralty Factory committee explained to the workers’ general assembly

*the difficulties involved in conducting the affairs of the factory committee in view of the complexity and indefiniteness and also because the matter itself is totally new. Given the confused circumstances that existed at the time of its creation and the difficulties in adapting this institution for management and control, the committee was placed in a contradictory situation — for in giving orders to the corresponding organ of the administration, it would thus limit itself in the sphere of broad control and also inhibit the initiative of the director of the factory, thus harming the efficiency and orderliness of execution. Practice and common sense told us that it is necessary to transfer the function of administration to the factory’s director and thus to unite the entire staff into a single unitary organization. The committee retains the right to control all of its actions up to and including removal, through the conciliation chamber, of both the factory director and individual administrative personnel and also the initiative in the reorganization and reduction of their numbers.<sup>38</sup>*

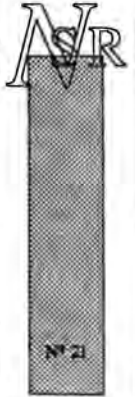
The different reactions in the state and private factories shed important light on the workers’ conception of the February Revolution in the economic sphere. The assumption of management responsibilities by the workers in the state enterprises was an initial reaction to the democratic revolution: the state had been democratized, so too should the factory administration in enterprises belonging to the state. The workers soon retreated from this position in view of the complexities of a task for which they did not feel prepared — all the more so in conditions of economic dislocation caused by the war. But there was also a recognition that workers’ management had to wait for the socialization of the entire economy. In March this was clearly not a prospect for the short or even intermediate term.

For the same reason, the workers in the private sector, in contrast to those in the state sector, did not put forth the demand for workers’ control. In the private sphere, this encroachment on the prerogatives of management was not seen as a right belonging to the democratic revolution in the way that the eight-hour day was. In both sectors, therefore, a transformation of property relations did not form part of the workers’ conception of the revolution.

## An “Enthusiasm for Work”

On the face of it, the February Revolution seems to have had little effect on the workers’ consciousness — almost all the measures they took in the economic sphere had already been important demands of the pre-revolutionary labour movement, many dating back to 1905 and beyond. Nevertheless, something had





changed as a result of the revolution, even if its significance was not readily apparent at first. There was a hint of this in the appearance of technical incompetence among the reasons in the purge of the managerial staff. Another sign was the inclusion of the factory's physical security among the areas falling to the factory committee's purview. Both indicated a new active interest in the welfare of the factories stemming from the workers' desire to defend the revolution they had made and considered their own.

This also expressed itself in the rise in productivity that followed the revolution.<sup>39</sup> N.N. Kutler, a big industrialist and Kadet\* leader, observed a certain "enthusiasm for work" in this period.<sup>40</sup> The director of the Schlüsselburg Powder factory reported to the Minister of Trade and Industry in mid-April

*The workers in a fully conscious manner are taking into account the current conjuncture and as far as possible are protecting the factory from any occurrences that could harm it in any way and are energetically co-operating in raising the production of powder and explosive materials.*<sup>41</sup>

### The Fear of Sabotage

The workers were concerned about the external threat. But possible internal enemies to the revolution worried them no less. The Minister of Trade and Industry noted in March that the workers of the capital "suspect the administration of holding up production of goods for defence."<sup>42</sup> This must also be viewed on the background of the campaign launched by the "bourgeois press" in mid-March directed toward the soldiers, accusing the workers of displaying laziness and greed while the valiant but ill-equipped soldiers languished in the trenches. On March 22 the representatives of the factories of the Moscow District of Petrograd discussed this campaign and resolved to appeal to the workers of the capital

*with the suggestion to call meetings to clarify the causes of the industrial dislocation in their districts and then [to call] a city-wide meeting of representatives of all the districts to clarify and publish these causes of the industrial dislocation and to expose those who are preventing the elimination of this dislocation.*<sup>43</sup>

Lockouts had been one of capital's preferred weapons against the labour movement — a weapon wielded regularly against the workers' economic as well as political (anti-Tsarist) actions.<sup>44</sup> One of the most famous of these was the general lockout in Petrograd in November 1905, which played an important role in the eventual defeat of that revolution. Before February 1917, when confronted with a

lockout, the workers either continued their strike or declared a new one, if they had been out previously for a political reason. But the possibility of setting up "control" over management to forestall a lockout or of re-opening the closed factory on their own had not been seriously entertained.

### Workers' Control in the Private Sector

After February, the situation was quite different. Given the new correlation of forces (the owners no longer had the repressive apparatus of the state at their disposal), the workers' new sense of citizenship and responsibility, their fervent desire to protect their revolution, and finally in view of the past history of intimate co-operation between capital and the old regime, the workers were no longer prepared to sit back when they suspected their factories were threatened by a malevolent or incompetent administration. And suspect they did. At the March 20 session of the Petrograd Soviet, the delegate from the Metallicheskii Factory stated:

*We are receiving declarations that, although there is work in certain shops, for unknown reasons this work is not being set in motion. We are told, Its turn has not yet come — and the shops are idle. We had a meeting of elders at our factory and they reached the conclusion that they elected a commission of three which is to investigate whether there are not abuses on the part of the administration in favour of the old regime and the Germans, and if it turns out that work can begin, then to immediately demand of the administration that it be done. Maybe the administration will not want to submit, so it is desirable that it be issued from the Soviet of W. and S.D. that a commission be chosen immediately from the Military Industrial Committees. True, that commission was bourgeois and there was only a small group of workers in it, but it is desirable that now such a commission be created with a view to control and that it conduct an inspection of all the factories in order to make sure that there are no abuses on the part of the administration in holding up work. Are the claims of the administration correct that there is no metal and coal?*<sup>45</sup>

Here already is a call for workers' control in the private sector. But in contrast to what was occurring in the state factories, it was posed in purely pragmatic terms, as a means of defence, and not as a right flowing from the democratic revolution. Moreover, this was an appeal for action on the city level by the Soviet, based upon the recognition that the Soviet would have more clout. There is no trace of anarchist motivation here.

The same is true of the few cases of control actually established in the private enterprises in this period: it was set up to prevent the suspicious shipment of goods and materials. At the Kebke Canvass Factory, production had come to a halt

\* The Kadets (short for Constitutional Democratic Party) were a liberal party that moved increasingly to the right after the 1905 revolution and became the main party of the propertied classes after February 1917.



despite earlier assurances by management of a sufficient supply of materials and orders. The administration was evasive in reply to all questions but in the meanwhile it was hurriedly loading canvasses for shipment right off the looms. At the start of April the workers decided to prevent this shipment and cut off all telephone communications to the factory. Their general assembly asked the Soviet to investigate.<sup>46</sup>

Such cases were very rare in the early weeks of the revolution, since production was generally expanding and the economic crisis inherited from the old regime

seemed to be turning around. Nevertheless, one can argue that this new activist orientation of the workers in the area of production contained the embryo from which the movement for workers' control and ultimately the social revolution would grow. But this seed would only grow if the necessary conditions were present: a threat to the factories and a basis to believe that the owners, far from sharing the workers' interest in maintaining production, actually wanted to shut it down through their inactivity and negligence or outright sabotage. By the end of April these conditions would already be in place.



# III.

## April to June: Defending the Factories

NSR

N° 21

It was towards the end of April that the state of the economy and particularly the need for economic regulation first became dominant issues in the revolution, taking their place alongside Peace, Land and Freedom in the labour movement. About this time, it became clear that the economic crisis, whose progress seemed to have been halted and even reversed in the first weeks of the revolution, was reasserting itself. "Of late," wrote the Menshevik Internationalist paper *Novaya zhizn'* in early May,

*one observes a curtailment of production in a whole series of enterprises. This phenomenon has so far manifested itself only in medium and small enterprises, but all the same it is beginning to worry the workers.*<sup>47</sup>

The Menshevik Defensist\* *Rabochaya gazeta* wrote of the "intensification of the general course of economic dislocation and the advancing spectre of mass unemployment."<sup>48</sup> *Rech'*, the liberal Kadet paper, was even more pessimistic: "Two or three weeks will go by, and the factories will start closing one after the other."<sup>49</sup>

### Industrialists against State Regulation

On the left, the conclusion was apparent: if disaster was to be averted, regulation of the economy had to be instituted at once. On May 16, the Executive Committee of the Petrograd Soviet adopted a plan worked out by its Economic Department under the leadership of the Menshevik economist Groman calling for broad state regulation of production, distribution and finance. In its essence, this plan differed little from what was already being done in the other warring states. Nevertheless, two days later, the Minister of Trade and Industry, A.I. Konovalov, a big Moscow industrialist of liberal repute, submitted his resignation citing his opposition to this plan for regulation and public control as the reason for his decision. The crisis could be averted, he wrote in his letter of resignation, only if the "Provisional Government, at the least, demonstrated truly full authority, if it, at least, entered upon the path of restoring discipline which had grown lax and if it showed energy in the struggle against the excessive demands of the extreme left."<sup>50</sup>

This was the consistent position among the industrialists: in place of state intervention, rejected out of hand, was the insistent demand to curb the workers.<sup>51</sup> Ryabushinskii, another liberal Moscow industrialist, explained why state intervention was not suited to Russia:

*In Europe, the state, in intervening into the sphere of state [economic] life, receives full control, something to which we do not object. But we fear that in Russia such control is impossible in terms of its usefulness and expediency for the state as a whole so long as our government continues to find itself in a position of being controlled.*<sup>52</sup>

In other words, state regulation was seen as beneficial only where the propertied classes were in full control of the state. In Russia, the workers, through their soviets, had too much influence on the state for it to be allowed to meddle in the economy — the regulation might be turned against capital's interests.

If there was general unanimity in the pronouncements of upper-class representatives on the need to restrain labour as the only means of saving the economy, in the soviet camp there was an equally striking consensus across the political spectrum on the need to restrain capital if economic collapse — and the counter-revolution that was sure to follow — were to be averted. In this respect, it is worth quoting at length the analysis of *Rabochaya gazeta*, staunch defender of the governmental coalition of representatives of revolutionary democracy and the upper classes.\*\* The editorial, dated May 20, is entitled "An Offensive?"

*In the camp of the industrialists there is excitement. The brief stupor which had seized them in the first months of the Revolution has passed. No trace remains of their recent confusion and panicky tendency to make concessions. In the first month of freedom, the united industrialists, offering almost no resistance, granted the workers' demands. Now they have decisively taken up resistance and are quickly making ready an offensive along the entire front...*

*They are not deciding immediately to declare open war on the workers. The volcanic soil of the Revolution is still too red hot, the working class still too threatening in its burst of revolutionary enthusiasm for the industrialists, at least for the moment, to decide on a frontal attack in order to smash the enemy with a counter-thrust.*

*But the intensification of the general course of*

\* The Menshevik Defensists, the majority of the Menshevik Party, advocated an alliance with liberal elements of the bourgeoisie as a necessary condition for the bourgeois-democratic revolution, and rejected a break with the Allies during the First World War. They opposed the October Revolution, arguing that socialist forces in Russia were too weak and that it would lead to disaster.

\*\* A coalition government of liberals and moderate socialist (Menshevik and Social Revolutionary) leaders of the Soviet was formed in May 1917 to bolster the flagging authority among workers and soldiers of the liberal Provisional Government of Prince Lvov set up after the February Revolution. Lvov continued to head the government until July, when Kerensky replaced him as Prime Minister. The Petrograd Soviet under Bolshevik leadership overthrew this coalition government in the revolution of November 1917.



economic ruin, the advancing spectre of mass unemployment, the social fright of the propertied classes — all this will create favourable ground for carrying out the entrepreneurs' plan for the offensive. And having decided not to advance openly "down the middle", they are attempting an encircling movement around the flank in order to attack the enemy in the rear. Of late, more and more often one hears of an "Italian strike" [go slow] practiced by the entrepreneurs now here, now there. The factories are not being kept in repair, work parts are not replaced, work is carried out in a slipshod manner. The entrepreneurs shout from the roofs that the "inordinate demands" of the workers are not realizable and are directly disastrous to the enterprises. They generously propose, or at least pretend to, that the government remove from them the unbearable burden of running the enterprises.

In other cases, they cut back production, dismiss workers under the pretext of a lack of metal, fuel, orders, the competition of imports. We have before us a different means of struggle — the hidden lock-out.

In the Labour Department of the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, one daily encounters facts that confirm the existence of a definite plan of the industrialists.

### A Declaration of War

It was not as a simple prediction, but as a veiled threat, that the workers understood statements such as that of Konovalov at the Congress of Military-Industrial Committees\* in which he lashed out at the "excessive demands of the workers" and warned that "if in the near future a sobering of minds does not occur, we will witness the closing of tens of hundreds of enterprises."<sup>53</sup> Nor was this an isolated statement.<sup>54</sup> To the workers, this was nothing less than a declaration of war by the bourgeoisie against the revolution.

As a result, while the Provisional Government remained paralyzed on this issue due to the resistance of the capitalists, and the Menshevik "conciliators" continued to tell the workers that what was needed was state regulation by this government, the workers themselves were increasingly drawn to other solutions. Zhivotov, the delegate of the 1886 Power Station at the First Petrograd Conference of Factory Committees at the end of May, expressed a view that was predominant among the conferees and rapidly gaining ground among the broad mass of workers as well:

... You have to be blind not to see this counter-revolutionary work. Sabotage in the Donbass, in the textile industry, in a whole series of Petrograd factories requires the organized intervention of the working class in the form of the immediate establishment of workers' control, which alone can

\* The Military-Industrial Committees were formed at the initiative of the Tsarist government in 1915 in order to coordinate industrialists' (and later workers') mobilization for the war effort. They became a focal point for liberal opposition culminating in the February 1917 revolution, then defended capital against the factory committees.

put an end to the counter-revolutionary ideas of the capitalists.... It is naive to think that the Provisional Government is going to set up control over its own capitalists.... Undoubtedly in the near future life will put forth this demand for workers' control of production, but it will be fully realized not in a bourgeois government but in a government of revolutionary democracy....<sup>55</sup>

### For Workers' Control — and a Soviet Government

As this passage indicates, the workers reacted to the situation on two closely related levels. On the most immediate, practical level, they demanded the establishment of control of the administration at the enterprise level. This demand for workers' control, which arose from below, not having figured on the programme of any of the parties, came into its own as a major demand of the labour movement at the end of April, and received its organized expression in the First Petrograd Conference of Factory Committees a month later.

But control on the factory level was never seen as a substitute for regulation at the national level but rather as a necessary complement to it. As Levin, one of the organizers of the First Conference, stated:

The factory committees are doing all they can. But it would be an idealization to say they are working smoothly and productively in all factories. In fact, in the majority of cases control is simple and primitive.... Until the workers' organizations create a control apparatus which together with the state power will assume control, the factory committees will limit themselves to guarding the given factory, protecting the means of production from being sold, from conscious sabotage, etc.... The factory committees will play a great role, but not without the co-operation of a truly revolutionary state power.<sup>56</sup>

Hence the response on the political level: regulation is feasible only under a government not subject to the influence of the upper classes, i.e. a government of revolutionary democracy, and in concrete terms, a soviet government.

Western historiography has not sufficiently appreciated the importance of the issue of economic regulation in the workers' political radicalization. Yet this was possibly a more important factor than the desire for peace or even the threat of direct counter-revolution, because of its immediacy and urgency.

### "Unloading" Petrograd

It is significant that the first resolution in the Workers' Section of the Petrograd Soviet to gather a majority for soviet power was the outcome of a debate on economic regulation. While the Provisional

Government was unable to introduce a system of state regulation, it did come up with a project of "unloading" Petrograd, i.e. removing its factories to places where they would presumably be closer to sources of fuel and raw materials. The workers, however, immediately saw in this a plan to rid Russia of its most revolutionary element, the industrial workers of the red capital. Intense opposition from the workers and soviets forced the government to temporarily shelve this plan. On May 31, the Workers' Section met to discuss the "unloading" and to hear explanations from the Acting Minister of Trade and Industry, Pal'chinskii,\* as well as from the moderate socialist leaders of the Soviet's Executive Committee. The assembly voted 173 against 144 to reject the plan. Instead, it called for a struggle against the economic dislocation and an end to the war and concluded:

*A real struggle against it [the economic crisis] is possible only through regulation and control of all production by state power in the hands of the Soviet of Workers', Soldiers' and Peasants' Deputies.*<sup>57</sup>

The June 1 resolution of the First Conference of Factory Committees on "the economic means of struggle against the dislocation" spoke as much of measures necessary on the national level as it did of the need to extend workers' control on the enterprise level to all factories and aspects of production. The last paragraph concluded:

*The systematic and successful execution of the above measures is possible only with the transfer of all state power to the hands of the Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies.*<sup>58</sup>

This resolution garnered 297 votes, or just over two thirds. To this, the Mensheviks, who insistently repeated that workers' control was anarchistic, choosing to disregard its explicit and intimate linkage to state regulation in the discussion and the resolution adopted, counterposed their "state control". It, however, received only 85 votes. (The anarchist resolution, which passed over the state in silence, gathered only 45 votes, a fact that the proponents of the anarchist interpretation of workers' control have so far failed to explain.)

Responding to the Mensheviks, Ivan Naumov, the delegate from the New Parviainen Machine-Construction Factory, a young Bolshevik activist, stated:

*Remember how not long ago they called us Bolsheviks "anarchists" and said "you are provoking a civil war" because we demanded*

\* Pal'chinskii, an engineer who became acting Minister of Trade and Industry in the coalition government after Konovalov's resignation in May 1917, was one of the main advocates of "unloading" Petrograd. Kerensky's governor-general of Petrograd during Kornilov's attempted coup at the end of August, he was removed from office after three days, after he tried to ban the Bolshevik newspaper. Later he helped organize the defense of the Winter Palace against the October insurrection.

*control over production. Now everyone wants it. If we give the responsibility for control to the existing government — more bourgeois than democratic — it is like giving capitalists who have been criminally aggravating the economic crisis the responsibility for controlling their own criminal acts. This makes no sense. If you propose state control, then finish what you are saying: the government of what class? If it is the bourgeoisie, that means: leave everything like it was before.*<sup>59</sup>

## Workers' Control: A Defensive Measure

The defining characteristic of workers' control, as a direct response to the crisis on the enterprise level, was precisely its defensive nature: it was first and foremost a measure aimed at forestalling or reversing a decline in production or complete shutdown. In its motivation, it was, therefore, quite different from the control established in the state enterprises in March as a democratic right flowing from the revolution. The movement for workers' control in the private factories arose "from below" towards the end of April when the threat to the factories became tangible. It is worth noting that although workers' control soon became a major plank of the Bolsheviks' programme, the party's Petrograd Committee first called on the workers to introduce it only on May 19, and its appeal was clearly a response to what was already taking place:

*In response to a series of declarations from the factory committees on the need for control and its establishment, it was decided to recommend to the comrade workers to create control commissions in the enterprises from representatives of the workers.*<sup>60</sup>

## Langezipen: The Missing Rubles

The conflict at the Langezipen Machine-Construction Factory is a good illustration of the nature and circumstances surrounding the introduction of control in this period. At the end of April, the Senior Factory Inspector of Petrograd Province reported that "the workers of this factory suspect the administration of holding up the production of defence goods." On April 27, they posted guards outside the administrative offices and refused to let the director leave before the end of work. A joint commission of representatives of the Petrograd Soviet, the Petrograd Society of Factory and Mill Owners, the Union of Engineers and the Central Military-Industrial Committee was formed to investigate the conflict. Then on June 2, the director announced that the factory was closing. He cited rising costs and a two-thirds decline in output due to the introduction of the eight-hour day, a 50 per cent decline in labour productivity, and a shortage of fuel and raw materials. As a result, the company had lost ten million rubles on

its defense orders and was forced to liquidate the factory for lack of funds.

The workers turned to the CS of Factory Committees (established at the First Conference), which appointed an investigator. By the time the latter had succeeded in uncovering a lengthy and suspicious chain of stock transfers, the director announced that "by chance" he "found" 450,000 rubles, loaned from an acquaintance, and production could proceed at full steam.<sup>61</sup> *Izvestiya*, the paper of the moderate socialist-led Soviet, cited this case as characteristic of "a whole series of declarations of closure by the owners" that were flowing into the CS of Factory Committees. It noted that in the majority of cases the reasons given boiled down to a lack of funds and losses sustained, but

*at the first attempt of the workers' organizations to verify the reasons offered by the entrepreneurs, very often the most complex and crafty machinations directed toward a lockout by the capitalists is uncovered.*<sup>62</sup>

It was upon learning of the owner's intention to close that the Langezipen workers decided to establish control over the administration. On June 5, the factory committee issued the following declaration:

*The situation of late at the factories of Langezipen Co. Inc., i.e.*

*1) the refusal of the factory administration to recognize the control commission of the workers and employees,*

*2) the violation by the administration of the decision of the conciliation chamber of May 6, 1917 on the amount of wages for the employees, and*

*3) the latest declaration of the administration on the closure of the factory — have placed us before the necessity of taking the following measures:*

*1) No goods or raw materials may leave the factory without the authorization of the factory committee, and also finished goods ready for shipment must be registered by the factory committee and are stamped by it.*

*2) All orders of the factory committee are obligatory for all workers and employees and no order from the administration is valid without the authorization of the factory committee.*

*3) No papers or correspondence relating to the factory can be destroyed without the factory committee having reviewed them.*

*4) To carry out the above tasks, the elected control commission will begin to carry out its duties from today.*

*5) The firemen and guards are duty-bound to watch over the factory's buildings against fire.*<sup>63</sup>

The defensive nature of the motives behind these measures is evident from the wording of the declaration itself: the actions of the administration "have placed us before the necessity" of acting. The establishment of control was finally prompted by the closure of the factory.

## Treugol'nik: A Case of Poisoning

Of course, not all conflicts leading to the introduction of workers' control were so clear-cut. At the Treugol'nik Rubber Factory, a dispute over compensation for the victims of the mass poisonings of 1914 had gone to the conciliation chamber. But in early May, a group of anarchist workers decided to force the issue. A crowd of about 70 workers went to the director and threatened to throw him into the canal if he did not agree to pay the demanded compensation as well as fifteen kopeks an hour extra retroactive from May 1915. At the same time, they also threatened the factory committee and the workers' representatives in the conciliation chamber, who opposed this act. They were finally persuaded to wait for the arrival of government representatives the next day. But overnight, the senior managerial personnel decided to leave, taking with them the factory's liquid funds. They were discovered by chance by the office workers and taken to Kerensky\* "until clarification at the factory". At a meeting with the workers' representatives the next day, the Minister of Labour cautioned the workers lest the administration leave and they would find themselves unable to run the factory. He advised postponing the demands until after the war.

At a joint meeting of representatives of the workers, the white-collar employees, foremen and union of engineers, it was decided to form a commission of representatives of workers and employees to control the activities of the administration. On May 5, at the suggestion of the workers' organizations, the administration returned, having spent more than a day in Kerensky's apartments.<sup>64</sup> Even in this case, though the origins of the conflict are different from those at Langezipen, control is still a response to a perceived threat to the factory on the part of the administration.

## The Rarity of Full-Scale Control

In fact, the evidence indicates that control in the private factories in the sense instituted at Langezipen was still rare at this time, despite the fact that workers' control had become the common demand of the entire labour movement. No doubt also partly due to management's firm opposition to it, the workers appear to have established control — or at least attempted to — principally when faced with a direct, tangible threat to the factory. The delegate from the New Arsenal Factory to the First Conference of Factory Committees noted that

\* Aleksandr Kerensky was a right-wing populist lawyer, who entered the first Provisional Government as Minister of Justice, became Minister of War and Marine in the coalition government in May 1917, and became Prime Minister following the July Days. He played an ambiguous role in the Kornilov uprising, but continued as Prime Minister until the October revolution.



*the committees have developed control mainly in the state enterprises. While attempts at control in the private factories raise loud protests from management and the bourgeois press — for example, "seizure of the factories", "anarchy" — the existence of this same control in the state factories goes unnoticed by broad circles of society.*<sup>65</sup>

As late as October, the factory committee of the Reznekrants Copper-Rolling Mill, a very militant factory, reported to the CS of Factory Committees that it had only recently formed a control commission. This decision was taken in conjunction with the need "to conduct a stubborn struggle with the attempts by the administration at sabotage." Pal'chinskii himself had threatened to "come and shut the factory."<sup>66</sup>

Much more common than control was the activity of the factory committees directed at securing raw materials, fuel and orders for the enterprises. Even before the First Conference of Factory Committees, the Petrograd workers had organized a special conference to discuss the fuel and raw materials situations. A number of factories sent delegations as far as the Donbass in search of these supplies and to clarify the situation in the mines.<sup>67</sup> As one of the speakers at the First Conference noted:

*Strangely, after the first weeks of the Revolution, in one factory after another there was no fuel, raw materials, money. More important, the administration took no steps to secure what was necessary. Everyone saw in this an Italian strike. The factory committees sent representatives all over in search of fuel — to other factory committees, to railroad junctions, warehouses, etc.... As a result of their activity, oil and coal, orders, money were found....*<sup>68</sup>

The motivation in this was identical to that behind the establishment of control, except that the administration had much less objection to the former type of activity.<sup>69</sup>

### "The Stain of the Entrepreneur"

Viewed from a certain angle, this was a form of active co-operation with the capitalist management and, as such, it drew criticism from some quarters: particularly from union leaders like Ryazanov,\* who, organizational rivalry aside, opposed direct worker intervention into the running of the factories in a democratic revolution. "The trade-union movement does not bear the stain of the entrepreneur," he told the All-Russian Conference of Factory Committees in October.

\* David B. Ryazanov, initially associated with a group intermediate between the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks and a collaborator of Trotsky's in Vienna and Paris before the revolution, became a moderate Bolshevik during the course of 1917, though an opponent of the October insurrection. Later head of the Marx-Engels Institute, he would die in Stalin's purges.

*But it is the misfortune of the committees that they are as if an integral part of the administration. The trade union directly opposes itself to capital, but a member of a factory committee involuntarily turns into an agent of the entrepreneur.*<sup>70</sup>

Although from a quite different perspective, Lenin also criticized the factory committees for acting as "errand boys" for capital. His point was that only soviet power and worker majorities in national regulating bodies could ensure that the efforts of the factory committees would be serving the interests of the people and not a small group of capitalists.<sup>71</sup> A number of speakers objected to his criticism. For while the Conference did indeed vote overwhelmingly for soviet power and national regulation, the situation called for immediate action. "The factory committees had to obtain raw materials," replied one worker delegate. "This is not errand running. If we didn't support the factories in this way, no one knows what might happen."<sup>72</sup>

### The Inexorable Struggle for Power

Lenin wanted to impress upon the conference the importance of the question of power for that of economic regulation. And in the abstract, this criticism had some validity. But the concrete situation in Russia of 1917 was such that the workers' concern for the maintenance of production led them progressively and inexorably past any attempts at collaboration with management to a direct struggle for power in the factories and ultimately to the complete expropriation of capital.

This was the objective tendency and this is what the workers were pushed toward. But it is necessary to repeat that this is not what the workers wanted, and not least because they did not feel themselves prepared to assume responsibility for the functioning of the factories. This is evident from the concept of control itself, which is premised upon the continued existence of capitalism and, therefore, requires at least a minimal, grudging co-operation of the owners in the sense of their continued interest and willingness to manage the enterprises. If this was lacking, if there was no positive managerial activity to control, the workers would have either to accept the decline in production and ultimately the closure of the factories, as they had done in the case of lockouts before the revolution, or else they would have to themselves assume more and more direct managerial responsibility. Here, in a nutshell, is the political-economic dynamic that led from the democratic to the social revolution, despite workers' reluctance to accept this change on the conceptual level.

For in practice, there was indeed a readiness to co-operate with management if this held out hope of saving the factory. And this even went beyond, at

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times, the search for fuel and orders. For example, in mid-July, the director of the Baltic Wagon-Construction factory announced his intention to close the automobile department due to the losses it had suffered since the revolution. When the factory committee countered that his claim was based upon inaccurate figures, the director finally agreed to continue production if the workers could guarantee a profitable level of productivity. The workers accepted this condition but insisted on the right of control over production and accounts. But the administration could not accept such measures, as they "had no precedent".<sup>73</sup> Co-operation was one thing, but the workers were not about to let themselves be duped.

At the Brenner Foundry and Machine-Construction Factory, the workers persuaded the white-collar employees to call off a planned strike and agreed themselves to work on holidays in order to avert a shutdown. When the owner closed the factory anyway, the workers re-opened it on their own and asked the Soviet to lobby for sequestration. An inquiry revealed a series of shady dealings on the part of the owner, who had received large sums as advances from the Technical Section of the Committee on Medium and Small Industry which he chaired.<sup>74</sup>

### Co-operation — and Frustration

In this way, the readiness to co-operate with management, albeit a capitalist management, in the interests of the factory was regularly frustrated. This was the point made by Antipov, a young Vyborg worker delegate to the Second Petrograd Factory Committee Conference in August, in relation to whether the workers should participate alongside representatives of the owners in public economic regulatory bodies:

*Can our comrades achieve anything by entering these conferences with the industrialists? It would be possible to liquidate the dislocation by such means if the owners were really unable to properly manage production. But here it is a case of the absence of desire on the part of the owners, and we will not be able to force them by means of these conferences. They are making no concessions, and therefore we have no reason to go to them.*<sup>75</sup>

There is a striking parallel between workers' control and dual power in the state. Dual power in February had been explicitly premised upon leaving the executive functions of governing in the hand of upper-class representatives, while revolutionary democracy, through the Soviet, "controlled" this government, making sure it did not deviate from the programme of the revolution: peace, land, democratic republic. By July, however, the majority of Petrograd's workers had concluded that the liberals were unwilling to carry out this programme, that, in

fact, they wanted to destroy the revolution. Even the direct participation of Soviet representatives in the government after the April crisis had not changed this. They therefore began to demand the assumption of state power in its entirety by revolutionary democracy to the complete exclusion of upper-class representatives.

But in the political arena, particularly before the July Days\* when the depth and finality of the split within revolutionary democracy had not yet become fully apparent to the workers, this was a much easier conclusion to reach than in the economic sphere. For whatever the inherent dynamics of the situation, to the workers, a soviet government did not of itself imply a transformation of property relations and the direct assumption of managerial functions by the workers, i.e. a social revolution. It implied only control of the still capitalist economy.

### "No One Knows How This Revolution Will End Up"

This is how workers' control was conceptualized on the more theoretical level in the labour movement. Control was clearly differentiated from seizure. At the Second Factory Committee Conference in August, Levin stated:

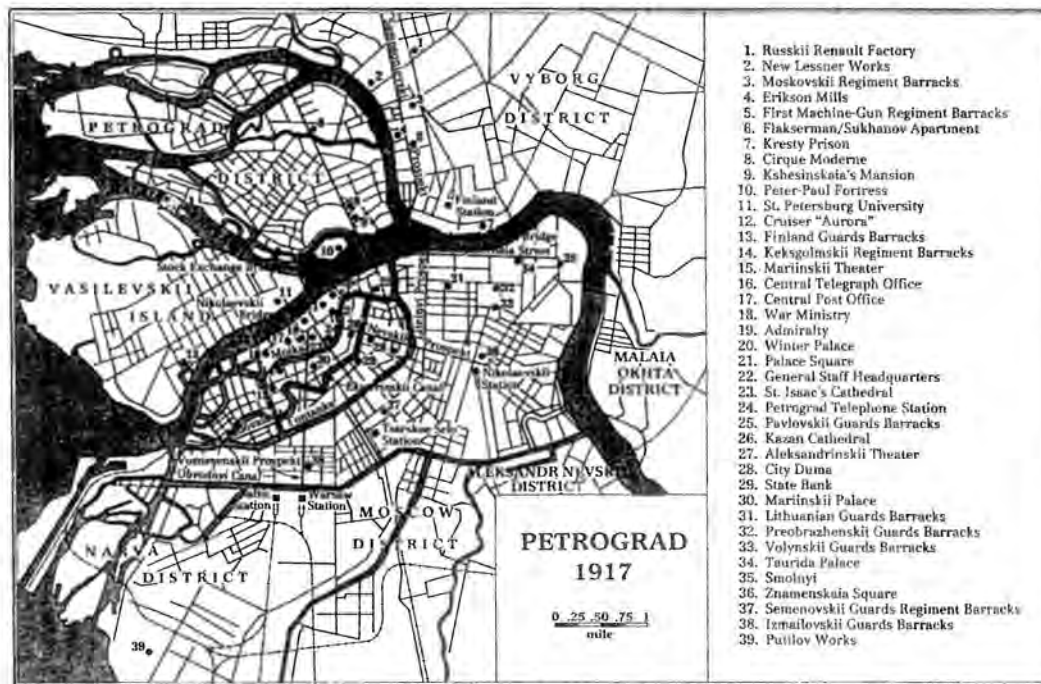
*We demand from the ministries control over production. But here, on their part we met with indecision and a reluctance to act; and on the part of the industrialists — with anger and fear for their property. Many consciously or unconsciously confuse the concept of "control" with that of "seizure of the factories and mills", although the workers are not at all conducting a tactic of seizure. And if such cases have occurred, then only in exceptional and isolated circumstances.*<sup>76</sup>

On the other hand, workers' control was a new unforeseen demand and it did, therefore, call for at least a partial revision of the social conception of the revolution (as did the demand for soviet power itself). Levin, a Left Social Revolutionary\*\* member of the CS, who was more aware than many others of the dynamics of the situation (though even after Octobe

\* The "July Days" were armed worker and soldier demonstrations on July 3-4, 1917 to pressure the moderate leaders of the Central Executive Committee of Soviets to take power, which despite attempts by the Bolsheviks to hold them back took on a semi-insurrectional character. The coalition government, supported by some of the moderate socialists, responded with repression against the labour movement and the Bolsheviks, beginning a period of reaction that lasted for several weeks, until the defeat of Kornilov's attempted coup.

\*\* The Social Revolutionaries were a populist, peasant-based party organized after the turn of the century as the heir of the terrorist Populist (Narodnik) movement of the late nineteenth century. It formally split in September 1917. The Left Social Revolutionaries were close to the Bolsheviks after November 1917, joining a coalition government headed by Lenin that lasted until March 1918. The Right Social Revolutionaries sometimes participated in the civil war on the side of the Whites.





he constantly cautioned against takeovers that were not absolutely necessary), saw it in the following manner:

*It is no secret that an end to the economic dislocation is not only not in the interests of capital, but contradictory to them. To end the dislocation would mean to strengthen the young growing organisms of our revolution — and no one knows how this revolution will end up: at the least, in the deprivation of capital of a part of its rights; at the most, who will say that from the Russian Revolution it will not become a world revolution?<sup>77</sup>*

In other words, viewed from the internal Russian perspective, the revolution did go beyond the strictly democratic framework and stopped short of a social revolution that would abolish capitalism. Anything more depended upon international developments, which indeed held out great possibilities for the Russian Revolution.

### “We Will Learn in a Practical Manner”

This was essentially the position of the Bolshevik militants too. Naumov, a Vyborg District metalworker, told this conference:

*We, as Marxists, must look upon life as always moving forward. The revolution continues. We say: our revolution is a prologue to the world revolution. Control is not yet socialism and not even the taking of production into our hands. But it already goes well beyond the bourgeois framework. It is not socialism that we propose to introduce. No. But having taken [state] power into our hands, we should direct capitalism along such a path that it will outlive itself. The factory committees should work in this direction. That will lead to socialism....*

*Having strengthened our position in production, having taken control into our hands, we will learn in a practical manner how to work actively in production and in an organized fashion we will direct it toward socialist production.<sup>78</sup>*

Even with Naumov's confidence in the future of the world revolution, the implication of this statement is that the Russian working class lacked the knowledge and capacity to directly take charge of the economy. One of the functions of control was precisely as a school in which to acquire this capacity, a school for socialism. But this was not for tomorrow or the next day.

But whatever the theoretical or ideological conceptualization of workers' control, it would make little difference in practice. For it was practice, the concrete situation in which the workers had to live and struggle, that had originally given rise to the demand for workers' control and which would, in the end, determine just how far the workers' intervention into the economy would go. “No party foresaw the intervention of the working class into the bourgeois economy under a bourgeois government,” observed Levin.

*Now all recognize its necessity. True, they were forced to this in order to avoid finding themselves out on the streets.<sup>79</sup>*

“When our factory committee arose,” recalled the report of the Putilov Factory Committee at the end of 1917,

*it had neither a programme of action nor any sort of rules by which it could guide itself in its functioning. Its practical instructions, decided as the functions of the committee evolved, formed the basis of its guiding principles. In this way, the factory committee had the best of teachers — life itself.<sup>80</sup>*

## IV. July to October: "Control" Without Power

Following the July Days, on the background of the split in the ranks of revolutionary democracy and the defeat of the workers that this had made possible, the employers adopted a much more aggressive posture on both the economic and political fronts. Even the swift and bloodless defeat of Kornilov, who represented the political-military hope of upper-class Russia, did not dampen the militancy of the industrialists but rather spurred on their offensive against labour in the economic sphere. This was, after all, their trump card — and last line of defense beyond which there could be no retreat.

Before July, the large majority of closures had occurred in small and medium industry.<sup>81</sup> In July and August, however, declarations of intent to cease operations were arriving from numerous large Petrograd enterprises in all sectors of private and state industry.<sup>82</sup> The Petrograd Metalworkers' Union (metalworking employed almost two-thirds of Petrograd's industrial labour force) reported in August that the owners intended shortly to close 25 factories and to cut back production in another 137.<sup>83</sup>

In the meanwhile, according to Sukhanov, a Menshevik member of the Soviet's Economic Department, "state regulation had gone no farther than a plan for a sugar monopoly. The Council of Congresses of the Representatives of Industry and Commerce was preoccupied exclusively with pressing its offensive against the workers. The Provisional Government did nothing and the TsIK [Central Executive Committee of Soviets]\* supported the Provisional Government." He recalled a meeting of the Economic Department in September which Groman chaired:

*Of the twelve there, the majority were Mensheviks and far from leftists. Officially all were for the coalition. But here, with facts in hand, they painted a devastating picture of the coalition's economic policy. Even the most brilliant political agitator could not have done better. I do not know how their views sat in their heads.*<sup>84</sup>

The government did, however, dust off its plan for the evacuation of Petrograd's industry at state expense. Despite the economic dubiousness of this project and the obvious political motives at play,<sup>85</sup> the situation was so serious that the September Conference of Factory Committees decided to allow

\* The Central Executive Committee of Soviets (Russian abbreviation TsIK) was a permanent leadership body elected by the First All-Russian Congress of Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies in May 1917. It was dominated by moderate socialists until the Second Congress in October, which had a Bolshevik majority. The revolutionary constitution of January 1918 gave this Central Executive Committee the authority to legislate in between sessions of the Congress of Soviets.

evacuation in individual cases where justified and under the control of the factory committee, though not all factories agreed even with this decision.<sup>86</sup> However, when the factories in question sent delegations to inspect the proposed relocation sites, they typically found conditions inadequate for both the factory and the workers, again casting doubt on the employers' willingness to continue production.<sup>87</sup>

### The "Bony Hand of Hunger"

State intervention into the economy continued to be anathema to the industrialists, whose explanation for the crisis came down to two simple causes: the lax discipline in the labour force and the pernicious interference of the workers' organizations in the life of the factories. (They conveniently forgot that the crisis pre-dated the revolution by a year and a half.) And they were lavish in their predictions of imminent doom. Most famous of these was Ryabuishinskii's warning that the "bony hand of hunger" would have to grasp the people by the throat before they would awake to the evil nature of their "pseudo-leaders" in the soviets and other workers' organizations.<sup>88</sup> In early September, the Committee of United Industry sent a note entitled "Conditions for the Restoration of Industry" to the Minister of Labour which urged the following measures: exclusive power for management in hiring and firing, and the right to impose penalties up to and including dismissal; complete exclusion of the factory committees, soviets and other workers' organizations from interference in administration; the freeing of the administration from any formal obligation to these organizations; and finally, the dismissal of those workers whose productivity fell below that of the previous year. "Without these measures to influence the worker masses," it concluded, "industry is threatened with a total shutdown."<sup>89</sup>

### The Employers' Offensive

The period following the July Days was marked by a major offensive of the industrialists against the factory committees and their acquired, de facto rights to meet during work hours (with pay) and to "control" hiring and firing and the "internal order" of the factory generally. They went so far as to press for the lifting of the military deferment of members of the CS of Factory Committees. The Minister of Labour, the Menshevik Skobelev,<sup>90</sup> was not unsympathetic. In

\*\* Skobelev, the leader of the Menshevik group in the pre-revolutionary Duma (parliament), became Minister of Labour in

August he issued two circulars denying that the committees had the right to meet during work hours without management's permission or to control hiring and firing.<sup>90</sup> "We hear each day of new attacks on the rights of the factory committees," it was reported at the August Factory Committee Conference. At the same time, the owners began to boycott the CS itself:

*In the beginning of the activity of the CS of Factory Committees, the entrepreneurs were quite amenable to our influence in personal negotiations with representatives of the CS. But now they are becoming less and less flexible, citing in their intransigence the Society of Factory and Mill Owners and refusing to recognize the CS, as it is a non-governmental body.*<sup>91</sup>

To the workers, the goal of the offensive was evident: the owners were determined to remove the last obstacle preventing them from closing. After the administration of the Vulkan Factory ceased to pay wages to the members of the factory committee, the latter turned to the CS with the following letter:

*As you know, the factory committee has already defended the existence of the factory in relation to finances and to raising productivity. But the sabotage of the administration continues. It expresses itself in both the total technical defectiveness of the basic shops and the extreme difficulty with which the factory committee must attempt to carry out the general wage agreement at the factory. But now the administration is taking new measures of sabotage. It has decided to completely withhold the money necessary to pay the factory committee, in all eleven people, including the technical control commission, the tariff commission, the investigative commission and the conciliation chamber. This measure is not only a general offensive against the factory organizations (the administration cites Skobelev) but it hits at the very existence of the factory itself. For it is anyway only with great difficulty that the factory committee now exists, amidst extremely tense workers standing at defective lathes and who are poorly paid, and with the factory administration constantly threatening to close the factory and cut the work force.*<sup>92</sup>

### "Nothing Left But Bare Walls"

The upshot of all this was the very serious undermining of the basic premise of the movement for workers' control: the existence of an active capitalist administration to control. At the August Factory Committee Conference, this was put very pointedly by one worker delegate:

*We are told that we must control. But what will we control when already we have nothing left but walls, bare walls?*<sup>93</sup>

Accordingly, this period witnessed the increasingly direct and active involvement of the factory

the coalition government in May 1917. He strongly opposed interference by the factory committees with management of industry.

committees in production itself. At the All-Russian Conference of Factory Committees, Schmidt,\* leader of the Metalworkers' Union, observed that "the factory committees, against their will ... [are] intervening into production, deviating from their direct tasks of control."<sup>94</sup>

As the Vulkan letter indicates, the factory committees became increasingly involved in measures to raise productivity. In early July, when the administration threatened to cut production and possibly close entirely, citing a drastic decline in productivity, the factory committee established a commission to clarify the situation and to determine its causes. This commission came up with a series of recommendations, directed at reducing the proportion of defective output and ensuring strict labour discipline. It also made specific proposals for technical improvements. These were accepted by the workers' general assembly, which agreed also to allow overtime when justified by the interests of production.<sup>95</sup>

The first set of measures, which vaguely fell within the sphere of the "internal order", were duly introduced, leading to a significant rise in productivity. But the administration would hear nothing of the technical changes, announcing at the same time the dismissal of 640 workers, soon to be followed by others. In the end, after the workers presented an ultimatum demanding the replacement of the director, the government intervened to set up its own control, promising to remove the director if the workers' allegations proved correct.\*\*<sup>96</sup>

One of the most famous cases was the intervention of the Novyi Parviainen factory committee that saved 1630 jobs. When management announced these dismissals, citing a shortage of fuel, the factory committee, with the aid of the CS, set up a commission of inquiry which found that fuel was being expended in a technically irrational manner, and that with certain changes a savings of 30 per cent could be affected. After some initial resistance, the director was forced to accept the commission's recommendations. The factory committee then proceeded to work out instructions on the expenditure of fuel for each job category.<sup>97</sup>

\* Schmidt, a Bolshevik, would become People's Commissar of Labour after the October revolution.

\*\* John Reed, the U.S. journalist (and later founder of the U.S. Communist Party) whose *Ten Days That Shook the World* became a classic account of the October Revolution, mentions a conversation with the owner of this factory in which the latter emphasized that the owners would never allow the existence of factory committees or permit the workers to share in management. He placed his hope on international intervention to stop the spread of such ideas as "social revolution", but noted that even without that, "Starvation and defeat may bring the Russian people to their senses."<sup>97</sup>



## The Flight from Responsibility

But notwithstanding these developments, the factory committees were as insistent as ever in rejecting responsibility for production or formal participation in management. A series of conferences in Petrograd in October, including one of representatives of the factory committees and other workers' organizations, the All-Russian Factory Committee Conference and the All-Russian Conferences of the Artillery and Naval Authorities, passed resolutions in this sense, strictly limiting the committees to control through control commissions entirely separate from management.<sup>99</sup>

There were a number of reasons for this position. In part, it was fear of being used by an administration that wanted to shift responsibility for dismissals and closures onto the factory committees without giving them any real power to act to maintain production. This, for example, was among the reasons given in the discussion in the Putilov Factory committee of Pal'chinskii's offer of a joint worker-management standing conference to "regulate all the work of the factory."<sup>100</sup> The committee was being offered only five places, a minority, and no other workers' organizations (such as the CS of Factory Committees) could participate.

*The entrepreneurs at present are seeking out all means so that the workers might whip themselves with the knout. Without the function of genuine control, we should not enter this organ. When it turned out that the government [which had sequestered the factory in 1916] could not do without us and that it was in a bad way, then it came to us for help. But we will give it help only when it gives us a guarantee that we are real controllers. Otherwise, why should we take the bait that is being tossed at us. We must not get caught.*<sup>101</sup>

Another reason, to which the "conscious workers" were particularly sensitive, was that participation in management implied collaboration in the exploitation of the workers. At the All-Russian Tariff Conference of the Metalworkers' Union in October, Gast'ev, a member of the executive of the Petrograd branch, observed, somewhat unjustly, "a touching solidarity [of the factory committees] with management."<sup>102</sup> Ryazanov, as noted earlier, characterized them as involuntary "agents of the entrepreneur."<sup>103</sup>

But by far the weightiest reason was simply the reluctance of the factory committees to take responsibility for a task for which they did not feel prepared. As long as the capitalist management was running the factory more or less conscientiously, they very much preferred to leave responsibility for management in its hands. At the All-Russian Factory Committee Conference, Larin proposed that the factory committees delegate one member with a consultative voice to each department of the

administration to monitor its execution of an economic plan that would be drawn up by a central economic organ with a majority of workers' representatives. This, presumably, was to occur after the coalition government had been replaced by a government of revolutionary democracy. But factory committee activists, like Chubar', objected that

*The members of the factory committee would turn into "pushers", whom the administration will use as extra help while itself remaining outside of active work. Such phenomena have already been observed in the state factories. Besides, if the workers enter the factory administration, even with only a consultative voice, in a critical moment (and at present that can be any time) the workers will direct all their discontent at the factory committee, blaming it for not having taken steps to prevent hitches in production. It will, therefore, sow discontent in the midst of the workers themselves.*

Chubar' proposed instead to stick to control through commissions entirely separate from the administration.<sup>104</sup>

## Toward Active Intervention

The factory committee activists were, of course, not unaware that they were being compelled increasingly to move beyond their original conception of control. But they tended to view this as exceptions forced upon them by the situation and refused to draw any more far-reaching conclusions. Milyutin,\* who gave the report on workers' control at the All-Russian Conference on the very eve of the October Revolution, reflected this position when he stated:

*Many comrades pointed out that the executive [rasporyaditel'nye] functions of the factory committees were not clarified in the reports. This was done consciously, since the economic [khozyaistvennye] functions are only an inevitable evil which should by no means be erected into a system.*<sup>105</sup>

Milyutin's resolution received 65 votes against eight. The anarchists' resolution for immediate takeover of the factories garnered only five votes.<sup>106</sup>

"Life itself" was pushing the factory committees toward more active intervention into management. This, pressure from below played an important role. The mood in the factories was extremely tense and volatile amidst the deepening economic crisis and the looming threat of mass unemployment. The workers were impatient for action that would save the factories and less concerned with the complexities of factory administration than their committees, who would have to directly assume this task themselves.

\* Milyutin, a Bolshevik Central Committee member and economist, would later oppose the October insurrection and argue for a socialist coalition, but would nonetheless become the first People's Commissar of Agriculture.

The director of the Admiralty Shipbuilding Factory noted in October

*under the pressure of the workers a deviation of the committees from their proper [pryamoi] and fruitful activity of preliminary [predvaritel'nyi] control of the administration, in other words, in the direction of management of the factory.*<sup>107</sup>

### Conservative Committees, Militant Workers

As a result, some factory committees began to find themselves at odds with the workers, attempting to restrain them, warning against going too far — although in the end of the workers often did come around. At Vulkan, for example, matters came to a head in September. On top of the threats of dismissals and closure and on top of the administration's refusal to introduce technical improvements or to give the workers information on the true state of the factory, it was reported that the director had behaved "insolently" toward the factory committee, using such expressions as "keep your tongue between your teeth". That was enough for the workers in their current state of mind. Against the opposition of the factory committee, the general assembly passed a motion from the floor that the director be removed within 48 hours or "the general assembly will free the factory committee from all responsibility for acts the workers might take in relation to the administration." The factory committee was able to keep the lid on long enough to secure the intervention of the broader workers' organizations and the state, which set up control.<sup>108</sup>

In his report to the Bolshevik Central Committee on October 16, Skrypnik, a member of the CS of Factory Committees, stated:

*Everywhere one observes the desire for practical results. Resolutions no longer satisfy. It is felt that the leaders do not entirely express the mood of the masses. The former are more conservative. One notes a growth in the influence of the anarchists in the Moscow and Narva Districts.*<sup>109</sup>

### Rise of the Anarchists

This was the background to the brief upsurge of anarchist influence in the fall and early winter of 1917, particularly in districts like Narva and Moscow with a large contingent of unskilled workers who had recently shifted from the Social Revolutionaries to the Bolsheviks. After the intense political mobilization around the Kornilov coup, a certain disenchantment with politics set in: the economic situation was deteriorating and heading for utter disaster in the near future, but the recent political involvement of the majority of unskilled workers had so far yielded

nothing tangible. In these circumstances, the anarchists' advocacy of direct action on the enterprise level and their ignoring of the issue of state power found a certain resonance. At the meeting of the Bolshevik Petrograd Committee on October 15, the delegate from the Narva District noted that "in the backward masses there is indifference to politics." In the Petrograd District: "Where our influence is weak, there is political apathy. There a struggle is taking place with the factory committee."<sup>110</sup>

In fact, there was widespread dissatisfaction among the workers with the results of the movement for workers' control and of the activity of the factory committees, and not least among the committee activists themselves. While the factory committees did play a crucial role in keeping the industrial working class of Petrograd together for several months longer than would have been possible had the industrialists and the Provisional Government been given free reign, they were nevertheless unable to reverse or even halt the economic crisis. And workers' control, as the regular monitoring of the administration of the enterprise through access to documents and other information, was rare before October. It existed mainly in the state factories and in some of the private enterprises, where the workers had been able to tip the balance of power in their favour — usually after reopening a factory the owner had decided to close.

At a meeting of the Putilov factory committee on September 26, its chairman, Glebov, spoke of the pending dismissal of 5000 workers:

*The administration has given up and it is hardly likely to take the dismissals upon itself, and in all probability we will have to assume this dirty work ourselves. The blame in this, of course, lies with those on top [verkhy] who refused to allow us to control.*<sup>111</sup>

Another worker, Voitsekhovskii, seconded this:

*We must succeed in getting the right to control, and it is high time that we put an end to our traipsing about the factory shops.*<sup>112</sup>

### The Unavoidable State

The frustration was great indeed, and in the end the discussion always came back to the question of state power. Surkov, a delegate to the August Factory Committee Conference, lamented:

*At the First Conference, we expected to greet the second amidst brilliant successes. But the revolutionary wave has stopped, and those for whom it is profitable have been able to exploit this. As a result, our activity has been paralyzed to a significant degree.*<sup>113</sup>

At the Fourth Conference in October, Egorov, the delegate from the Putilov Shipyard, pointed out that the forthcoming All-Russian Conference of Factory Committees, while important, did not itself hold the key:

*We are only too well acquainted with factory life to deny the need for the Conference. We know how often the factory committees turn out to be helpless, knowing how to avert a stoppage of production in the factories but lacking the possibility of intervening. The conference can give valuable directives. But we should not delude ourselves that the conference can get us out of the dead-end. Both private and state administrations sabotage production, referring us to the Society of Factory and Mill Owners. They are still strong. The conference must first of all point to those obstacles which prevent people of action from saving the country. These obstacles are placed before us by the bourgeois government. Only the reorganization of state power will give us the possibility of developing our activity.* <sup>114</sup>

At the All-Russian Conference, Skrypnik had this to say to those who had expressed disappointment at the limited results of the activity of the factory committees:

*They apparently flattered themselves with illusions. But our conference said from the start that under a bourgeois government we would not be able to carry out consistent control. The future centre will find itself in the same circumstances, and to speak of a control board under a bourgeois government is impossible. Therefore the working class cannot bypass state power, as comrade Renev [an anarchist delegate] recommends.... The conference will work out a plan corresponding to the interests of the proletariat and together with all workers' organizations will struggle for the conditions of its realization.* <sup>115</sup>

### The Argument for Insurrection

In this way, the issue of economic regulation was possibly the most potent argument in favour of an immediate insurrection and, as such, was central in overcoming the fear and hesitancy that characterized a significant part of the working class as it stood before this fateful leap. The economic situation, which had become the main hope of the counter-revolution, did not permit waiting even six weeks for the Constituent Assembly, the elections for which had already been postponed twice by the Provisional Government. On October 15, a joint meeting of the Executive of the Petrograd Trade-Union Council with union executives, the CS of Factory Committees and representatives of the municipal government and political parties discussed the food and unemployment situations. The picture painted was one of a dam on the verge of bursting. The coalition was subjected to withering criticism for its obstructionist policies and its bias in favour of the propertied classes. The meeting resolved,

*Unemployment, which grows with each day, is being caused not only by the general conditions of the capitalist economy intensified by the conditions of war. It is further aggravated by the entire economic and financial policy of the coalition government, which systematically weakens all revolutionary-democratic organizations and hands the management of the entire economic life over to the landowners and capitalists.*

*Considering the transfer of power to revolutionary democracy — to the soviets of workers', soldiers' and peasants' deputies — an indispensable condition for the successful struggle with the economic dislocation and food crisis, this meeting proposes the following measures to ease the calamity of unemployment:*

Among these were workers' control of industry on all-state scale, legislation of the eight-hour day, a plan to demobilize industry, public works and others. <sup>116</sup>

At the October 16 meeting of the Bolshevik Central Committee, Schmidt gave the following appraisal of the workers' attitude toward insurrection:

*In view of the specific economic conditions, one can expect colossal unemployment in the nearest future. In this connection, the mood is vigilant. All agree that outside the struggle for power there is no way out of the situation. They demand power to the soviets.* <sup>117</sup>

### "Workers' Control Is Still Not Socialism"

But with all the hope placed in the transfer of power to the soviets, it was still only control and regulation that were envisaged, not management and socialization of the factories. Skrypnik told the All-Russian Conference:

*Workers' control is still not socialism. It is only one of the transitional measures bringing us closer to socialism.* <sup>118</sup>

In response to the question whether workers' control was possible under a bourgeois system, Larin replied:

*It is not a question of a socialist revolution but of new methods of production and their monitoring.... We tie control closely with regulation of industry. Therefore, we say that our democratic organizations must create an economic plan for the entire country. And only on the basis of this plan will the factory committees make sure the plan is carried out.... But you will not achieve anything by the seizure of industrial enterprises, as Zhuk [an anarchist delegate] proposes.* <sup>119</sup>

Similarly, Evdokymov replied to the anarchist demand "factories to the workers — land to peasants":

*To demand the transfer of all factories to the workers is premature. It signifies the transition to a*



## V. After October: From Control to Expropriation

The soviet seizure of power produced a break in the thinking on workers' control amidst a basic continuity in the evolving practice of the factory committees. The pre-October conception of control as an essentially monitoring function, exercised by the workers' representatives who remained completely separate from management, and the insistent rejection of responsibility for production were abandoned. The factory committees, firmly backed by the workers, pressed for the right to broad and active intervention and, in fact, regular and decisive participation in the management of the factories.

Rejecting the position of "those comrades on the right", drawn heavily from the moderate Bolsheviks in the national trade-union leadership, they argued forcefully against parity of workers' and management representatives in the controlling bodies and for the necessity of decisions by the factory committees themselves — and not only the higher trade-union and governmental bodies — to be binding on management.<sup>125</sup> As against Larin's "narrow" (pre-October) definition of workers' control as "passive" monitoring ("the control commission does not participate in the management of the enterprise and does not bear responsibility for its work and activity, which remains that of the owner"<sup>126</sup>), a definition endorsed by the All-Russian Trade-union Council, the Draft on Workers' Control by the CS of Factory Committees proposed a revised definition of control as broad powers to intervene directly into management and on a systematic basis:

*Workers' control of industry, as an integral part of control over the entire productive life of the country, must not be conceived in the narrow sense of inspection [reviziya] but, on the contrary, in the broadest sense of intervention into the disposition by the entrepreneur of capital, inventory, raw materials and finished goods belonging to the enterprise; in the sense of active monitoring of the correctness and rationality of the execution of orders [zakazy], the utilization of energy and the work force, and participation in the organization of production itself on a rational basis, etc. etc.*<sup>127</sup>

At a conference of the Delegates' Council of the Petrograd Metalworkers' Union and representatives of the factory committees, a series of speakers urged the rejection of Larin's draft as it "ties the hands of the workers, while the [CS's] Draft on Workers' Control allocates broad initiative to the workers and makes them the factual masters of the given factory."<sup>128</sup>

### The Economic Dam Bursts

One need not look far for the causes of this shift. Frustrated with the limited results obtained under the Provisional Government by the movement for workers' control, the workers had been waiting impatiently for the transfer of power to untie their hands. October released a tremendous amount of pent-up energy in this area. At the same time, right after October, the economic dam burst and the crisis began to assert itself with a vengeance on the level of production and employment: by January 1, 1918, the industrial work force had declined to 339,641 from 406,312 the year before. In the metalworking industry the decline was even more drastic, from 246,679 to 197,686.<sup>129</sup> The great bulk of this occurred in the two months following the seizure of power.<sup>130</sup>

It was the same problem as before October. "How are you going to control factories that are closing?" asked a delegate to the November Conference of Factory Committees in Petrograd.<sup>131</sup> On November 22, the committee of the Metallicheskii Factory sent the following note to the director:

*In view of the persistent intention of the administration to destroy the enterprise, we, the workers and employees, are forced to defend our right to free labour and life and on the basis of the law have created a worker directorate (control-executive commission) for joint management with the administration.*<sup>132</sup>

The problem and the dynamics were the same; only now it was no longer possible to see the need for regular intervention as an exception, "an inevitable evil that should not be erected into a system." After October, the factory committees were determined that it indeed be erected into a system.

### The "Comrades on the Right"

The "comrades on the right" opposed this for two closely related reasons. The first was that they felt control should be constructed from the centre beginning with a national regulating agency and national plan, the execution of which it would be the factory committees' task to monitor. To entrust such broad independent powers to the factory committees was seen as an anarchist deviation that would favour the particular interests of an individual factory over those of industry and the working class as a whole.

In theory, this argument had considerable merit. But the factory committee activists and the workers they represented were not motivated by anarchism.

## Private Enterprise's Last Stand

Underlying to an important degree the accusation of anarchism — explicitly in the case of the Mensheviks, but largely implicitly in the case of the Bolshevik “comrades to the right” — was another consideration. It was not so much that “active control” was anarchistic but that it was seen as incompatible with the continued existence of private enterprise, at least in the sense that it posed such a challenge to the owners they would sooner close up shop. Indeed, this is how the employers explained their preference for Larin’s position. The reporter on workers’ control at the January 25 meeting of the Petrograd Section of the All-Russian Society of Leather Manufacturers summed it up in this way:

*The struggle between the two currents in the worker milieu is still not over. On the one hand, we have to do with an anarchistic current represented by the factory committees; on the other, a thought-out system of gradual transition to state socialism on the basis of the existing capitalist system. The second current is supported by all active members of the trade-union movement. In evaluating the issue of who can save industry from total and final disintegration, one can without exaggeration state that at present the only ally of industry in the struggle between the anarchist element and the conscious workers are the organizations of these union people.*<sup>138</sup>

It would, of course, be naive to think that the industrialists were eager for socialism in any form, be it of the “state” variety or other. But the transition to “state socialism” promised to be long, and in the meanwhile property rights would be respected and, who knew, the transition could very well be interrupted by a successful counter-revolution. The meeting unanimously endorsed Larin’s draft on workers’ control as “something we can live with”. The reporter approvingly quoted an article from *Novaya zhizn’* that argued that the Russian Revolution was bourgeois and that, therefore, private property had to be maintained:

*In the given conditions it is possible to realize only state regulation with the participation of the workers in control, but maintaining the private capitalist basis of the enterprises, i.e. private ownership of the means of production and profit.*<sup>139</sup>

## Control: An Outdated Concept

Control, in the form now conceived by the factory committees and particularly in the given Russian conditions, was, in fact, not compatible with the continued existence of private enterprise. The continued use of the term “control” in the draft of the CS is anomalous, since it was not control that was envisaged but a sort of co-management, if not more. (Thus, the *Metallicheskie* workers “created a worker directorate (control-executive [!] commission for joint

management with the administration)”. This clinging to outdated concepts, again, reflects the fact that the workers were pushed to this by the situation in which they found themselves and by their desire to save their factories. This was their overwhelming motivation, not any eagerness to have done with capitalism and take over the factories. They acted fundamentally from a sense of lack of alternative. It is this that explains the continued use of concepts appropriate to the democratic revolution at a time when this revolution was already being left behind.

Indeed, the evidence indicates that even at this late date, when the introduction of control (in the new or old sense) threatened to provoke the departure of an administration that was more or less willing to run the enterprise and not threatening to close, the workers preferred not to force the issue rather than have to unnecessarily assume responsibility for production. In January, the committee of the Erikson Telephone Factory reported to the CS that while the administration had been co-operating in the procurement of fuel and raw materials, it categorically refused to provide reports on the financial and economic side of the factory and even threatened the resignation of the entire administrative staff. In order “to avoid premature complications that could cause a temporary stoppage,” the factory committee decided not to press its legal right at that stage. *Novaya zhizn’* commented approvingly:

*One should note that the factory committee at Erikson, acting in full contact with the administration, is making use of the Decree on Workers’ Control with great intelligence, while not overestimating its forces. Thus, for example, it froze all financial assets of the joint-stock company and in this way prevented their removal from the enterprise and transfer abroad. At the same time, the factory committee in no way intrudes upon the economic prerogatives of the administration.*<sup>140</sup>

And Erikson was one of the most politically radical factories in the Vyborg District. Similarly, at the Tentelevskii Chemical Factory an entente was reached, according to which in return for its recognition of workers’ control (in the narrow sense), the workers recognized the administration’s right to manage.<sup>141</sup>

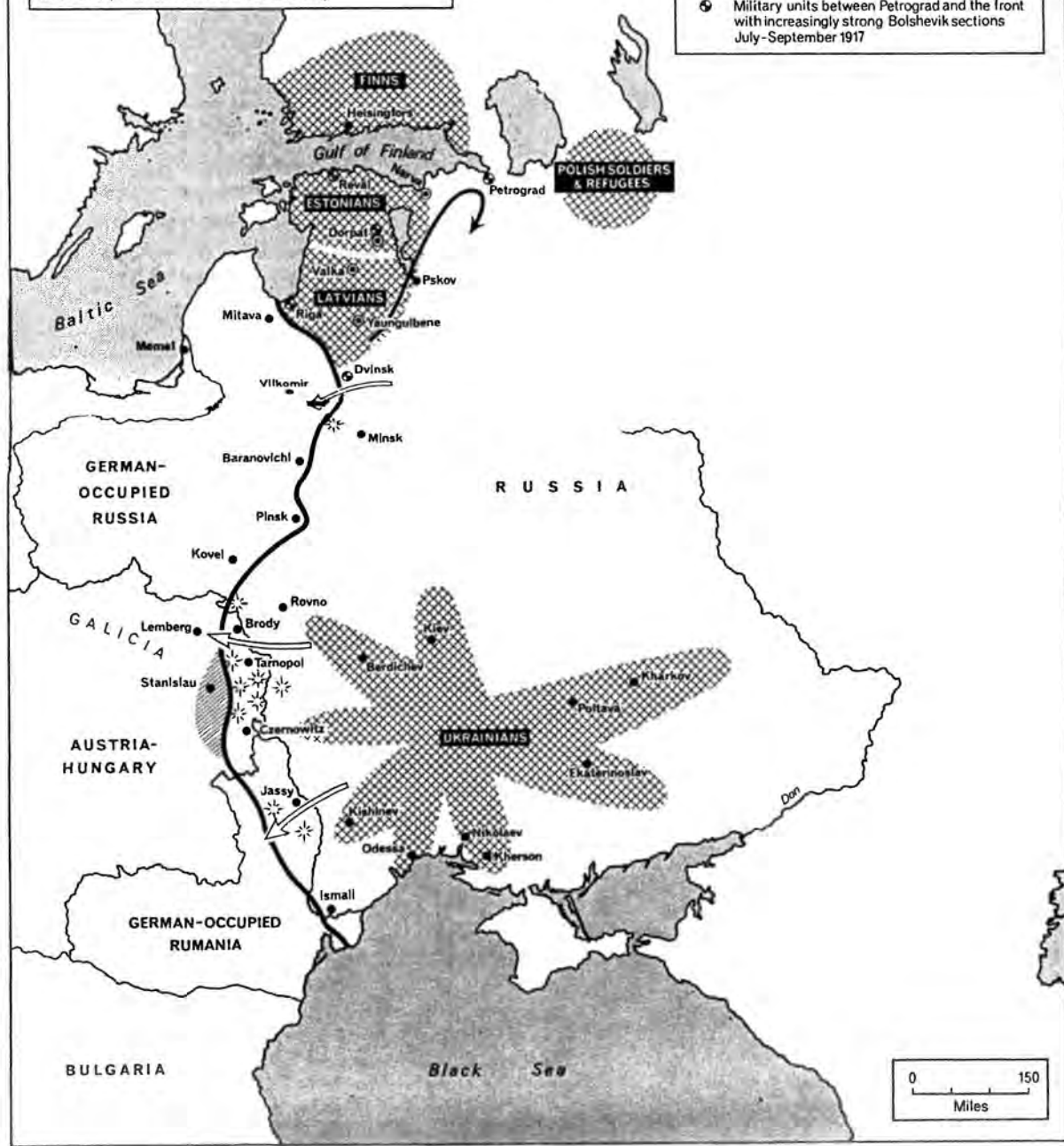
## “Take My Place”

At the New Cotton Mill not long after the October Revolution, the owner finally lost patience as he observed the chairwoman of the control commission carefully checking for unnecessary expenditures before she countersigned his check. “Alright then, in that case, take my place, and I will leave” — and he walked out. And the worker did just that. (Some years later, she explained this by her youth: “I was just a girl. I thought to myself: Well, why not? No great loss.”) But she had not been sitting more than

**THE WAR AND REVOLUTION JULY AND AUGUST 1917**

In March 1917 the Provisional Government assured Britain and France that it would continue the war against the Central Powers. But the offensive launched on 1 July ended two weeks later in mutiny and failure. Mass demonstrations in Petrograd on 16 and 17 July, though leaderless, showed how hated the war had become, and the Bolsheviks soon dominated the Soviets by their cry of "Bread and Peace". The Provisional Government then published evidence of financial dealings between the Bolsheviks and German agents, forced Lenin to go into hiding in Finland, and arrested Trotsky. In August General Kornilov led an army against Petrograd, intending to crush the Soviets and stiffen the Provisional Government against concessions. The Bolsheviks took a leading part in the defence of the city, and greatly increased their military power, having been armed by the Provisional Government. They also gained support among the masses, who feared the return of autocracy

- The eastern front on 1 July 1917
- ▨ Austrian territory conquered by Russia 1-16 July 1917
- ↗ Russian proposals for further offensive action during the second two weeks of July
- ▩ Subject peoples insisting on independence from Russian rule, and gravely hampering the war effort when their demands were rejected or disregarded
- ☀ Principal areas of mutiny 17-30 July 1917
- ↻ Kornilov's unsuccessful attack on the capital August 1917
- Factory groups between Petrograd and the front with increasingly strong Bolshevik influence July-September 1917
- ⊕ Military units between Petrograd and the front with increasingly strong Bolshevik sections July-September 1917





ten minutes, when she was called out to a meeting where she was severely taken to task: "Why, don't you know that we can't manage without a specialist?" And she was replaced by another worker.<sup>142</sup>

At the Kersten Knitting Mill it was more complicated. The owner had clearly been speculating with the finished goods and bypassing the control commission in his financial dealings. As a result, the latter placed a guard outside the cashier's office. As the conflict escalated, the director and chief book-keeper were arrested by the workers. This violence provoked a strike by the white-collar workers. The workers' general assembly decided to continue production on their own, despite the urgings of representatives of the Executive of the Textile Workers' Union to compromise. But after three days, in view of the difficulties they were facing, the workers were in a more conciliatory mood. An agreement was reached to limit control to its narrow definition and carry it out according to instructions of the higher economic authorities. This, however, did not prevent the owner from absconding shortly after with 40,000 in gold rubles from the factory's safe.<sup>143</sup>

### The Transition to Nationalization

Control after October, whether in the narrow or broad sense, proved in practice to be only a transitional measure to the complete elimination of the capitalist management. Even as the Sixth Conference of Factory Committees on January 27, 1918 defended the broad concept of control against the supporters of Larin's draft, it called on the soviet government to immediately begin to construct a technical apparatus to prepare for the transfer of all enterprises to the state. These enterprises were to be headed by the workers' committees under the leadership of the Councils of the National Economy.<sup>144</sup>

The logic inherent in the situation from the beginning had worked itself out. For by January 1918 it was obvious in the great majority of cases — and particularly in metalworking — that the premise of control — an active capitalist management — did not exist. The Petrograd Society of Factory and Mill Owners had officially decided that owners should abandon factories where workers' control was asserted.<sup>145</sup> The factory intelligentsia showed little more willingness to co-operate. Actually, when a representative of the Society of Factory and Mill Owners was asked about its position on closing at a meeting of the Leather Section, he explained that "leaving is conceivable only for those enterprises that lack means, but in no case where the enterprise still represents some value for the owner."<sup>146</sup> But apparently in the given economic and political conditions, most owners decided that their factories did not represent sufficient value to keep them open.

This was especially true in the metalworking industry, which was closed down by the government in mid-December for one month in order to prepare the factories for demobilization and peacetime production. At the end of the month, however, it was clear that most factories would not re-open as scheduled. In very many cases the administration — and the technical staff as well — refused to participate in the demobilization. The bulk of Petrograd's metalworking industry had been heavily dependent upon state military orders. With the transition to peace production, the owners lost whatever economic interest they may still have retained in their factories. Accordingly, demobilization was the occasion of many requests from the factories for nationalization.<sup>147</sup>

### "The Only Way Out"

The prevailing view from below was summed up in the March 23 letter of the committee of the Vulkan Factory, which had been waging a running battle with management since the early summer of 1917:

*The factory committee, having discussed ... the entire policy of the administration, has reached the following conclusion:*

*The entire policy of the administration, from July 1, 1917 to the present, has been conducted with a definite view toward closing the factory (circulars of the administration). If the factory has not already been closed, the credit should be given to the factory committee, which in its activity, hourly encountering insurmountable difficulties, conducted its entire policy in an effort to support the life of the factory. The factory committee considers the kind of control that the administration is willing to accept to be a palliative, since the master of the enterprise will still be the administration, while responsibility for conducting the affairs in the factory will lie entirely with the control commission, and, consequently, dual power will not be eliminated. The factory committee sees the only way out in the nationalization of the factory, and this petition once again affirms this.<sup>148</sup>*

Even Larin was finally converted. (He was soon to become one of the proponents of the most utopian conception of war communism.) In June 1918, he told the Congress of the Metalworkers' Union:

*We tried in many cases to put off the moment of full management of the enterprises and to restrict ourselves to control. But all our efforts came to nil. In the present situation not one of the existing forces can — and sometimes they do not even want to — manage the economy... Now there is but one way out: either move forward or go down. We have to abandon the idea of workers' control and, whether we like it or not, shift to a system of full management of the enterprises and leadership of the economy of the country.<sup>149</sup>*

## Ко всѣмъ рабочимъ ПЕТРОГРАДА!

Товарищи! Революція побѣждаетъ—революція побѣждена. Вся власть перешла къ нашимъ Советамъ. Первыми надѣли самыя трудныя. Надо раздавить до конца сломленную умиротвореніемъ, надо обезпечить полное торжество нашимъ стремленіямъ. Рабочій классъ долженъ, обязанъ проявить въ эти дни величайшую выдержку и выносливость, чтобы облегчить Новому Народному Правительству Советовъ выполненіе всѣхъ задачъ. На эти же дни будутъ выданы новые законы по рабочему вопросу и въ такомъ числѣ однихъ изъ самыхъ важныхъ законовъ о рабочемъ контролѣ надъ производствомъ и объ регулированіи промышленности.

### Забастовки и выступления рабочихъ массъ въ Петроградѣ теперь только вредятъ.

Имъ просятъ, всѣхъ немедленно прекратить всѣ экономическія и политическія забастовки, всѣхъ начать работу и производить ее въ полномъ порядкѣ. Работа на заводахъ и во всѣхъ предприятияхъ необходима поному правительству Советовъ, потому что только энергичное работа компаний для всѣхъ новыхъ заводовъ, заводовъ и безъ того должно. Всѣ въ своемъ мѣстѣ.

Лучшее средство поддержать новое правительство Советовъ въ эти дни—исполнять свои дѣла.

Да здравствуетъ твердая выдержка пролетариата! Да здравствуетъ революція!

Петроградскій Советъ Р. и С. Д.  
Петроградскій Советъ Профессиональ-  
наго Службы.  
Центральная Советъ Фабрично-Завод-  
скихъ Комитетовъ.

## TO ALL WORKERS OF PETROGRAD!

Comrades! The Revolution is winning, the Revolution has won. All the power has passed over to our Soviets. The first weeks are the most difficult ones. The broken reaction must be finally crushed, a full triumph must be secured for our endeavors. The working-class ought to—must—show in these days

**THE GREATEST FIRMNESS AND ENDURANCE** in order to facilitate the execution of all the aims of the new People's Government of Soviets. In the next few days, decrees on the Labor question will be issued. Among the very first will be the decree on Worker's Control over the production and regulation of industry.

**STRIKES AND DEMONSTRATIONS OF THE WORKER MASSES IN PETROGRAD NOW CAN ONLY DO HARM.**

We ask you to stop immediately all economic and political strikes, to take up your work, and do it in perfect order. The work in factories and all industries is necessary for the new Government of Soviets, because any interruption of this work will only create new difficulties, and we have enough as it is. All to your places.

The best way to support the new Government of Soviets in these days—is by doing your job.

**LONG LIVE THE IRON TENACITY OF THE PROLETARIAT!  
LONG LIVE THE REVOLUTION!**

Petrograd Soviet of W. & S. D.  
Petrograd Council of Trade Unions.  
Central Council of Factory-Shop Committees.

By the time this statement was made, there was not much left in Petrograd to manage. Between January 1 and May 1, 1918, the industrial work force further declined from 339,641 to 142,915 (even more drastically in metalworking), and the decline had not yet halted. 150

In his pamphlet entitled *From Workers' Control to Workers' Management in Industry and Agriculture* published in 1918, I. Stepanov outlined the dynamic that had led the workers to the social revolution:

*Conditions were such that the factory committees became full masters of the enterprises. This was the result of the entire development of our revolution. It was the inevitable consequence of the unfolding class struggle. The proletariat did not so much move toward this, as circumstances led it to it. It simply had to do what in the given situation it was impossible not to do.*

### "We Have No Choice"

But, he continued, it was taking too long to arrive at real control. The factory committees often acted as the heirs of the capitalists. It was, of course, natural for them to see their first task in helping the workers live through these hard times. But in doing so, they often made it more difficult to deal with the crises. Decisive measures on the national level were needed, and, "as terrible as it may seem to many," this required the complete removal of the capitalists from affairs.

*Yes, "socialist experiments", as our opponents chuckle. Yes, we must say it directly: now, what the working class of Russia has to do is remove the capitalists and resurrect all of industry on a new socialist basis. This is not a "fantastic theory" or "free will". We have no choice, and since it is done by the working class and the capitalists are removed in the course of the revolutionary struggle, it has to be socialist regulation.*

*This has to be said and said directly. Then, what until now we have done by dint of circumstances, hesitatingly, unsystematically, we will do consciously, in a systematic manner, looking further ahead.*

"Will this be another Paris Commune or will it lead to world socialism?" he asked. That depended on international circumstances. "But we have absolutely no choice." 151

This passage reflects the point where consciousness caught up with practice. At this point the deepening social content of the revolution ceased to be perceived primarily as a series of ad hoc, practical measures to defend the democratic revolution and became, in effect, the socialist revolution, though it too was no less a matter of necessity. The fate of the revolution in Russia was still tied to revolutions in the developed West. But if international factors made it permissible to think of a socialist revolution in Russia in 1918, it is worth stressing that the dynamic that drove the workers to this was fundamentally internal to Russia itself.



## Conclusion: The Revolutionary Dynamic

The gap between consciousness (or “theory”) and practice that characterized the labour movement in 1917 was an expression of the predominantly defensive and practical nature of the dynamics that led the workers from a democratic to a socialist conception of the revolution. This evolution was not the result of ideological processing by the Bolsheviks nor of chiliastic or anarchist drives. Indeed, the very minimal role played by such factors supports the contention that the increasingly radical social content of the revolution was anything but the result of historical accident — it was a process with deep roots in pre-revolutionary Russian society.

“This is not a ‘fantastic theory’ or ‘free will’. *We have no choice.*” Stepanov was replying here to the traditional Menshevik argument against the workers taking power in the democratic revolution: they would carry out “socialist experiments”, for which there was no objective basis in backward Russia, and at the same time alienate the liberal bourgeoisie, leading inevitably to the defeat of the revolution. In this Notebook I have argued that the increasingly social character of the revolution was not the result of the workers’ eagerness to proceed with “socialist experiments” but an expression of their desire to defend the democratic revolution in face of what they perceived as the counter-revolutionary threat posed by the bourgeoisie.

Of all the theorists, it was Trotsky who, while not foreseeing the specific manner in which the revolution would unfold, was able nevertheless on the basis of the experience of 1905 to grasp its essential dynamics. Agreeing with the Bolsheviks that the bourgeoisie would oppose rather than lead the democratic revolution, he at the same time rejected the Bolsheviks’ “democratic dictatorship of workers and peasants”. He wrote in 1906 that “there can be no talk of any sort of *special* form of proletarian dictatorship in the bourgeois revolution, of *democratic* proletarian dictatorship (or dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry).” He predicted, “The proletariat, once having taken power, will fight for it to the end.”<sup>152</sup>

*... Take the question of the eight-hour day. As is known, this by no means contradicts capitalist relations.... But let us imagine its introduction during a period of revolution, in a period of intensified class passions. There is no question but that this measure would meet the organized and determined resistance of the capitalists in the form, let us say, of lockouts and the closing down of factories.*

*Hundreds of thousands of workers would find themselves thrown on the streets.... For a workers’ government there would be only one way out: expropriation of the closed factories and the*

*organization of production in them on a socialized basis....*

*Let us take another example. The proletariat cannot but adopt the most energetic measures to solve the question of unemployment.... But ... this would mean an immediate and quite substantial shift of economic power to the side of the proletariat. The capitalists, who in their oppression of the workers always relied upon the existence of a reserve army of labour, would feel themselves economically powerless while the revolutionary government at the same time doomed them to political impotence....*

*There is nothing left for the capitalists to do then but to resort to the lockout, i.e. to close the factories. It is quite clear that the employers can stand the closing down of production much longer than the workers, and therefore there is only one reply that a workers’ government can give to a general lockout: the expropriation of the factories and the introduction in at least the largest of them of state or communal production.<sup>153</sup>*

### The Nature of Pre-Revolutionary Society

The roots of the socio-political dynamic of the Revolution of 1917 must be traced back ultimately to the specific nature of pre-revolutionary Russian society: an industrializing but still backward society, in which a powerful, if numerically small, working class constituted the leading force in the democratic revolution, facing a weak, pusillanimous bourgeoisie heavily dependent both politically and economically on the autocratic state for the maintenance of its economic dominance.

1905 already offered a glimpse of this dynamic when, in response to the workers’ campaign for the universal introduction of the eight-hour day, the industrialists, frightened by this “social” turn of events, weary of the strikes and tempted by the Tsar’s limited concessions, ended their brief flirtation with the democratic revolution and joined with the autocracy in a massive lockout of Petrograd’s workers. This, in effect, marked the end of the all-national democratic movement and the start of the workers’ isolation from upper-class Russia.

In the upsurge of 1912-14 matters were much clearer. To the consternation of the Mensheviks, the political and economic aspects of the strike movement became practically indistinguishable.<sup>154</sup> The same was true of the other side: capital and the state worked hand in hand against economic and political aspects of the labour movement equally. It was in this context that a demand such as “polite address”, which stood at



the very heart of the workers' aspirations on the eve of the war, was seen by both sides as a political demand.

### "And If We Perish ..."

But while the industrialists feared a popular democratic revolution as a threat to their existence, the workers did not draw this conclusion. And the same is true of the Bolsheviks, who led the labour movement in this period. Lenin did change his position after the war broke out. But this was based upon an analysis of the international context, of imperialism, and not so much on the dynamics of the internal Russian situation. Even into 1918, the Bolshevik leaders still were thinking in terms only of soviet and workers'

control and regulation of production. All agreed that Russian conditions were not ripe for socialism, even if the world revolution held out great possibilities for a more rapid transition.

It was not, therefore, utopian dreams or the alleged Bolshevik voluntarism that explain the revolution's increasingly radical social character, but the grim determination of the workers and their leaders to do what they felt was necessary to defend the revolution. As Maksimov put it:

*But while they are going for our throat, we will fight.  
And if we perish, then it will be in an honest battle,  
but we will not retreat from the struggle.*



# Notes

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## Glossary

**Bazarov** - Menshevik Internationalist economist. A former Bolshevik, he worked with the Economic Department of the Petrograd Soviet during 1917. He advocated "state regulation" as an alternative to intervention in management by the factory committees.

**Central Executive Committee of Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies** (Russian abbreviation TsIK - Tsentral'nyi ispol'nitel'nyi komitet) - Permanent leadership body elected by the First All-Russian Congress of Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies in June 1917. It was dominated by moderate socialists until the Second Congress in October, which had a Bolshevik majority. The revolutionary constitution of January 1918 gave this Central Executive Committee the authority to legislate between sessions of the Congress of Soviets.

**Central Soviet of Factory Committees (CS)** - Permanent leadership body of the Petrograd Factory Committees, elected at the First Conference of Factory Committees in May-June 1917. By contrast with the moderate-dominated Central Executive Committee of Soviets, the Central Soviet of Factory Committees was under strong Bolshevik influence from the beginning, as shown when the Bolshevik resolution won 335 out of 421 votes at the Conference of Factory Committees that elected it. After the **July Days** Lenin even thought for a time that the factory committees rather than the soviets might be the basis of a working-class insurrection.

**Chubar', V.** - Bolshevik metalworker and member of the Central Soviet of Factory Committees of Petrograd.

**Coalition government** - A coalition between liberals and moderate socialist (Menshevik and Social Revolutionary) leaders of the Soviet. It was formed in May 1917 to bolster the flagging authority among workers and soldiers of the liberal Provisional Government of Prince Lvov set up after the February Revolution. Lvov continued to head the government until July, when Kerensky replaced him as Prime Minister. The Petrograd Soviet under Bolshevik leadership overthrew this coalition government in the revolution of November 1917.

**CS** - See Central Soviet of Factory Committees.

**Groman, V.** - A Menshevik economist, head of the Economic Department of the Petrograd Soviet during 1917. He advocated "state regulation" of industry.

**July Days** - Armed worker and soldier demonstrations on July 3-4, 1917 to pressure the moderate leaders of the Central Executive Committee of Soviets to take power. Despite attempts by the Bolsheviks to hold them back, they took on a semi-insurrectional character. The coalition government, supported by some of the moderate socialists, responded with repression against the labour movement and the

Bolsheviks, beginning a period of reaction that lasted for several weeks, until the defeat of Kornilov's attempted coup.

**Kadets** - Constitutional Democratic Party, a liberal party that moved increasingly to the right after the 1905 revolution and became the main party of the propertied classes after February 1917.

**Kerensky, Aleksandr F.** - Right-wing populist lawyer, who entered the first Provisional Government as Minister of Justice, became Minister of War and Marine in the coalition government in May 1917, and became Prime Minister following the **July Days**. He played an ambiguous role in the Kornilov uprising, but continued as Prime Minister until the October revolution.

**Konovalov, A.I.** - Kadet industrialist and banker, Minister of Trade and Industry in the Provisional Government. (He had given some financial support to the Bolsheviks before the war.) He resigned from the coalition government in late May 1917 in protest against economic "anarchy", and was replaced by the engineer Pal'chinskii. He became Minister of Trade and Industry again and Deputy Prime Minister in September 1917, and in that capacity in November surrendered to the Soviet on behalf of the Provisional Government.

**Kornilov** - Young general who became Russian commander-in-chief, and leader of the failed right-wing coup of August 27-31, 1917. The coup was supported by many Kadets and at least initially welcomed by Prime Minister Kerensky. Its defeat by soldiers and armed workers, including Bolsheviks released from prison, helped create the conditions for the Bolsheviks to win a majority in the Soviets and overthrow the coalition government. After escaping from prison Kornilov died in 1918, fighting alongside the Whites in the civil war.

**Larin, Yu.** - A left-wing Menshevik who joined the Bolshevik party in the summer of 1917. He was active in the trade-union movement. In late 1917 and early 1918 he was one of the Bolshevik "comrades on the right" who shrank from direct economic confrontation with the bourgeoisie; but by late 1918 he became one of the most zealous defenders of "war communism".

**Levin, V.** - Left Social Revolutionary, member of the Central Soviet of Factory Committees of Petrograd, and one of the organizers of the First Conference of Factory Committees.

**Lozovsky, A.** - Bolshevik and trade-union leader. He was an opponent of the October insurrection, later head of the Red International of Trade Unions (Profintern).

**Menshevik Defensists** - Right wing of the social-democratic Menshevik Party. The Defensists

## Suggestions for Further (Non-Russian) Reading

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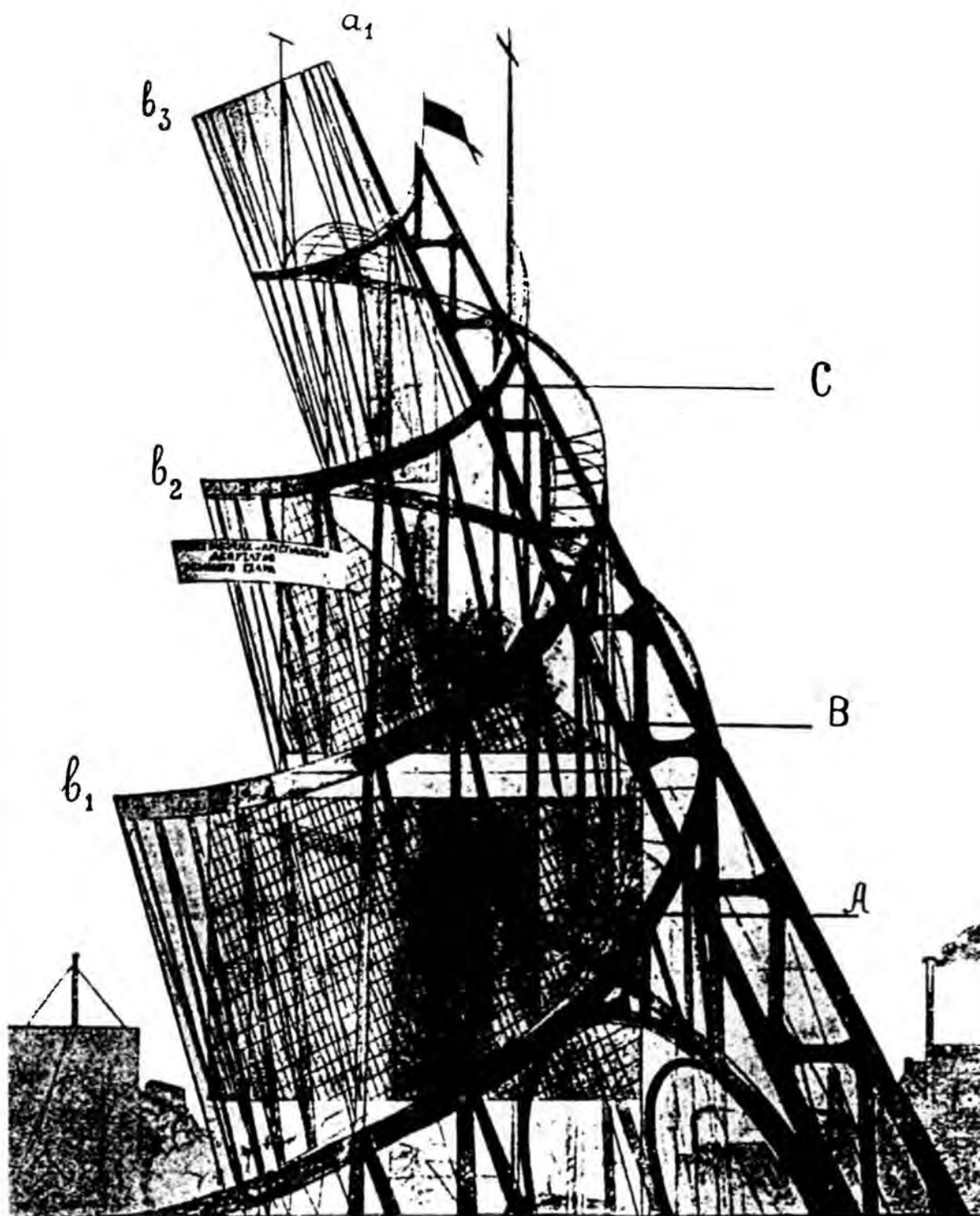
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Vladimir Tatlin's drawing for a Monument to the Third International (1919-20)



In the "studies" series

# Factory Committees and Workers' Control in Petrograd in 1917

*David Mandel*

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**Cover:** A Bolshevik poster shows a Menshevik holding death's hand as a priest, a bourgeois and a tsarist general urge him on.

*Factory Committees and Workers' Control in Petrograd in 1917* tells the story of 1917 "from below", delving into Russian-language archives to uncover worker-activists' own words. It shows how the Petrograd workers did not dream at first of "socialist experiments" in backward Russia; how factory owners put up a fierce resistance to demands for an eight-hour day and a "constitutional regime" in the workplaces; how they decided to shut down their plants rather than yield their prerogatives; and how factory committees were ultimately driven, in a desperate effort to save workers' jobs, to take management into their own hands and appeal to the Bolshevik government to nationalize the factories. It assesses and refutes common conceptions about "utopian" and "anarchistic" impulses supposedly behind the October Revolution.

**David Mandel** teaches political science at the Université du Québec à Montréal. He is active in solidarity with the Russian labour movement, and writes frequently on Russia for *International Viewpoint* and other publications. Among his previous works are *The Petrograd Workers and the Fall of the Old Regime* and *Perestroika and the Soviet People*.

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