

LRCI: From Yeltsin to Rutskoi

The May 1993 issue of the League for a Revolutionary Communist International's *Trotskyist International* contains a substantial polemic by Keith Harvey, largely directed at the "dogmatism" of the International Bolshevik Tendency (IBT) for our position of military support to the Stalinist apparatus in its August 1991 confrontation with the capitalist restorationists headed by Boris Yeltsin. The LRCI defends its bloc with Yeltsin, and perversely claims that those who fail to do so "abandon the gains of October." In fact, Yeltsin's triumph over the sclerotic remnants of the Stalinist bureaucracy marked the decisive moment in the destruction of the degenerated workers' state created by the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, a historical fact which the LRCI still refuses to recognize.

The LRCI polemic got one thing right: there was no middle ground in the Soviet coup. Pseudo-Trotskyist groups like the International Communist League (formerly the international Spartacist tendency) which acknowledge that the coup's defeat signaled the destruction of the workers' state, but nonetheless refused to take sides at the time, only testify to their own bankruptcy.

The LRCI, however, is proud that it sided with the Yeltsinites in 1991. They argue that we are wrong to see Yeltsin's victory as the triumph of the counterrevolution, and criticize us for confusing the collapse of the Stalinist bureaucracy with the destruction of the workers' state. The article asserted that the "decisive contest" to determine the fate of the Russian workers' state lay in the future:

"Those who claim the Russian workers' state is no more have a difficulty in explaining the significance of the events of the last 18 months in Russia. A perpetual and still unresolved battle has taken place between the fast track restorationists around Yeltsin and a broad coalition of chauvinists, conservatives and state capitalists. Many of the latter supported Yeltsin in August 1991 but have resisted him ever since."

The LRCI provided the following summary of the two sides:

"the economic goal of the contending forces in Russia today is control of the Central Bank and its allocation of credits to enterprises. Each side—Yeltsin and Khasbulatov—have their own parallel administrations....Only by resolving the political struggle over which body has sovereignty in Russia will Yeltsin be able to claim the prize and set about forcing the Central Bank to act as a weapon for the restoration of capitalism instead of subverting that process."

It is true that the parliamentarians sought to keep industry afloat by massive subsidies financed by printing banknotes. The problem with this solution is that the Russian and other ex-Soviet governments could not afford to maintain the subsidies, let alone make the investments necessary to modernize the industrial plant. The LRCI was engaging in wishful thinking to imagine that, by maintaining the subsidies, Ruslan Khasbulatov and Aleksandr Rutskoi (ex-chairman of the Supreme Soviet and ex-vice-president respectively) and the parliamen-

tary majority were somehow defending a collectivized economy.

The dispute between parliament and the Kremlin was over how best to establish a market economy. The parliamentary opposition represented a spectrum of local and regional officials, military officers concerned that Russia was losing its "great power" status, and factory managers whose future prospects are tied to the survival of the enterprises they run. The "shock therapy" integration into the world market proposed by the IMF and Yeltsin's former prime minister and chief economic adviser, Yegor Gaidar, would mean the liquidation of huge sectors of Russian industry, the absolute impoverishment of tens of millions of workers and a prolonged period of civil unrest.

In an interview last year Khasbulatov denounced Yeltsin/Gaidar's plans for a rapid transition to capitalism:

"how can one evaluate statements by one of the leading members of the government to the effect that a 50-percent decline in production in the country—that this is normal?...But a person who is at the rudder in carrying out the economic reform declares that a 50-percent decline is a norm. Is he really aware of what a 50-percent decline means? This is a stoppage, a shutdown of production, a destruction of the forces of production. Generally speaking, it is tragic that cadres are still being selected from the ranks of a very narrow contingent, and that a no less narrow circle is doing the selecting....Our entire press continues to write by inertia about the success of the shock therapy in Poland—when in fact the entire world knows that Poland is experiencing a total collapse and that this conception has been proved totally bankrupt."

—quoted in *Russian Social Science Review*, July 1993

In the same interview Khasbulatov made it clear that the dispute with Yeltsin and Gaidar is not over whether to resuscitate the planned economy:

"Now, realities are such that there is no returning to the past. I am certainly not one of those people who rejoiced at the collapse of the Soviet Union; let us say it straightforwardly, this was a tragic event. But life is life. As they say, the train has already left the station. And it did not merely leave: the rails behind it were torn up and discarded....But we must understand that life must now be constructed anew, within the Russian state."

The conflict between Yeltsin and Rutskoi/Khasbulatov came to a head with the armed clash in early October 1993. The eventual decision of the military chiefs to back Yeltsin allowed him to crush his opponents and their defenders (which included both Stalinists and fascists). This was an important episode in the *consolidation* of a capitalist-restorationist regime, but it was never anything but a conflict *within* the camp of the counterrevolutionaries.

LRCI: Choosing Sides Among Counterrevolutionaries

In response to Yeltsin's dissolution of parliament, the LRCI issued a call to defend the White House and "Fight

Yeltsin's Coup" (*Workers Power*, October 1993). This article, written before the decisive clash, attacks Yeltsin as a bonapartist and says that: "Revolutionary socialists should...nevertheless use the crisis to try and rally the workers against this attack on their democratic rights." Yet in addressing this long-awaited showdown between Yeltsin and those who have supposedly been blocking his drive to capitalism, *Workers Power* ignored the question of the survival of its hypothetical "workers' state."

To its credit, the article did not attempt to prettify Yeltsin's opponents among the People's Deputies. They are described as being "in favour of the restoration of capitalism" and opposed to Yeltsin only because they "want guarantees that privatisation will be carried out in such a way that the old bureaucracy can be the beneficiaries of the new capitalism." Almost as an afterthought, *Workers Power* called for workers to "organise independently to stop the Yeltsin/Gaidar economic programme for the restoration of capitalism," but failed to call for opposition to the *other* gang of capitalist-restorationists then headquartered at the White House.

After the smoke had cleared the LRCI published a special supplement to their *Trotskyist International*, which advanced somewhat different arguments. Noting that the differences between Rutskoi/Khasbulatov and Yeltsin "are rooted only in the method and the tempo of the restoration process," the dispute between Yeltsin and the parliament about when to hold elections is dismissed as:

"...squabbling over equally bourgeois constitutional forms [which] could present no real alternative to the population. Revolutionaries should demand the abolition of both the presidency and the parliament..."

The LRCI statement notes that neither side was able to mobilize significant mass support: "Only a few thousand turned out at the rival rallies that Yeltsin and Rutskoi called." It also speculates that:

"It seems likely that it was the hardline Stalinist[s] and ultra-nationalists who were the real organisers of the abortive insurrection....Their goal was an ultra-nationalist conservative dictatorship. Clearly revolutionary communists could and can have no political solidarity with this reactionary objective."

Yet after all this, the statement inexplicably concludes that, "in the battle between the parliament and Yeltsin, revolutionaries had to defend the White House and the parliament..." The only justification offered for this conclusion is that: "Since the collapse of Yanayev's coup in August 1991 Boris Yeltsin has been the main enemy of the workers of the Russian Federation." But why should workers want to replace one "main enemy" with another?

The *Trotskyist International* text differs from the original piece in *Workers Power* in two respects. First, the claim that Rutskoi/Khasbulatov should be defended because they represented a more democratic alternative is dropped, and instead the article asserts that parliament's "democratic credentials were no better and no worse than Yeltsin's." Secondly, an indirect reference to the LRCI's imaginary Russian workers' state is tucked away in the last paragraph of the lengthy statement: "Now we alone consistently and openly fight against all attempts

to transform the country into an openly capitalist dictatorship." The LRCI is indeed alone (and evidently more and more uncomfortable) in making the absurd claim that Russia under Yeltsin and the IMF remains any kind of workers' state. It is evident that they would like to edge away from this position without having to offer any serious political accounting.

The defense of the workers' states against counter-revolution has never been anything the LRCI took seriously. In 1991, when the Soviet degenerated workers' state *did* exist, the LRCI supported Yeltsin, the "democratic" capitalist restorationist, against the Stalinist bureaucrats who "hoped by their actions on 19 August to defend their privileges on the basis of post capitalist property relations" (*Workers Power*, September 1991). We sided with the coup leaders and reminded the LRCI that: "the conquests of the October Revolution weighed far heavier than bourgeois democracy in the scales of human progress" (1917 No. 11). We warned that, "The brutal austerity measures required for capitalist restoration will be imposed on the Soviet masses with bayonets, not stump speeches or election-day handshakes." Today that prediction is being borne out.

To reconcile its support to Yeltsin in 1991 with its Soviet defensist posture, *Workers Power* simply denied that a social counterrevolution had occurred. Two years later, as the counterrevolutionaries fall out among themselves over who is to cash in on the dismantling of the planned economy, the LRCI's first impulse was to choose sides on the grounds of who was more "democratic."

The axis of the conflict between Yeltsin and Rutskoi/Khasbulatov was not one of bonapartist authoritarianism versus bourgeois democracy: it was a test of strength between two factions within the capitalist-restorationist camp. Had the military split between the two camps, and a civil war erupted, the workers' movement should have been revolutionary defeatist on both sides. We oppose Yeltsin's wholesale attacks on democratic rights (media censorship, banning political opposition, suppression of oppositional newspapers, etc.). But had Rutskoi/Khasbulatov emerged victorious at the head of a nationalist coalition of regional bureaucrats, old-time Stalinists, anti-Semites and outright fascists, they would also have sought to consolidate their rule with repressive measures.

Historical Pessimism as 'Smart' Tactics

Supporters of *Workers Power* would do well to rethink their position on the August 1991 coup in light of recent events. Keith Harvey's polemic reiterated the argument that only a "united front" with the Yeltsinites against the 1991 coup could preserve the democratic space necessary to permit the proletariat to rediscover its own class interests:

"We judge the question of democratic rights from one standpoint only: which rights will assist the working class in attaining class consciousness?"

"...to side with the bureaucracy against the working class and its democratic restorationist misleaders is criminal folly. It is in fact to drag the banner of Trotsky's name in the filth of Stalinism."

At this point it should be clear that the claim that Yeltsin's "democratic" restorationist regime was going to provide an opportunity for the working class to come to class consciousness was really just historical pessimism dressed up as smart tactics. The level of class consciousness in the Russian proletariat was low, and there was no organized formation that even roughly approximated the kind of political direction necessary. Many workers had considerable illusions in Yeltsin and indeed in the whole project of capitalist restoration.

The task of Marxists is not to adapt to the illusions of the mass of more backward workers, but to rally those who at least have a sense of where the class line lies. In August 1991 that meant the necessity to defend collectivized property against counterrevolution. Despite massive illusions in Yeltsin in sections of the proletariat (particularly the miners), other layers of workers were deeply *hostile* to Yeltsin. The job of a revolutionary organization intervening in August 1991 was to seek to lead *these* elements into action against the restorationists, making blocs with sections of the Stalinist apparatus as and where necessary, while sharply posing the necessity of establishing organs of direct proletarian political power.

In the 1993 confrontation, the space created by the falling out between the two wings of the restorationists presented a fleeting opportunity for political intervention by the working class. In this situation of national crisis, a campaign in the unions to convoke emergency gatherings of representatives from factories, unions, collective farms and military units across Russia could have

struck a chord in the masses, and opened the door for independent political action by the working class. Within such bodies, Marxists could have sought to crystallize opposition to the entire project of capitalist restoration with an emergency program to reverse the process of privatization and deal with the ravages of unemployment, inflation, the wholesale collapse of health and social services, food shortages and speculation through the direct political intervention of the masses.

To the LRCI leadership, the capacity to swim against the stream is merely "dogmatism" and "sectarianism." From Poland in 1981, to the DDR in 1989 (see *1917* No. 10), to the USSR in 1991, the LRCI has been consistent in its refusal to defend the bureaucratized workers' states against counterrevolution. Rather than face the reality that the victory of the Yeltsinites in 1991, which they eagerly supported, destroyed the Soviet workers' state, the LRCI leadership has sought refuge in idiot optimism and ludicrous assertions that "the gains of October" survive. When the veterans of Yeltsin's 1991 barricades fell out among themselves, the LRCI hastened to choose sides.

These are not the responses of a serious revolutionary organization. The LRCI leadership's record of support to restorationist movements, its congenital inability to say what is and its proclivity to manufacture "Marxist" rationalizations for political adaptation to the mass movements of the moment, mark it as a thoroughly centrist formation. ■