

# Three Days in August Soviet Rubicon & the Left

In the weeks following the failed coup attempt of 19-21 August, the International Bolshevik Tendency was virtually alone among self-proclaimed Trotskyists in recognizing that this event marked the end of the Soviet workers state. Every major political development has since confirmed our view. A few days after the coup, Gorbachev, at Boris Yeltsin's instruction, proclaimed the dissolution of the Soviet Communist Party. The Congress of Peoples' Deputies voted to self-destruct. In December Yeltsin announced the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the formation of the so-called Commonwealth of Independent States. He did this without even bothering to consult Gorbachev, whose subsequent attempts to maintain some semblance of all-union government were simply ignored. On Christmas Day Gorbachev resigned as Soviet president. The Soviet flag was lowered over the Kremlin and replaced by the czarist emblem the same evening. Yeltsin moved into the Soviet president's office before Gorbachev could even pack his bags.

The major political institutions of the Soviet state could be dismantled without armed resistance because the fate of the USSR had already been decided. The post-coup developments were a mere epilogue to the three days in August when the demoralized defenders of the old Stalinist apparatus made and lost their last desperate gamble.

Yeltsin wasted no time in launching a full assault on the already disintegrating state economy. At the beginning of January he withdrew state subsidies for foodstuffs and many other items, raising most prices several fold. This was just the first of a series of measures designed to replace centralized planning with market anarchy. Stirrings of popular protest quickly followed. As Yeltsin toured the country to gauge public reaction, he was confronted by angry crowds. Food riots erupted in the Uzbek capital of Tashkent, claiming the lives of several students; workers, military men and members of the old party apparatus demonstrated against the new regime in Red Square on Revolution Day; 5,000 army officers gathered in the Kremlin to protest Yeltsin's plans to carve up the army along national lines. In February, 50,000 people poured into the streets of Moscow in the largest demonstration against the government to date. The anti-Yeltsin protests are extremely heterogeneous. While some demonstrators carried red flags and pictures of Lenin and Stalin, the ultra-rightist Liberal-Democratic Party and other monarchist and anti-Semitic elements were also prominent. As the Caucasus region is racked with communal slaughter, and Yeltsin continues to wrangle with the Ukraine's new nationalist regime over the Black Sea Fleet, it is clear that the road back to capitalism in the former Soviet Union will not be a smooth one.

Yeltsin's "price reforms" were introduced on the ad-

vice of Jeffrey Sachs, golden boy of the Harvard Business School, who spent the past few years acquainting Polish workers with free-market misery. The purpose of the reforms is to reduce the Russian state budget deficit and stabilize the ruble. Under the old planning system the prices of commodities were determined not by market forces, but by the social and economic decisions of state planners. The ruble functioned more as a labor ration ticket than as a measure of value. To establish a regime of generalized commodity production, and to open the economy of the ex-USSR to the world market, it is first necessary, according to the Harvard school, to have some sort of universal equivalent that establishes the ratios in which various goods can be traded.

On what terms will Russia and the other republics join the imperialist "family of nations"? The productivity of Soviet labor has always lagged far behind that of advanced capitalist countries. The products of Soviet industry simply can't compete in price or quality with Western goods. Western capitalists are reluctant to invest even in Poland and the former DDR, whose industrial plant is more advanced than Russia's. Russian and Ukrainian industries are even less likely to find foreign buyers. Aspiring Russian "entrepreneurs" cannot simply take over existing state industries and start making money. To become competitive internationally, most Soviet enterprises would require massive retooling and upgrading, and that can only be financed from abroad. The imperialist giants, locked in ever intensifying economic rivalries with one another, are not about to underwrite the development of a major new competitor. The total "aid" earmarked for the former Soviet Union so far is only a fraction of what the imperialists spent each year preparing to wage war on the "evil empire." The assistance they are providing is only enough to help Yeltsin keep a lid on his unruly population. There will be no latter-day Marshall Plan.

The lands that once made up the USSR are not without value to the predators of Wall Street and the Frankfurt bourse. The former Soviet Union was the world's number-one producer of oil and timber, and its territories are also rich in minerals, metals and grain. The population is well educated even by Western standards, and is thus a huge potential market and reserve of exploitable labor. But the imperialists see the former Soviet Union chiefly as a producer of raw materials and agricultural products and a consumer of the finished goods of the U.S., Europe and Japan. The deindustrialization which will accompany capitalist restoration will lock the various republics into a pattern of economic dependency and backwardness more typical of third-world countries than the developed capitalist world.

The former Soviet Union, however, is no third-world country. The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 tore the former czarist empire out of the imperialist orbit and laid

the foundations for transforming it from a backward, largely peasant nation into a major industrial power. At the time of the revolution, over 80 percent of the Soviet population lived in the countryside; today, more than 60 percent are city dwellers.

The reintegration of the Soviet Union into the international capitalist division of labor will mean the ruin of entire economic sectors: steel, machinery, military hardware and consumer goods and the destitution of many of the tens of millions of workers whose livelihoods depend upon industry.

The states emerging from the breakup of the USSR are not likely to be reduced to third-world status without explosions of popular anger. As mass indignation at free-market “shock therapy” continues to mount, Yeltsin could easily fall. He has already been forced to modify some of the harsher aspects of his economic package. Yet none of Yeltsin’s would-be successors is any less committed than he to capitalist restoration; they differ only over tactics and timing.

### **For Workers Revolution To Smash Counterrevolution!**

The one force that can turn back the tide—the working class—is confused and demoralized by years of Stalinist betrayal. Yeltsin’s regime remains extremely fragile and vulnerable to an upsurge from below. Revolutionists in the former USSR must attempt to turn popular hostility to price-gougers and food speculators into a weapon against the whole privatization scheme. By forming representative committees in each workplace and working-class neighborhood, workers could come together to recreate the soviets of 1905 and 1917. Such organs of popular power could ensure that the necessary food supplies are fairly distributed. They could also block the wholesale looting and theft of publicly-owned enterprises and counter layoffs with a campaign for a sliding scale of wages and hours, and constitute the organizational framework for a reborn workers state.

Mass hostility to Yeltsin’s austerity measures is being exploited by a host of right-wing nationalist demagogues and anti-Semitic descendents of the Black Hundreds. The demonstrations against Yeltsin in recent months have brought together “patriotic” Stalinists with Russian-nationalist fascists. Capitalist restoration has unleashed an explosion of reactionary nationalist blood-letting throughout the Caucasus region, in Moldavia and elsewhere in the former USSR. Marxists uphold the right of all nations to self-determination and oppose the Great Russian chauvinism of Yeltsin’s Kremlin. At the same time, socialists champion the voluntary union of the peoples of the former USSR in a renewed socialist federation.

To avert disaster, the working class urgently requires revolutionary leadership. A revolutionary party would seek to mobilize the proletariat to drive Yeltsin and other nationalist potentates from power, reverse privatization programs and return the birthplace of the world’s first workers state to the revolutionary internationalist road of Lenin and Trotsky.

Any group aspiring to revolutionary leadership must be able to recognize reality and tell the truth. Political reality today is shaped by the fact that the victory of the counterrevolution in August 1991 destroyed the Soviet workers state. Most of the economy is still formally the property of the state, as in Poland, Czechoslovakia and the rest of Eastern Europe. But those wielding the monopoly of force in society are committed to dismantling, not maintaining, state ownership of the means of production. The class that brought collectivized property into being and had the greatest interest in its survival—the proletariat—was excluded from direct political power with the rise of Stalin in the 1920s. Yet the Stalinist bureaucracy, for all its crimes against the working class, derived its social power from its role as administrator of the state-owned economy. It was episodically compelled to defend workers property forms from capitalist restoration and to repress pro-capitalist elements within its own ranks in order to safeguard its privileges. With the failure of the August coup, the deeply divided and thoroughly demoralized Stalinist apparatus collapsed, as forces openly pledged to destroy the economic foundations laid by the October Revolution seized power.

The success of the coup plotters would have represented an obstacle, however temporary and insubstantial, to the victory of the restorationists now in power. It was therefore the duty of those who defended the Soviet Union against capitalist restoration to side with the coup leaders against Yeltsin, without offering them any political support. Yet, to our knowledge, every other tendency purporting to be Trotskyist failed this last test of Soviet defensism. Most sided with the forces gathered around Yeltsin in the name of democracy. Others were neutral. To excuse their failure, many of these groups now find it expedient to play down the significance of Yeltsin’s August victory. We shall examine the responses to the coup by three pseudo-Trotskyist organizations: the United Secretariat of the Fourth International, Workers Power and the Spartacists.

### **USec: ‘Nobody Here But Us Democrats’**

For the past forty years, the United Secretariat of the Fourth International (USec), led by Ernest Mandel, has specialized in distorting and abridging Trotsky’s revolutionary program to adapt to the latest leftist political fad. Their search for a cheap ticket to “mass influence” has led them from support to insurrectionary Stalinists like Castro and Ho Chi Minh in the late 1960s, to unstinted praise for the anti-communists of Poland’s Solidarnosc a decade later. As the prevailing political winds shifted rightward during the past decade and a half, the USec has been trying to find a niche on the fringes of social democracy. It is hardly surprising, then, that during the August coup Mandel and his followers sided with the few thousand capitalist-restorationist liberals and black-marketeers who rallied to Yeltsin’s White House. Along with the entire international bourgeoisie, the USec applauded the Russian president’s victory over the Emergency Committee as a triumph for “democracy.” One American USec affiliate, the Fourth Internationalist Tendency, wrote, “The defeat of the coup was

a genuine victory for the Soviet peoples” (*Bulletin in Defense of Marxism*, October 1991). Another American USec outfit saw in the Yeltsinite crowds a “popular uprising” with “few precedents since the time of the Russian Revolution of 1917, led by V.I. Lenin and Leon Trotsky” (*Socialist Action*, September 1991). Mandel himself wrote:

“The...putschists wanted to severely limit or even suppress the democratic liberties that existed in reality....This is why the putsch had to be opposed by all means available. And this is why the failure of the putsch should be hailed.”

—*International Viewpoint*, 3 February

Like every good Kautskyite, Mandel’s highest criterion is abstract “democracy.” The counterrevolutionaries in the Kremlin and their international backers in the IMF are not so worried about such “liberties.” The brutal austerity measures required for capitalist restoration will be imposed on the Soviet masses with bayonets, not stump speeches or election-day handshakes.

Marxists know that bourgeois democracy has a class content. The real social inequality between bourgeois and proletarians, between the homeless beggar and the president of General Motors, is not eliminated, but rather concealed, by formal equality of rights. Parliamentary institutions play an important part in legitimating the rule of the bourgeoisie by concealing the class policies of capitalist governments behind a facade of popular consent. The working class must defend democratic liberties in capitalist society against all attempts to curtail or suspend them. Yet, the conquests of the October Revolution weighed far heavier than bourgeois democracy in the scales of human progress. The abolition of private property over one sixth of the earth’s surface and the replacement of market anarchy by economic planning were social foundations upon which democracy could become real for the millions who do not own factories, banks or media empires. The hypocritical “democratic” imperialists hated the Stalinists not because they disenfranchised the Soviet workers, but because their rule depended on the survival of the gains won by the Russian proletariat in 1917. In Trotsky’s words:

“We must not lose sight for a single moment of the fact that the question of overthrowing the Soviet bureaucracy is for us subordinate to the question of preserving state property in the means of production in the USSR...”

—*In Defense of Marxism*

### USec on the Wrong Side of the Barricades

The barricades of August formed a dividing line between those bent on bringing back capitalism and those who wanted to slow down the market reforms and preserve, at least for a time, the social and economic status quo. Social democrats, liberals and all those who openly favored capitalist restoration had little difficulty in grasping the significance of the coup and its defeat. Pseudo-Trotskyists, however, must falsify reality to justify shirking Soviet defensism and prostrating themselves before left-liberal public opinion. It is therefore extremely important for the USec to “prove” that there were no fundamental differences between the coup plot-

ters and the Yeltsinites. Nat Weinstein, writing in the September 1991 issue of *Socialist Action*, opined:

“To the extent there are divisions among those in governmental and state power—from Gorbachev, to the organizers of the coup, to Boris Yeltsin and Eduard Shevardnadze—it is *not* between those supporting a market-based capitalist democracy, on the one side, and ‘hardline communists defending socialism,’ on the other.”

The coup leaders were certainly not “communists defending socialism;” they were Stalinist bureaucrats attempting to hang on to the power and prerogatives of the central apparatus, which depended on the existence of a *state-owned economy*, against forces that had openly declared for capitalism. If the coup did not pit restorationists against those resisting restoration, what, according to Weinstein, were the rival factions fighting about? He continues:

“All major currents in the state apparatus...support the reintroduction of capitalism.

“The fundamental difference between them was whether it was possible to continue the process of capitalist restoration by political means, or whether an iron-fisted dictatorship was necessary to impose the anti-working-class measures this policy requires.”

It is not hard to see where this reasoning leads. If the Yeltsinites and the coup leaders were equally in favor of capitalism, and differed only over the political means, the working class should favor the victory of the faction that sought to restore capitalism by less repressive methods. This, as we shall see, is the only logical argument offered by any of the so-called Trotskyists who refused to block with the coup leaders. Only its major premise—that the aims of the coupists and their adversaries were the same—is false.

Ernest Mandel agrees with Weinstein that Yeltsin represents a wing of the Soviet bureaucracy, but doubts that either the Russian president or the coup leaders would or could restore capitalism:

“The Soviet bureaucracy is too vast, its social networks too strong, the web of inertia, routine, obstruction and sabotage on which it rests too dense for it to be decisively weakened by actions from above.

“Yeltsin, just as much, if not more than Gorbachev, represents a faction in the top levels of the nomenklatura. Yeltsin, by his whole past and education, is a man of the apparatus. His gifts as a populist demagogue do not permit the modification of this judgement...”

“People will say that, unlike Gorbachev, who continued in some vague fashion to call himself a socialist, Yeltsin has come out openly for the restoration of capitalism. This is true. But professions of faith are not enough for us to form an assessment of politicians. We have to look at what happens in practice and what social interests they serve. “From this point of view, Yeltsin and his allies in the liquidation of the USSR...represent a faction of the nomenklatura distinct from the bourgeois forces properly so-called...although they can overlap at the margins.”

—*International Viewpoint*, 3 February

Thus Weinstein, on the one hand, argues that the *entire Soviet bureaucracy* was bent on restoring capitalism, while Mandel, on the other, is skeptical as to whether *any wing* of the bureaucracy, including its most rightist Yeltsinite elements, has the will or power to do so. These two assessments of the Soviet bureaucracy are

diametrically opposed, and would give rise to heated contention in any organization that took such questions seriously. If, in fact, Weinstein and Mandel continue to live happily together under the same political tent, it is only because their apparent differences conceal a much more significant common denominator.

Mandel and Weinstein agree that the August coup and its denouement did not pose the question of the survival of the Soviet workers state. They concur that Yeltsin's main political difference with the Emergency Committee was that he wanted to preserve democratic liberties. Thus, from opposite assumptions concerning the nature and direction of the Soviet bureaucracy, Weinstein and Mandel arrive at the same bottom line: support to the "democratic" Yeltsin camp. And by a happy coincidence, this practical conclusion situates the USec on the fair-weather side of liberal-left and social-democratic opinion. For opportunists, analysis of objective reality functions not as a guide to action, but as a rationale for cutting programmatic corners. Which rationale one chooses is a minor matter as long as the cash value is the same.

### Yeltsinites and Coupists: Conflict of Interest

Like all rationales those of Weinstein and Mandel contain elements of truth emphasized to falsify the larger picture. It is true, as Weinstein would point out, that the Emergency Committee, unlike Soviet Stalinists in the past, did not seek to justify its actions with the rhetoric of socialism. Nor can it be denied that the attitude toward collectivized property expressed in their public statements was ambiguous: on the one hand, they voiced concern about the growing peril to the "integral national economic mechanism that has been shaping for decades," and the offensive that is "underway on the rights of working people....to work, education, health, housing and leisure" (*New York Times*, 19 August 1991). Yet on the other hand, they pledged themselves to respect the different forms of property that had grown up in the Soviet Union, including private property, and to continue down the path of perestroika.

This equivocation is explained by the fact that the coup plotters were bereft of any positive historical outlook. Very few of them, in all likelihood, believed in the superiority of socialized property, let alone in "socialism." Writing in the early 1930s, Trotsky described the Stalinist bureaucracy as a mixed bag: it ran the gamut from utterly cynical time-servers who would betray the Soviet state at the first opportunity, to sincere socialist revolutionaries; from fascists like Butenko to proletarian internationalists like Ignace Reiss. The Brezhnev years, however, saw the erosion of whatever socialist conviction the bureaucracy retained. As the Soviet economy lost its forward momentum, complacency, cynicism and corruption pervaded the apparatus at all levels. This corrosion was personified by Brezhnev himself, with his notorious fondness for accumulating fancy dachas and foreign sports cars. The only ideological conviction that motivated the "hardliners" was Soviet patriotism: a commitment to maintain the USSR's standing as a world power. This "patriotism" explains the undeniably het-

erogeneous character of the opposition to Yeltsin, and the curious affinity between old-guard apparatchiks and czarist anti-Semites: for both, maintaining a strong Russian state is far more important than the property relations that support it.

But a Marxist analysis of the Soviet ruling caste is not primarily based on what the bureaucrats think, much less what they say in public. The key to explaining the political behavior of different social classes and strata lies in their objective social position and the material interests that derive from it. Unlike the bourgeoisie, the Soviet bureaucracy was never a property-owning group. In August 1991, as at the height of Stalin's power, its privileges derived from its role as custodian of the centrally administered, state-owned economy. As the power of the center came under mounting attack from rebellious nationalities, breakaway bureaucrats and free marketeers, it was natural that some sections of the central state and party apparatus would attempt to reassert their prerogatives. This was the significance of the power struggle within the party that preceded the August coup, and of the coup attempt itself (see IBT September 1991 statement, page 20).

What requires explanation is not the fact that a section of the Stalinist bureaucracy offered resistance, but that it allowed itself to be overthrown unresistingly in most of Eastern Europe, and that the attempted counterblow of the Soviet nomenklatura, when it finally came, was so belated, irresolute and pathetic. The sclerosis of Stalinism was indeed far more advanced than had been thought prior to 1989.

The status quo, which the "gang of eight" sought to preserve, included something more valuable to Soviet workers and the workers of the world than a thousand constitutions or parliaments: public ownership of the means of production. No one could have known on the morning of 19 August that the barricades erected in defense of the status quo would prove as ephemeral as they did. But as we wrote before the coup:

"It is possible that leading sections of the bureaucracy may attempt at some future point to arrest the process of capitalist restoration. If that happened, it would be our duty to side militarily with the 'conservatives' against the Yeltsinites. The Stalinist caste is incapable of *solving* the problems which gave rise to the 'reforms' in the first place, but slamming on the brakes could at least buy some time."  
—1917, No. 10

Ernest Mandel, who complacently assures us that the Stalinist bureaucracy is still in power, also buttresses his argument with certain fragments of truth. Yeltsin was indeed a creature of the apparatus, first gaining national notoriety as a party boss in the city of Sverdlovsk (now, as in czarist times, Yekaterinburg), and then going on to become Moscow party chief. A brash man with a very high opinion of himself, Yeltsin chafed at the autocratic party discipline imposed by Gorbachev, and publicly criticized the Party Chairman for not taking glasnost and perestroika far enough. Yeltsin's rupture with Gorbachev eventually led to his dismissal as head of the Moscow party and his expulsion from the Politburo. He subsequently repudiated the Communist Party altogether.

Yeltsin survived politically only because his reputation as Gorbachev's most prominent critic allowed him to become a spokesperson for forces outside the party. Yeltsin was elected president of the Russian Republic against the party as a champion of those elements, in Russia and the USSR as a whole, that sought to destroy the CPSU's political monopoly. When he stood on a tank outside his White House to confront the coup makers, he spoke as a representative of foreign capital, national separatists and Moscow's pimps, currency speculators and other "entrepreneurs" who, along with their private security guards, comprised the bulk of the crowd that rallied to his support. Mandel can paint Yeltsin as a "man of the apparatus" only by ignoring his defection to the camp of the class enemy.

### "Spontaneous Privatization" and the Nomenklatura

Mandel's assertion that the bureaucracy remains in power contains an element of truth as well. The millions of individuals who constituted the nomenklatura have not disappeared and many of them have not even lost their jobs. The Ukrainian president, Leonid Kravchuk, and his Khazak counterpart, Nursultan Nazarbayev, were Stalinist party chiefs who became fervent nationalists only after August. It is no surprise that holdovers from the old regime, and the lower bureaucratic echelons on which they lean, are scrambling for positions of influence in the new political and economic order. If a fully developed capitalist class, armed with a legal code and a repressive state apparatus to protect private property, were a precondition for capitalist restoration, capitalism could never be reestablished in any collectivized economy.

The 27 December 1991 *New York Times* quoted Graham Allison, a Harvard Sovietologist, on the new role played by many directors of state firms:

"You are the manager of a state enterprise, say an aircraft company with 10,000 employees, and you begin to imagine there is no one above you," he said. "You don't get any orders, and the ministry you reported to disappears. You begin to imagine that the property is yours, and since you aren't getting any supplies you have to look out for yourself and your employees. Sometimes you get a foreigner to buy half of the operation in a joint venture. That is spontaneous privatization."

The USec's *International Viewpoint* (20 January) contains a remarkable interview with Yuri Marenich, academician and delegate to the Moscow Council (Soviet) of Peoples' Deputies. Marenich describes the process by which local Yeltsinite officials appropriated large chunks of real estate and other public property:

"They ran their electoral campaigns under the slogan: 'having won power, we will demonopolize property and manage the economy through the market.' But once they got the power to manage the public's property, they found themselves facing a tremendous temptation to grab this property for themselves. This was made easy by the possibility of combining jobs in government institutions with posts in private firms dealing with the government. Briefly, those in charge of supervising privatization simply transferred the district's property to companies they themselves head.

"All the members of the soviet's executive committee set up private companies that they headed. One firm took over the soviet's information services; another its legal services, a third took over all the real estate, its sale and leasing rights on the territory of the district.

"It's quite simple. Since the 1930s, we've had a system of transferring property without payment. But it was all state property and the transfer was from one state agency or enterprise to another. All the parties were acting in the name of a single owner, the state. Now, however, we also have private owners. But they have used the same procedure to transfer real estate from the district soviet, a state body, to a private company...."

Marenich speculates that a similar pattern is being replicated throughout the country. Many of the old nomenklatura are likely to find a place as members of a new post-Soviet capitalist class. Those who replace the Stalinist apparatchiks will no doubt for some time continue to operate the mechanisms of public ownership.

Reimposition of capitalism must obviously come about as the result of a process in which elements of continuity with previous modes of social and economic life will survive, as an indigenous bourgeoisie is formed from fragments of other classes and strata. Powerful centrifugal forces were at work in the Soviet economy years before Yeltsin's triumph in August. But Mandel's stress on the elements of continuity obscures the fact that the defeat of the coup marked a qualitative change. As long as the center in Moscow could exert administrative control over the economy, regional and local bureaucrats were obliged to work within (or around) the framework laid down from above; their appetite for the prerogatives of property owners ran into an objective constraint. Only after the central power was definitively broken in August were they free to embark on the path of "spontaneous privatization." The August events sounded the death knell of the Soviet workers state. All of Mandel's and Weinstein's assurances that nothing fundamental has changed are, in the end, little more than elaborate attempts to avoid responsibility for having sided with the counterrevolution.

### Workers Power: Defensists in Word, Yeltsinites in Deed

The ostensible Trotskyists of Workers Power (Britain) and its partners in the League for a Revolutionary Communist International (LRCI) are a good deal more candid than the USec in acknowledging the significance of the aborted coup. Reluctant at first to admit that the Soviet workers state met its end in August, they initially described the post-coup situation as one of "dual power," in which Gorbachev, representing the bureaucracy, continued to vie for state authority with the Yeltsinite restorationists. When, however, the "Gorbachev pole" capsized with a tap of Yeltsin's little finger in December, Workers Power finally recognized reality and conceded that, "The Soviet Union is dead. The spectre that haunted the capitalists for over seventy years has been laid to rest." (*Workers Power*, January).

Workers Power also sees the connection between the death of the Soviet workers state and Yeltsin's August victory over the coup. A September 1991 statement by

the LRCI International Secretariat asserts that the bureaucratic faction represented by the Emergency Committee “hoped by their actions on 19 August to defend their privileges on the basis of post capitalist property relations” (*Workers Power*, September 1991, emphasis added). The statement goes on to describe the Yeltsin forces in the following terms:

“The former layer of [democratic and nationalist] oppositionists...lost almost all belief in reforming ‘really existing socialism’ and were oriented to western democracy and a market economy as ideals. The latter—the ex-Gorbachevites—became disillusioned with Gorbachev’s utopian project of ‘market socialism’, outraged by their leader’s vacillations and compromises with the conservatives and attracted into the service of imperialism as the restorers of capitalism in the USSR.

“What does the Yeltsin-headed coalition of forces politically represent? Yeltsin, Shevardnadze, and indeed the whole military and political entourage of the Russian President, represent a faction of the bureaucracy that has abandoned the defence of its caste privileges and their source—a degenerate workers’ state—in favour of becoming key members of a new bourgeois ruling class.”

Thus, according to the LRCI, the identity of the contending forces in the August confrontation is clear: on the one side, a section of the Soviet bureaucracy which, if only to maintain its privileges, sought to *defend the Soviet workers state*; on the other side, a coalition of nationalists, “democratic” intelligentsia and bureaucrats that sought to *destroy the workers state and restore capitalism*. In this confrontation, *Workers Power* did not hesitate to choose sides...with those who sought to *destroy the workers state!* The same issue of *Workers Power* proclaimed, “we had to stand with, and indeed take the front ranks in, the fight to stop the coup.” To underscore this point, the same issue features an article entitled “Their song is over,” which lambastes “the Coup’s Left Supporters.” Lest anyone doubt the LRCI’s seriousness on this score, they recently broke relations with a small California group called the Revolutionary Trotskyist Tendency for refusing to support the Yeltsinites against the Emergency Committee.

By what miracles of ideological contortion can the LRCI square this position with its claims to be communist, Trotskyist and Soviet defensist? The LRCI International Secretariat statement continues:

“Major questions are posed by these events. Was the perspective of political revolution an unreal, a utopian perspective? Was the resistance to the conservative coup in itself counter-revolutionary? Would a successful bureaucratic clamp-down have given the working class a breathing space? The answer to all of these questions is no!

“In what sense could it be said that SCSE [the Emergency Committee] ‘defended the planned property relations’? Only in this: that it resisted their abolition to the extent that they were the ‘host’ off which it was parasitic. However, this massive social parasite was the principle [sic] cause of the sickness unto death of the bureaucratic centrally planned economy, of the consequent disillusion of the masses in it.

“Through their totalitarian dictatorship the Stalinists were also an absolute bloc [sic] on the self-activity and self-consciousness of the proletariat and its ability to crystallise a new vanguard, which alone could have not merely

preserved but renewed the ‘gains of October’.”

—*Workers Power*, September 1991

It is axiomatic for Trotskyists that the Stalinists were an obstacle to the self-activity of the working class and acted as a parasite on the planned economy, which they ruined through their mismanagement, and ultimately proved incapable of defending. This is why a political revolution was necessary in the USSR: to oust the Stalinists and preserve the planned economy.

## What Was To Be Done?

Even a relatively small revolutionary grouping could have made a great impact during those critical August days, when the weak and vacillating coupists faced Yeltsin’s motley rabble. The weakness and disorganization evident on both sides presented an opportunity for a Trotskyist group committed to preserving nationalized property under the direction of democratic organs of workers power. The immediate tactical objective in those first days would have been to organize an assault to disperse the few hundred lightly armed Yeltsinites in and around the Russian White House.

A determined initiative against the counterrevolutionaries would have won wide support in the working class, who were fed up with perestroika. It would also have been viewed sympathetically by a considerable section of the armed forces, and could have galvanized active support from pro-socialist elements. The floundering grey men running the coup would have had little choice but to accept this “help” even though, carried out in the name of workers power, it would in the end have threatened their interests too. The scattering of the Yeltsinites could have been followed up by a call for representatives from every factory, barracks and working-class housing estate to gather at the White House to create a real, democratic Moscow soviet.

The success of such an initiative could have sparked mass workers struggles throughout the USSR to rout the capitalist restorationists. It would also have further weakened the grip of the CPSU apparat. A military bloc with the coupists against Yeltsin was not counterposed to the struggle for soviet democracy. Just as Lenin’s bloc with Kerensky against General Kornilov in August 1917 prepared the overthrow of the bourgeois Provisional Government, a struggle against Yeltsin in which independent working-class formations pointed their guns the same way as the coupists would have strengthened the forces favoring political revolution, and blocked efforts by Yanayev, Pugo et al to resurrect their system of political repression.

There is no way to guarantee in advance that an assault on Yeltsin would have succeeded. Yet even bloody defeat would have been preferable to succumbing without a struggle. Millions of workers would have been exposed to the program of Trotskyism. The attempt to defeat capitalist restoration and to fight for direct workers power would remain as an example and as an important focus of debate in the developing consciousness of the Russian working class. But in the actual circumstances, defeat was by no means inevitable. The intervention of a small, but cohesive group armed with

a correct political orientation might well have tip-ped the balance against the counterrevolution.

Unfortunately the Soviet working class did not play any independent political role. The struggle for power was between the Stalinist parasites who sought to preserve their host and the Yeltsinite restorationists who sought to destroy it. Workers Power complains that the Stalinists defend collectivized property “only” as a parasite. But the little word “only” obscures a convergence of interests that, during those three August days, was a matter of life and death for the Soviet workers state. A parasite cannot exist without its host, and therefore has a distinct interest in preserving it. If, at the hour of mortal danger, the parasite is armed and the host is not, the host’s survival depends on the parasite’s victory. That the Stalinists ruined the planned economy and could not be counted on to defend it in the future does not alter the fact that, in trying to preserve the status quo, their aims, for that moment, coincided with the interests of the working class. When Trotsky spoke of the *unconditional* defense of the Soviet Union, he did *not* mean that the Fourth International should defend the USSR *only if* the Stalinists ceased to rule, or became more competent or purer in heart.

### Yeltsin Was the Greater Danger

Workers Power blocked with the Yeltsinites because it considered the Stalinists a greater enemy of the working class than the capitalist restorationists. This is spelled out in the September issue of *Workers Power*:

“the only force capable of defending state property...is the working class. And it cannot act when its strikes are banned, when it is subject to curfews, censorship and political bans. It is far better that the fledgling workers’ organisations of the USSR learn to swim against the stream of bureaucratic restorationism than be huddled in the ‘breathing space’ of the prison cell.”

The “democratic” breathing space which Workers Power values so highly is not likely to last long under Yeltsin, as WP admits: “Once installed in power and seeking to crystallise a new class of exploiters even full and consistent bourgeois democratic rights for the masses will become intolerable” (*Ibid.*). So the sole difference between the Stalinists and the Yeltsinites with regard to democratic liberties is in the time required to abolish them. The Stalinists, had they prevailed, would have had an already existing police state to use against the workers. The Yeltsinites, on the other hand, need more time to consolidate a repressive apparatus and cannot yet get rid of many democratic freedoms.

Workers Power concedes that capitalism will mean, “poverty, high prices, unemployment, back breaking work, social oppression and the threat of war” (*Workers Power*, January), and “a historically unprecedented expropriation of the rural and urban workers of the ‘fruits of their labour’” (*Workers Power*, December 1991). Is Stalinist political repression more harmful to the working class as a fighting force than the social chaos and mass destitution of capitalist restoration? To justify its decision to back Yeltsin against the coup plotters Workers Power must answer in the affirmative. But such an answer would fly in the face of the whole body of

Trotsky’s writings on the Russian question. Trotsky insisted that the struggle to oust the Stalinist oligarchs was not counterposed to, but rather based on (and ultimately subordinate to), the defense of collectivized property. This is why Workers Power, which poses as an orthodox Trotskyist tendency, cannot openly state its *real* position: that the defense of the social gains of the Russian Revolution was subordinate to the overthrow of the Stalinist bureaucracy. But its position on the August events will permit of no other conclusion.

Trotsky defined centrism as revolutionary in word and reformist in deed. Workers Power provides a chemically pure example of this phenomenon. While they frequently analyze events and political forces accurately, their opportunist impulse to tailor their politics to radical/social-democratic public opinion prevents them from translating that analysis into a program of action, and often forces them to practical conclusions that contradict their own reasoning. They have yet to learn from Ernest Mandel and the USec that the gap between opportunist theory and practice can only be mediated by false representations of reality. To bridge that gap the USec asserts that there were no differences between the Yeltsinites and the Emergency Committee over property forms—only over whether to use democratic or authoritarian methods. Workers Power, by contrast, allows that the two rival camps did objectively represent opposing property forms, but throws in its lot with Yeltsin nonetheless, and attempts to paper over this contradiction with a series of “orthodox” non sequiturs.

### The Spartacists: ‘Neither the Coup Committee Nor Yeltsin’

James Robertson’s Spartacist League/U.S. and its overseas appendages in the International Communist League (ICL) have long claimed that, alone of all the so-called Trotskyist groupings on the planet, only they truly defend the Soviet Union. Yet this posture contrasts with their utter confusion over the victory of Yeltsin’s counterrevolution. The January/February issue of *Workers Hammer*, the publication of the ICL’s British affiliate, contains an exchange with Gerry Downing of the Revolutionary Internationalist League (RIL) entitled “RIL: neither the coup committee nor Yeltsin,” which castigates the RIL for remaining neutral in the coup:

“for RIL there is no difference between a wing of the bureaucracy on the one hand and a wing of world imperialism and capitalist restorationism on the other. And of course if Stalinism is equated with imperialism, then the possibility of a military bloc with a section of the bureaucracy against capitalist restorationists is necessarily precluded, since by their lights this would boil down to a bloc against capitalist restoration with ‘capitalist restorationists’.”

One would hardly suspect that the ICL, like the centrists they upbraid, *also* refused to take sides in the coup. If *Workers Hammer* wishes to take anyone to task for neutrality, we suggest that it begin with its American sister publication, *Workers Vanguard* (WV), which responded to the coup in its 30 August issue as follows:

“Even up to the coup, many of the most advanced workers, who opposed Yeltsin’s plans for wholesale privatiza-

tion and Gorbachev's market reforms, looked to the so-called hardline 'patriotic' wing of the bureaucracy. *There is no room anymore for such illusions.*

"[The] avowed program [of the coupists] was martial law to keep the USSR from breaking apart, which comes down to perestroika minus glasnost: the introduction of the market but not so fast, and shut up.

"During the coup, the Moscow workers council...issued a call to: 'Form workers militias for the preservation of socialized property, for the preservation of social order on the streets of our cities, for the control of the carrying out of the orders and instructions of the State Committee on the Emergency Situation.' There was not one word of criticism of the GKChP [Emergency Committee]. A call for workers militias to smash the counterrevolutionary Yeltsinite demonstrations was certainly in order. But if the Emergency Committee had consolidated power, it would have attempted to disband any such workers militias, which would otherwise have inevitably and rapidly escaped its political control."

Prodigies of exegesis would be required to interpret the above passages as suggesting anything other than "neither the coup committee nor Yeltsin." And no amount of bombast can cover up the fact that the Spartacists' arguments closely resemble those of the Mandelites, viz that there was no essential conflict between Yeltsin and the Emergency Committee. Like Mandel, the Spartacists seek to rationalize their failure to take a side by claiming that the coup left the class character of the state unchanged. For the ICL, the Soviet state still exists and Boris Yeltsin even now presides over a degenerated workers state.

Yet, unlike Mandel, the Spartacists cannot simply advocate a plague-on-both-your-houses position. Until August 1991 they had often endured the opprobrium of the entire mainstream left for advocating a military bloc with Stalinists against restorationist forces. The Spartacists correctly sided with the Jaruzelski regime in its 1981 confrontation with the counterrevolutionaries of Solidarnosc and gave military support to Soviet troops battling the reactionary, imperialist-backed insurgency in Afghanistan. The Spartacists were, in fact, so enthusiastic about siding with the Stalinists that they began to blur the line between military and political support. Their neutrality in August thus represents a radical departure from the noisy claims to be the last, best Soviet defenders.

### Neutrality with a Bad Conscience

Because this turn has no real programmatic basis, the Spartacist leadership has been reluctant to acknowledge that a major political line shift has taken place. Hence, they insist, in defiance of all logic and contrary to their own written pronouncements, that they were *not* neutral. They present their stand as perfectly consistent with past positions, and hedge it with a variety of qualifications, ambiguous formulations and distortions of fact. To obscure the striking resemblance between many of their arguments and those of other centrist and reformist pseudo-Trotskyists, the Spartacists must turn up the volume of their polemics. But increased volume only makes more audible the discordant sounds emanating

from the Robertsonite headquarters in New York.

To the extent that the Spartacists advance any coherent arguments at all, they revolve around the highly dubious claim that the Emergency Committee made no attempt to disperse the counterrevolutionary rabble that gathered to defend Yeltsin's White House. Assuming for the sake of argument that this claim is true, it would mean either that the coup leaders were not really in conflict with Yeltsin, or that they did oppose Yeltsin, but were too weak and indecisive to move against him. The Spartacists are never quite clear about which of these assessments they favor. Their repeated claim that the Emergency Committee's power bid represented a "perestroika coup" points to the former. Their characterization of the coup as "pathetic," and of its leaders as "the gang of eight that couldn't shoot straight," on the other hand, lean toward the latter. Either conclusion, however, leads to a hopeless tangle of contradictions.

How, for instance, can the claim that both Yeltsin and the Emergency Committee were equally in favor of marketization be squared with the assertion in the same article that, "The working people of the Soviet Union, and indeed the workers of the world, have suffered an unparalleled disaster," and that the coup's failure "unleashed a counterrevolutionary tide across the land of the October Revolution" (*WV*, 30 August)? How could a counterrevolutionary tide have been unleashed unless some major obstacle to it had been removed? Were the forces that the coup leaders represented such an obstacle? Or would they have unleashed a similar counterrevolutionary tide had they won? In that case, why was their defeat an "unparalleled disaster" for the working class? *Workers Vanguard* can not answer these questions.

*Workers Vanguard's* assertion that the Emergency Committee stood for "perestroika minus glasnost" echoes the arguments of Weinstein and Mandel. They all agree that Yeltsin and the coup leaders differed only over the question of democratic rights, with the latter wanting to impose capitalism by means of an "iron-fisted dictatorship." A thoughtful Robertsonite might wonder if the Soviet workers would not be in a better position to organize against restoration with glasnost than without it. Of course, this soon leads to support for the "democratic" Yeltsin camp. Unlike the USec, *Workers Vanguard* stops short of pursuing this argument to its logical conclusion.

Then there is the second set of excuses for neutrality: that the Emergency Committee did in fact represent those elements of the bureaucracy with interests that conflicted fundamentally with those of the Yeltsin camp, but that they were too half-hearted and inept to stop the Yeltsinites. First, it should be noted that this judgment was made with the invaluable benefit of hindsight: the events unfolded so swiftly that *WV's* first article on the coup was published some days after its fate had already been decided. Do the Spartacists claim to have known in advance that the coup would fail so miserably? It was long evident that Soviet Stalinism had reached the end of its tether, and could not have restored the pre-Gorbachev status quo in any event. But this *general* assessment was not sufficient to gauge the exact correlation of forces on 19 August. This could be tested only in action.



Even if a victory by the coup leaders would only have temporarily slowed the momentum of capitalist restoration, this *alone* was adequate grounds for a military bloc. Trotskyists do not choose sides according to the resolve, tactical finesse or strength of opposing camps, but on the basis of their political character. The coupists either had an interest in stopping Yeltsin or they didn't. But the Spartacists want it both ways: they simultaneously claim that the Emergency Committee never intended to stop Yeltsin in the first place *and* criticize them for bungling the job.

The Robertsonites' criticisms of the Emergency Committee take an even more bizarre twist when they condemn the "gang of eight" for failing to mobilize the working class against Yeltsin:

"The 'gang of eight' not only did not mobilise the proletariat, they ordered everyone to stay at work.

"The 'gang of eight' was incapable of sweeping away Yeltsin in its pathetic excuse for a putsch because this was a 'perestroika coup'; the coupists didn't want to unleash the forces that could have defeated the more extreme counterrevolutionaries for that could have led to a civil war if the Yeltsinites really fought back."

—*Workers Hammer*, January/February

The same article proudly recalled the Spartacist position on Solidarnosc a decade earlier:

"Poland in 1981 posed the same question as the Soviet Union today, but in the earlier instance the Stalinists *did* take measures to temporarily suppress counterrevolution. In the face of this confrontation it was impossible to waffle...."

In the Soviet case, the Spartacists are turning waffling into a fine art. But the comparison with Poland in 1981 is an apt one. We do not recall Jaruzelski mobilizing the Polish working class against Walesa. The Spartacists seem to forget that Stalinists in power rarely mobilize the working class politically because the very existence of the bureaucratic caste is predicated upon monopolizing political power. To make military support to Stalinists fighting capitalist restorationists conditional on their mobilizing the working class is tantamount to demanding that they cease to be Stalinists.

Elsewhere in the same polemic *Workers Hammer* implies that it would have supported any measures the 'gang of eight' had taken against Yeltsin:

"Calling for workers to sweep away Yeltsin's barricades would have meant a military bloc with any of the coup forces that moved to crush the counterrevolutionary rabble....Against RIL's Third Campism in the August events we wrote: 'in an armed struggle pitting outright restorationists against recalcitrant elements of the bureaucracy, defence of the collectivised economy would have been placed on the agenda whatever the Stalinists' intentions. *Trotskyists would have entered a military bloc with "the Thermidorian section of the bureaucracy against open attack by capitalist counterrevolution"*, as Trotsky postulated in the 1938 Transitional Programme'."

Jaruzelski's 1981 crackdown involved no armed struggle because Solidarnosc offered no armed resistance. Martial law was imposed through a series of police measures. The Spartacists here seem to be suggesting that they would have blocked with the Emergency Committee had it moved more decisively to enforce martial law. By this logic, military support

becomes contingent upon the firmness and skill of Stalinist tactics as opposed to the Stalinists' social character, political aims or the objective consequences of their victory or defeat. Or, more precisely, the Spartacists judge the political aims and social character of the Stalinist "hardliners" by their behavior in the coup.

The argument has a circular quality: the Emergency Committee did not take adequate measures against Yeltsin because they had no fundamental differences with him. How do we know they had no fundamental differences? Because they took no adequate measures. In other words, forget the fact that the majority of the bureaucracy had an objective interest in preserving the state from which they derived their privileges and prestige; forget as well the whole inner-party struggle that preceded the coup attempt, in which Gorbachev came under increasing attack for giving too much ground to Yeltsin and nationalist schismatics; forget, in short, that the *coup attempt itself* was a blow directed against the Yeltsinite restorationists. The Spartacists treat the Stalinists' motives as opaque, and the coup as an event without context or background.

### Did the Coupists Go After Yeltsin?

The effectiveness of the coup leaders' tactics are a question of secondary import. But did the Emergency Committee in fact attempt to move against Yeltsin? In the days following the coup's defeat, reports began to surface that the KGB's elite commando division, known as the Alpha Group (the same unit that assassinated the Afghan president, Hafizullah Amin, in 1979), was ordered to assault Yeltsin's White House, but refused to obey the order. This version of events was first reported by Yeltsin himself, and later confirmed by the officers of the Alpha Group. The Spartacists have gone to great lengths to debunk these reports. *Workers Vanguard* of 6 December contains an article entitled "Why They Didn't Go After Yeltsin—Soviet Union: X-Ray of a Coup." The article quotes a piece by Robert Cullen in the 4 November 1991 *New Yorker* to discount the version of events given by the officers involved: "The Alpha Group's post-coup interviews, in fact, have only one thing in common: in each case, the officer doing the talking tries to take credit for being the hero whose refusal to obey orders foiled the coup." *Workers Vanguard's* "X-Ray" relies heavily on excerpts from the interrogations of the coup plotters after their arrest, published by *Der Spiegel*, in which they all deny having issued orders to attack Yeltsin's White House. It is peculiar that *Workers Vanguard* should be so skeptical of the claims of the Alpha Group officers yet so credulous of the denials by the coup plotters, as they prepare to go on trial for their lives.

*Workers Vanguard*, moreover, quotes very selectively from Cullen's *New Yorker* piece. Cullen reports at least one attempt by the Alpha Group, supported by paratroop units, to advance on the White House. The first attempt, according to Cullen, was foiled when Yeltsinite crowds surrounded the armored personnel carriers moving into position, and a pro-Yeltsin military man, General Constantine Kobets, met with the paratroop commander and persuaded him not to attack. Cullen

reports that this setback did not deter the Emergency Committee from trying to mount a second assault:

“The leaks coming in to the White House suggested that the conspirators were trying desperately to find units both capable of seizing the building and willing to follow an order to do so.... ‘I know that there was a small group meeting at the Ministry of Defense concerning the realization of the plan for taking the building,’ Kobets told me.”

The second attack never materialized. Cullen adds:

“In the aftermath of this final, conclusive failure, various sources offered various explanations for the conspirators’ impotence.... All the explanations, however self-serving and however contradictory, had a common thread: the Soviet Army had refused to shed blood on behalf of the conspiracy.”

So, in fact, the Spartacists’ claim that the Emergency Committee attempted no concrete measures against the Yeltsinites is belied by the one credible source they cite to support it.

### **Yeltsin’s Victory: Counterrevolutionary Triumph**

The details of what happened during the coup are still somewhat murky. But it would be a mistake to counterpose the plotters’ timidity and incompetence to the refusal of their subordinates to obey orders. The two explanations are complementary, not mutually exclusive. The men of the Emergency Committee were not Stalinists of the 1930s mould. Their will to act was compromised by the fact that they were demoralized enough to accept the inevitability of loosening central controls and giving market forces a wider scope. Their difference with Yeltsin was that they favored market “reforms” within the overall framework of bureaucratic rule. By the time they decided to strike in defense of the beleaguered central state apparatus, it was already in such an advanced state of decay that it no longer commanded the unquestioned allegiance of the armed forces. These factors fed into each other, leading to the August debacle. The Spartacists emphasize the obvious affinities between the Emergency Committee and Yeltsin in order to obscure the fact that their conflict boiled down to a struggle over the fate of Soviet state power.

The Stalinist apparat, which was the backbone of bureaucratic rule, was shattered forever with the defeat of the coup. The Spartacists, who refused to block with the Stalinists in their last-ditch attempt to keep the “floodgates of counterrevolution” closed, now seek to rationalize this lapse of judgment by arguing that the former Soviet Union is still a (severely weakened and gravely endangered) workers state. This recalls the assurances given by the pet-shop owner of Monty Python fame to a customer whose recently purchased parrot lies supine and lifeless at the bottom of its cage. When the customer demands a refund, the store owner insists that the parrot isn’t dead, only resting, taking a nap, in a state of suspended animation, etc.

The Robertsonites have merely asserted their position that the ex-USSR remains a workers state without seriously attempting to argue for it. At public forums and in person they provide a range of, sometimes contradic-

tory, explanations.

First, they point to the fact that most of the ex-Soviet economy has not yet been privatized and remains formally in state hands. Capitalism cannot be restored by government decree. Its restoration involves undoing structures, organizational forms and habits of life built up over the last seventy years. In November 1937 Trotsky remarked that:

“In the first months of Soviet rule the proletariat reigned on the basis of a bourgeois economy.... Should a bourgeois counterrevolution succeed in the USSR, the new government for a lengthy period would have to base itself upon the nationalized economy.”

The victory of Yeltsin, Kravchuk, etc. was a triumph for the forces of counterrevolution because it signified that henceforth political power would be exercised by those unambiguously committed to the restoration of private property in the means of production.

Confronted with these arguments, the Spartacists retreat to a fall-back position. Yeltsin, they contend, heads a pro-capitalist government, but has not yet consolidated his hold over the state apparatus. At a Spartacist forum in New York City in February, much was made of the January gathering of 5,000 military officers in the Kremlin to protest the dismemberment of the old Soviet armed forces. A big offensive by the working class, the Spartacist League argued, could split the officer corps, with a sizeable segment going over to the workers. Such a development, say the Spartacists, would amount to a workers political revolution, which they still call for in their propaganda.

Such arguments trade on the inevitable ambiguities of the transition now taking place. The regimes that have emerged from the breakup of the USSR do not preside over consolidated capitalist states, any more than Russia, the Ukraine, etc. are full-fledged capitalist societies. Yeltsin’s hold on power is fragile, but this does not change the fact that Yeltsin and his republican counterparts are using their newly acquired power to unleash a social counterrevolution. Imperialism, perestroika millionaires and the black-market mafia now call the shots in the Kremlin. Many former Stalinist bureaucrats are appropriating huge chunks of state property. Yeltsin’s men hold the top military positions. As *Workers Vanguard* itself reported, the Moscow police did not hesitate to shed the blood of demonstrators calling for a return of the Soviet Union in March. A year ago Gosplan was still issuing planning directives and joint military-police patrols were on the streets harassing black-market speculators, and arresting and confiscating the property of perestroika profiteers. Now Gosplan is no more and profiteers and millionaires are in the saddle.

The social counterrevolution is far from fully consolidated, but it is victorious. A resurgent proletariat struggling for power would face far less resistance today in Russia than it would in a mature capitalist state. But a proletarian revolution would have to mop up the black-market mafia, suppress the Yeltsinites in the military and police, reverse the privatization drive and restore centralized state planning. With the passing of each month, the tasks confronting the proletariat become more and more those of a social, as opposed to a political,

revolution.

The Spartacists say we claim the Soviet workers state is dead in order to wash our hands of responsibility for defending it. This argument is ludicrous on its face. The imperialist bourgeoisie is acting with the knowledge that the Soviet workers state no longer exists. Marxists too must recognize this bitter truth. Workers struggling to turn back the tide of counterrevolution in the ex-USSR will want to know when state power passed into the hands of their exploiters. They will also want to know where the various self-styled Trotskyist groups who aspire to lead them stood at that fateful moment.

### “Yuri Andropov Brigade”— Long Ago and Far Away

The Robertsonites have always prided themselves on their mastery of the Russian question and the politics of the deformed workers states. Yet they have been consistently wrong throughout the terminal crisis of Stalinism. When mass demonstrations erupted against the Stalinist regime of the German Democratic Republic (DDR) in late 1989, they proclaimed the beginning of a “workers political revolution.” They thought that the prospect of reunification would provoke sufficient working-class resistance to split the SED (the DDR’s ruling Stalinist party), with a large section of it going over to the side of the proletariat in defense of collectivized property. The ICL threw large amounts of cash and every available cadre into its intervention. In January 1990, when the SED accepted the Spartacists’ proposal for an anti-fascist mobilization in East Berlin’s Treptow Park, the Spartacists’ Peerless Leader, James Robertson, became so flushed with delusions of grandeur that he (unsuccessfully) attempted to arrange a meeting with Gregor Gysi, then head of the SED.

But the anticipated political revolution never materialized. Instead of resisting reunification, the Stalinists entered into a coalition with pro-capitalist parties to engineer the liquidation of the DDR. By the time elections were held for the *Volkshammer* (DDR parliament) in March, the fix for reunification was already in. Yet still the Spartacists clung stubbornly to the notion that a workers political revolution was in progress, that workers and soldiers were about to set up soviets, seize the factories and establish dual power in opposition to the weak pro-capitalist government. The ICL leadership expected that hundreds of thousands of workers would support their electoral campaign and that they would be precipitated into the leadership of an insurgent, pro-socialist working class. The results were an unmitigated disaster for the Spartacists, as their candidates finished far behind the German Beer Drinkers’ Union.

The German disaster was probably the most immediate cause of the political shift that led to the Spartacists’ neutrality in the August coup. It was the culmination of a period in which the Spartacists exhibited an unhealthy fondness for Stalinist regimes. Trotskyists have always sided with the Stalinists against imperialist attack and internal counterrevolution, while recognizing that the degenerated and deformed workers states could only be defended in the long run by a political revolution to oust the Stalinist parasites.

During the Reagan years, however, the Robertsonites all too often crossed the line between military defense and political support. In 1983 a contingent in a Washington anti-Klan demonstration was named the Yuri Andropov Brigade, after the then-Soviet party chief, who, in 1956, played a leading role in the suppression of the Hungarian workers revolution. When Andropov died, *Workers Vanguard* printed a laudatory obituary-poem on its front page. A picture of the Polish military strongman, General Jaruzelski, adorned the walls of the Spartacist League’s New York headquarters. And rather than simply calling for military victory to Soviet troops in Afghanistan, the Spartacists insisted on “hailing” the Kremlin’s intervention.

With the ignominious collapse of bureaucratic regimes throughout Eastern Europe in 1989, however, this pro-Stalinist tilt began to become a source of acute embarrassment. Months before the coup, *Workers Vanguard* was already steering a middle course between the Yeltsinites and the conservative faction of the bureaucracy (whom they simply referred to as “patriots”):

“Soviet working people must cut through the false division between ‘democrats’ and ‘patriots,’ both products of the terminal degeneration of the reactionary and parasitic Stalinist bureaucracy. Both are enemies and oppressors of the working class in the interests of world capitalism.”

—WV, 15 March 1991

*Workers Vanguard* never mentioned the possibility that this “false division” might lead to a confrontation in which it would be necessary for the workers to take a side. And when this confrontation did take place in August, the Spartacists swung from their previous tendency toward *political support* for Stalinist regimes, to abandoning the elementary Trotskyist tactic of a *military bloc* with Stalinists against the forces of open counterrevolution. The Robertsonites’ shameful neutrality in August, and their concomitant refusal to recognize the fact that the Soviet workers state is no more, demonstrates the hollowness of their pretensions to revolutionary leadership.

### For the Rebirth of the Fourth International!

Over half a century ago, Trotsky wrote that the struggle for proletarian leadership is ultimately a struggle for the survival of human culture. The creation of a new revolutionary leadership for the working class depends above all on the conscious efforts of committed socialist militants. It is vitally important that every serious socialist absorb the lessons of the entire 74-year history of the Russian Revolution: its victory, degeneration and ultimate destruction. The forces of revolutionary Marxism today represent only a tiny minority. Yet through a combination of revolutionary determination and a willingness to struggle for programmatic clarity, the cadres will be assembled to shake the world once more. Revolutionary regroupment begins with the political exposure of the confusion, vacillation and treachery of the various reformists, centrists and charlatans who falsely claim the mantle of Trotskyism. Through hard political struggle, and a process of splits and fusions, the Fourth International, World Party of Socialist Revolution, will be reborn! ■