

The communists' dilemma

The Bolsheviks' success in taking power in Russia was just the start of their problems, Simon Pirani writes

In June 1922, five years on from the Russian revolution, a group of Moscow communists gathered to discuss a letter by Vladimir Petrzhek, an auto worker, tendering his resignation from the communist (or Bolshevik) party.

Petrzhek was one of the worker communists who swelled the party's ranks during the civil war of 1918-19, when the communist "Reds" had defended the revolution from the western-supported "White" generals.

Petrzhek's wife had died suddenly in 1918, leaving him as a single parent. He had volunteered to fight the Whites anyway, and joined the party at the front in April 1919.

Within a year, the main White armies had been beaten and the huge Red army was able to start demobilising. The communists' efforts shifted to the task of rebuilding Russia's economy, shattered by seven years of war and civil war.

Workers returned from the front to their factories: in Petrzhek's case, the AMO auto works (later renamed ZiL) in south east Moscow. In early 1921 the economic policies adopted during the civil war, based on nationalisation and state compulsion, were replaced by the New Economic Policy (NEP), which we might today call "mixed economy".

One result of NEP was the reappearance of entrepreneurs and traders, some of whom got rich very quickly and very visibly. Wealth also accumulated among the Bolshevik party "tops" – firstly, but not exclusively, in the state trusts that owned the factories. Vladimir Petrzhek told his comrades that he was quitting not because of inequality in society as a whole – which, he agreed with them, was to some extent inevitable – but because of inequality among communists. A party that tolerated that could never bring about social change, he argued.

"What is communism?," he asked in his resignation letter. Russia's poverty made

impossible the implementation of egalitarian principles in society as a whole, but members of a truly communist party could and should strive for equality among themselves.

"In the communist party [Petrzhek] had hoped to find the realization of his dream of communism. But he did not find communism. He learned only that among communists there were strongly-developed private proprietorial instincts," the minute-taker recorded.

Local party leaders replied that objective circumstances were to blame, and urged Petrzhek to be patient. He responded that "he was not disillusioned with the idea of communism itself – he understood that communism was in general a long way off – but for him the lack of solidarity and equality *among communists themselves* was too hard to bear".

I came across these minutes more than three-quarters of a century later in a Moscow archive. I was researching a book, published this year,* on the revolution's retreat, or reversal, in the early 1920s.

What the communists cared about

Petrzhek was by no means the only communist disturbed by inequality in the party. In the summer of 1920, when the rank-and-file communists who had rallied to the party during the civil war were streaming back from the front, the issue of inequality – "the ranks and tops" debate, as it was called – was at the centre of a big political crisis.

The civil-war recruits, who outnumbered Bolsheviks who joined the party before 1917 by five to one, were not just talking about material inequality. As the Bolshevik leader Grigorii Zinoviev told a special party conference in September 1920, the "ranks and tops" debate also concerned political power: the accumulation of it in

industrial management bodies, arrogant and authoritarian methods influenced by militarism, and corruption.

The conference adopted measures to deal with inequality – for example, it appointed a special commission to examine material privileges at the Kremlin – but they didn't stem the tide. Opposition groups advocating more radical solutions took control of two of the Moscow party's seven districts, and the city organisation narrowly avoided a split on the issue.

The adoption of NEP in 1921 in some ways exacerbated these tensions. Until then, the Bolsheviks had used methods of strict labour discipline, including military-style mobilisation, to keep factories running. Peasants' produce had been compulsorily sequestered. Throughout 1920 peasant revolts spread across Red territory, and in March 1921, there was an uprising at the Kronshtadt naval base, which had been a bulwark of Bolshevism in 1917. The party leaders decided that "war communism" was at a dead end: in came NEP, under which peasants were

allowed to market surplus produce and a degree of private entrepreneurship was permitted.

Once workers overcame initial worries that NEP would reverse what they had won in 1917, many of them became more hopeful for the future. The civil war had been a daily struggle for survival; now people began to think about the new society they hoped to build. But material inequalities widened rapidly, even in industry, which remained predominantly state-owned.

In 1920, the government ruled that the highest-paid managers should earn no more than five times the minimum wage. That soon went up to eight times. But in 1924 a survey showed that more than 80,000 state officials admitted to earning more than the upper limit, 15,000 were on more than 15 times the minimum and 1500 on 30 times the minimum – to say nothing of corrupt and illegal earnings, which everyone knew were widespread.

Compared to the vast wealth of the ruling class elsewhere, these privileges were



Communists in the Rogozhsko-Simonovskii district in south-east Moscow, 1920.
Courtesy of the Central Archive of the Social-Political History of Moscow

meagre. But that's not the point. The Bolsheviks claimed to represent the socialist future. In 1920 they had agreed to act against inequality within their own ranks; by 1922 they had effectively changed their minds. A few weeks after Petrzhek's resignation, a party conference decided that 15,000 "responsible officials" had the right to extra income and priority benefits. Inequality may have been unstoppable, but now it was being justified – not for technical specialists or entrepreneurs, who most socialists grudgingly accepted needed to be induced to help economic development, but for supposedly communist state and party officials.

The issue of material inequality was one aspect of the much larger problem of the accumulation of power at the top. And in 1922-23 – that is, under Lenin's government, before the rise of Stalin – authoritarian hierarchies were multiplying. Workers could see it in communist factory managers who often treated worker dissidents, including fellow communists, to methods of workplace discipline reminiscent of tsarism. Bolshevik factory directors might well sack communists who sided with their workmates to challenge management bullies. Workers who organised strikes – or worse still, initiated inter-workplace organisation outside the party's control – were invariably sacked, and often expelled from their Bolshevik-led trade unions too.

In researching this history, it was heartening to discover the wide spectrum of ideas, among Bolsheviks and non-Bolshevik workers alike, about how to build the new society. Equally, it was depressing to learn of the leadership's intolerance of this heterogeneity.

For example, the Workers Truth group – formed in 1921 by Red army veterans studying in the new communist universities and, unlike other dissident organisations, led by women – argued that, after the "heroic" 1917 revolution, the workers had been "unprepared for the organisation of society on a new basis". The bourgeoisie was divided against itself, but a "technical organising intelligentsia" was coming to the fore, on the basis of which a new bourgeoisie could arise. The Bolshevik party was deserting the

workers and becoming the party of this intelligentsia; a new workers' party had to be built. Such insightful attempts at analysis were not welcome. The group was broken up by the security police in September 1923 and its brave, self-sacrificing leaders sent into Siberian exile.

The non-party workers

Discussions about how to build the new society took place against a background of recovery from one of the greatest ever economic collapses. The first world war, the revolution and the civil war had ruined agriculture, industry and transport. Poverty, illness, and a major famine on the Volga in 1921, had caused a demographic disaster.

In the first few years of NEP, the Bolsheviks oversaw a remarkable economic recovery. But in doing so, they effectively proposed to non-party workers a social contract: political decision-making should be left to them, the communists; the workers should increase productivity, and would be rewarded with a return to, or even an improvement upon, pre-war living standards, which they and their families craved.

The majority of workers acquiesced. There is evidence that they were unenthusiastic: by 1923, for example, they were abstaining en masse from elections to the soviets (i.e. councils, new forms of democratic organisation that thrived in 1917). But only a minority expressed opposition.

The Bolsheviks treated this minority – active, politically conscious workers who were struggling to understand why the revolution had fallen so far short of the aspirations of 1917 – not as a potentially creative force, but as enemies who had to be disciplined and, if necessary, destroyed.

Party leaders often left it to the security police to decide whether such pro-soviet parties as the left Socialist Revolutionaries, left Mensheviks and anarchists should be allowed to operate. They invariably decided against. Non-party socialist groupings were not afforded much more room.

The damage done to the revolution by

the rift between Bolsheviks and non-party workers was clearly illustrated in the soviet elections of April-May 1921. The Kronshtadt revolt had just been put down; working-class discontent, voiced in strike waves during February and March that year in Petrograd, Moscow and other major cities, was still simmering. The workplace mass meetings at which soviet delegates were elected were fora in which views about the way forward could be voiced.

In Moscow, the Bolsheviks won a majority, but only because of the overwhelming support of the white-collar half of the city's workforce, mostly employees in government and other administrative offices. The industrial workers, for whom the Bolsheviks claimed to speak, deserted the party. They sent an overwhelming majority of non-party delegates to the soviet, along with a few Mensheviks, Socialist Revolutionaries and anarchists.

The strong showing for non-party candidates was repeated in most industrial areas. In some places, these "non partyists" had their own networks and organisations. For example at the AMO motor factory where Vladimir Petrzhek worked, a non-party group, whose members had Socialist Revolutionary, left Menshevik, syndicalist, workerist and even Bolshevik sympathies, defeated the Bolsheviks in both soviet and factory committee elections. Many "non-partyists" embraced democratic demands, such as free assembly and free speech for workers and for non-Bolshevik soviet parties, that had been voiced at Kronshtadt.

In May 1921, the newly-elected Moscow soviet was convened. A "non-partyist" fraction, comprising a quarter of the 2000 delegates, elected Sergei Mikhailov, chair of the factory committee at Bogatyr, a rubber goods factory, as its main spokesman. He suggested a proportionally representative soviet executive, through which Bolsheviks and non-party workers could join forces to rebuild the city's economy.

The Bolshevik majority on the soviet, headed by Lev Kamenev, one of Lenin's closest collaborators, unequivocally rejected these overtures. Non-party speakers were

heckled and jeered. The Bolsheviks used their white-collar majority to keep the non-party leaders from the factories off the soviet executive, selecting instead non-party workers who eschewed open criticism of Bolshevik policy.

Valerii Paniushkin, an old comrade of Lenin's, had quit the party and organised an alternative Workers and Peasants Socialist Party committed to a wider democracy than the Bolsheviks tolerated. Its members urged the soviet to resist the drift towards one-party dictatorship – and were soon arrested and jailed.

The intolerance of the Bolsheviks towards socialist workers who disagreed with them hastened the soviet's decline. Long before Stalin came to power, it had become a formal, lifeless body that rubber-stamped decisions made by party bodies.

For the future

I started my research after more than two decades of activism in the left and the workers' movement. I had always seen the Russian revolution – a giant upheaval of millions, that for the first time brought to power a government that ruled in the workers' name – as the defining event of the twentieth century. Equally, I believed that the Stalinist dictatorship of the 1930s and 1940s, and the stifling post-war Soviet regimes, had nothing to do with the socialism we are fighting for. I still think those things now.

But I had become dissatisfied with explanations common on the left about how the revolution degenerated, most notably Trotsky's. In the twenty-first century, we can and must say more. This short article points towards two problems in particular.

The first concerns the "revolutionary party". The Bolshevik party – unlike many poor copies of it – was successful in its own terms, winning the allegiance of large cohorts of workers and seizing state power. Its programme for modernisation brought results: in the first place, the economic recovery of the 1920s and the consequent improvement in workers' living standards.

But this party was vanguardist. It saw itself ruling on the workers' behalf, not empowering workers to rule. This is not a semantic distinction. In prioritising economic recovery, the party appropriated to itself the right to make political decisions. It downgraded collective working-class participation to an aspiration for the distant future. It overruled workers' organisations and, if it had to, silenced activists by imprisoning them or sending them to Siberia. Once the party had convinced itself that this authoritarian approach was compatible with "socialism", other ideological shifts soon followed, such as the justification of elite privilege that Vladimir Petrzhek would not swallow.

People on the left who remain inspired by the Russian revolution will no doubt continue to debate historical questions about the efficacy of this or that Bolshevik policy. But we can surely answer another, larger question – about whether their party was some sort of model for the future – with a clear "no". Without forms of organisation that embody the widest collective participation and creativity, of the sort that Lenin's party undermined, deepgoing social change is impossible.

The second problem is that of the "workers' state". If we use "socialism" in the original sense meant by Karl Marx – a movement to recreate society by superceding alienated labour, private property and the state – then we must acknowledge that the small steps taken in this direction in Russia after 1917 were soon reversed. The seizure of state power by organisations endeavouring to represent the working class, so long seen by many on the left as an aim in itself, proved to be just the beginning of a process in which still more profound difficulties presented themselves.

The labour in Soviet factories was not, and could never have been, anything but alienated labour. Even the few faltering experiments with collective management tried during the civil war were soon halted. The products of the workers' labour were

appropriated by the state. But this state – after the first few euphoric months of its existence – confounded, discouraged and subverted the collective, participatory democracy that is a necessary part of any movement towards socialism.

One of the astonishing things about the 1920s is the speed with which – in the absence of a ruling class, which had been shattered by the 1917 revolution – the state oversaw the reassertion of hierarchy, authority and privilege, and the party leaders developed an ideology that justified all this. This state reinforced antagonistic, alienated social relations based on exploitation of labour, even before something that could be called a stable social grouping, be it class or caste, solidified at the top. To look back now and call this a "workers' state" arguably obscures, instead of clarifying, our view of social transformations in future.

Could things have been different? In the early 1920s the Bolshevik leaders rejected numerous concrete proposals, by communists and others, to widen democracy. But it would be narrow-minded to believe that this, alone, caused the degeneration of the revolution. There were mountainous obstacles – principally, Russia's economic backwardness, and the failure of the revolution to spread – that anyway might not have been overcome.

But throughout the twentieth century the Bolsheviks' vanguardism and statism, which packed the punch of association with the first successful workers' revolution, left their mark on the socialist movement, far beyond the ranks of the official Communist parties. Socialist ideas that surpass these damaging concepts are the least that twenty-first century movements of social liberation deserve.

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** The Russian Revolution in Retreat, 1920-24: Soviet workers and the new communist elite, by Simon Pirani (Routledge, 2008). See www.revolutioninretreat.com*

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