

The Russian Revolution, Soviets, and Socialist Democracy



“Revolutions are the mad inspiration of history”

Leon Trotsky, *My Life*

Dan La Botz for New Politics: Suzi, you’re the author of a biography of Victor Serge, and you’re currently making a movie about Leon Trotsky, so you have been for years deeply immersed in the history of the Russian Revolution. What is it that makes the Russian Revolution so important for the left?

Suzi Weissman: The Russian Revolution was an epoch-changing event, one that transformed the nature of the century. We are still debating everything about it, including whether, in the end, it was a positive for world socialism.

There is much in the Russian Revolution that is important for the left and for history: For a time, another class was in power, and that had never happened before, nor did it last long. It was a first and was greeted with enthusiasm by workers around the world. Suddenly workers were in power, led by the Bolsheviks, who were determined to make good on their demands: peace, land, bread, factories to those who toil, all power to the soviets.

The Revolution was a beacon of hope for humankind: For the first time the people, rather than their rulers, were

determining their own destiny. It was that act and the hope contained within it that was so powerful and so invigorating. The oppressed, exploited, and powerless were now summoned to political life in a workers state, something that had never before existed. There is a witness in the film *Reds* who captured the joy of the moment when the workers in Petrograd brought down the tsar: He described dancing with happiness through the streets of New York. The revolution emboldened workers all over the West who had been radicalized by war, revolution, and the deepening capitalist crisis.

Though the revolution didn't spread, it was a transcendent, historic event, and despite what it became, it changed the nature of the world.

Although the revolution was destroyed by Stalin, transforming the epoch into one of Stalinism instead of socialism, the important point is that there was, for a time, a working class in power. However short-lived the period when workers exercised power, the fact remains that they did: They overthrew capital in Russia, threatening capitalism in the world. The reaction to the Russian Revolution, as well as to its subsequent evolution and destruction, constitutes the epoch we live in, and in this sense it can still be said that we live in the epoch of the actuality of the revolution.

In 1936, Serge wrote, in one of his many articles for *La Wallonie*, a socialist daily in Belgium,

The essential gain of that day, of those years, is the fact that for the first time in history the workers were able to achieve total victory, sustain it, take control of all the levers of command of society, both the economic and the political, get the machine working, and, under the worst conditions, reorganize, despite unbelievable difficulties, all of production on a collective basis. This is what remains and will remain; this is what makes the Russian October shine behind us like a flame that nothing can tarnish.

NP: At the center of the Russian Revolution were the soviets, or councils of workers, soldiers, and peasants, which initially formed the base of the government. What happened to these soviets?

SW: The unique element that lay at the heart of the Russian revolutionary process was its revolutionary working class—and the democratic form of self-organization that it created in struggle that made the idea and reality of power possible. Urban workers led and dominated the opposition to the old order and ultimately brought into being—for the first time in world history—a workers state, albeit in embryonic form, functioning as an effective alternative government.

When the Russian working class came to power in 1917 with the slogan “all power to the soviets,” workers around the world greeted the revolution that they had accomplished with jubilation because it represented their broadest aspirations, “a new democracy of free workers, such as had never before been seen.”¹

This new democratic form of workers’ self-organization arose spontaneously and quickly blossomed independently from the existing political parties, distinguishing the Russian revolutionary process from the beginning and enormously inspiring working people around the world. Soviets were organized democratically, joined voluntarily, enjoyed freedom of speech and representation for all the political currents of the left, and were hotbeds of revolutionary ferment. This was a significant step forward for concretizing democracy because it meant that the parties had to compete for workers’ allegiance in a common political arena. Russian workers developed their politics, their leaderships, and their power to fight the employers and the state at the same time.

The soviets, or councils, made their first appearance in 1905 and were swiftly adopted as an organizing tool by workers around the globe—especially after the successful October

Revolution—as a higher form of political organization for the working class in struggle. Trotsky, leader of the Saint Petersburg soviet in the 1905 revolution, recognized the importance of this new form of organization, which he saw as “authentic” democracy—without chambers, without bureaucracy, with the right of recall at any time.²

The promise of the soviets was the promise of socialism—an *authentic* democracy, a society in which people organized collectively, at every level from bottom to top, to become the masters of their work, their lives, and their fate. The Russian Revolution held out the promise of socialism, but it was doomed by its isolation and dashed by the rise of Stalin. Given the huge influence the experience of the Russian revolution had on revolutionaries everywhere thereafter, the particular circumstances that choked democracy in the USSR were overlooked while the authoritarian model was generalized. The benchmark of a healthy revolution—organs of democratic control from below as an integral part of a successful revolution and transition—was relegated to rhetoric, not reality. Yet revolutionary socialists, committed to socialist democracy, judged (and continue to judge) revolutionary struggles as politically healthy if there exists that key marker, councils or soviets.

The soviets did not make it through the Civil War in anything but name. Their revolutionary content and potential fell victim to the dire reality of a country torn by foreign invasion and internal civil war. What survived were moribund institutions that served the empty rhetoric of the Bolshevik Party. The soviets became auxiliary rubber-stamp organs of the party, de facto party committees. The leadership in these circumstances was not committed to the “democratic self-governance of the working class”—the working class barely survived the Civil War. The country was exhausted and the notion of “all power to the soviets” was truly an empty one given the overall situation.

This wasn't the doing of the party per se, but of the transformed composition of the soviets as the Bolsheviks became the majority force within them, outnumbering the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionary Party (SRs). Political power resided in the Bolshevik Party. In a one-party state, soviet governance is easily co-opted, corrupted, de-fanged, or simply sidelined by the party of power. In the Stalin years, the soviets stopped holding meetings, even for ceremonial purposes.³ The soviets existed in form, but were lifeless assemblies that could hardly even be called governmental institutions. Power was administered by higher ups in the party-state hierarchy: the secret police, state ministries, and party apparatus.

But let's go back to the period after the Civil War, to the revolutionary wave from 1918 to 1923. With the failure of the European working class to extend the Russian Revolution to more advanced countries, the Bolsheviks found themselves isolated in power and in the world. The revolution was under siege: The SRs took up arms against the Bolsheviks, and the suppression of the Kronstadt sailors revolt was the last straw for the anarchists, who then withdrew their support for the revolution. The Bolsheviks hadn't intended to rule alone, but they only trusted themselves to understand the nature of the struggle for socialism in the world. No other political party saw the importance of the extension of the revolution as the only way they could survive, so Lenin and Trotsky didn't trust the others to rule with them.

After Lenin died in 1924, there was an inner-party struggle about which way forward—the party divided into essentially three tendencies: the Left Opposition, led by Trotsky; the Right Opposition of Bukharin; and Stalin's "Center." Discussions about democracy henceforward were about *inner-party* democracy, not multi-party democracy, and not about reviving the soviets.

There is both tragedy and irony in heralding the soviet as a

superior form of democratic governance from below—a tool in the revolutionary arsenal that the Russian proletariat gave to the international working class—even as it could not itself survive the aftermath of the Russian revolution. The world political reality the Bolsheviks operated in was hardly conducive to the flourishing of democratic self-governance. The country faced economic crisis, civil war with internal counter-revolution, and foreign invasions. The front-line workers of the revolution perished in large numbers in the Civil War, leaving the Bolsheviks—representing the revolutionary working class—in power with a peasant majority. The revolution failed to spread to countries where workers were in the majority and could come to the aid of the besieged and isolated soviet revolution. All these conditions acted together to strangle the feasibility of socialist democracy. No alternative existed to the emergent Bolshevik dictatorship, other than chaos or worse. Lenin and Trotsky, who were attacked from the beginning for advocating democratic control from below, actually found themselves having to rule from above.

The question becomes, can governance from below survive the heady days of revolution, and if so what form must it take? The model of the soviet failed, and this raises the issue of whether it can be resurrected and whether it can be viable. As we have seen, the Bolsheviks themselves were unclear on this critical point.

NP: The Bolshevik Party played the leadership role in the Russian Revolution. How would you characterize this party? What made it different from the others? How did its strengths and weaknesses affect the revolution?

SW: The Bolshevik Party differed from the other social democratic parties of the day inside and outside of Russia. Marxists at this point in history called themselves social democrats, but this was a different animal than the social democrats we know today: They were Marxists and fought for

socialism, not capitalism with a human face.

What distinguished the Bolsheviks was their view of the hegemony of the working class in the revolutionary process, as well as their organic link with the working class; their conviction to put their program into practice—Serge called this “the unity of word and deed;” their insistence that revolutionary practice had to be nourished by solid revolutionary theory; and their method of organization, though this was one of the main issues at the base of the split between the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks in 1903. Trotsky, before becoming a Bolshevik, cautioned in 1914 that Bolshevism may well be the best instrument for winning power, but on the eve of power it would reveal all its counter-revolutionary aspects.

More importantly, the Bolsheviks were the revolutionary party of the Russian working class. In 1905, the newly split Mensheviks and Bolsheviks were still developing their revolutionary theory when the workers took center stage, organized themselves into soviets, elected Trotsky as head of the largest Saint Petersburg soviet, and began the series of strikes leading to the most general strike in history and a year of revolutionary struggle, culminating in the 1905 revolution, which went down to defeat. Had the Bolsheviks been more together at that point, perhaps the workers in the Russian empire could have won power, and there would have been just one, not three revolutions.

After the defeat of the 1905 revolution there was a period of deep reaction driven by the repressive, authoritarian autocracy. But within a few years the autocracy saw the need to rapidly build up their military capacity in reaction to the intensification of the inter-imperialist rivalry leading to World War I. The growth of heavy industry in this period led to a tumultuous expansion of the urban working class, largely recruited from the countryside and concentrated in coal, iron, steel, and military equipment. This meant the terrain of

struggle for working-class democracy and power shifted to industrial workers. In the period between 1912 and 1914 there was an enormous growth of workers' struggles and strikes. The trade union struggle became the main school for working-class democracy, radicalism, and revolutionary politics, and it was in this period that the Bolsheviks demonstrated their dynamism and capacity to lead. By the outbreak of the war, the Bolsheviks had won a strong political majority in the trade union movement and this became the springboard for their winning over the urban working class in 1917.

World War I temporarily ended the dynamism of the Russian working class. Russia suffered more deaths, more oppression, and more misery in a war that mowed down an entire generation of young men. Soldiers began to mutiny, to march home with their rifles and bayonets to join the revolution.

In February 1917, there were massive strikes in Petrograd as the increasingly combative, mobilized masses took to the streets to demand peace and an end to the intolerable autocracy. Women and men poured into central Petrograd and toppled the tsar and his regime. This was the initiative of the workers—they were in the lead. The urban workers expanded their democratic base because they overthrew the tsar and the feudal aristocracy, demanding land, bread, and peace, thereby winning the support of the peasants. But the overthrow of the autocracy posed in acute fashion the nature of the revolution in progress. Dual power emerged, almost overnight: the soviets versus the new provisional government of Kerensky that had replaced the tsarist autocracy.

Lenin and Trotsky were still outside the country and the Bolshevik leadership at home vacillated. Serge wrote that one Bolshevik committee in Petrograd advised against the strikes that led to the downfall of the empire. In this instance, the workers were in the lead, while party members were caught up in the stream of events, lacking the audacity of Lenin and Trotsky, who returned to Petrograd in April and May

respectively. As Serge put it, "The revolutionists of every party, who had spent their entire life preparing for the revolution, did not realize that it was at hand, that the victory had already begun."4

Lenin arrived at Petrograd's Finland Station in April 1917, and immediately realized that Trotsky's conception of permanent revolution was presented in concrete terms before him. The workers in the Petrograd soviet would have to make the revolution by overthrowing the provisional government.

All the Marxists in Russia had thought the revolution would have a bourgeois democratic character because Russia lacked the conditions for a socialist revolution. The Russian bourgeoisie, however, lacked the capital and skills to carry out the tasks of developing modern industry. Russian capitalists were dependent on the old regime, particularly because the military industry was directly driven by the state. This meant that the weak bourgeoisie identified with the old order, opposed bourgeois revolution in any form, and confronted a revolutionary working class. The liberals in the provisional government accepted the continuing existence of the old monarchy, demanding merely that it be constitutional. So it was left to the working class to make the revolution and push the democratic revolution to its democratic limit with free elections, free speech, free press, the eight-hour day.

Lenin dared the soviets to seize power, but the majority of the Bolsheviks disavowed him. The workers, however, in the streets, factories, and barricades agreed, and within three weeks Lenin had a majority in the party. The program was for power, a democratic proletarian and peasant soviet republic with the hegemony of the working class at its center. They called for the right to elect and recall functionaries; nationalize the banks, trusts, and cartels; confiscate the land to be turned over to the peasants organized in soviets; and a workers' peace directed against all the capitalists. Trotsky arrived in May and echoed Lenin, calling for the

soviets to take power.

NP: The Russian Revolution of October 1917 faced enormous challenges, and its leadership was faced day after day with life-and-death decisions involving millions. Gradually the combination of the objective situation and the decisions made by the Bolshevik Party began to change Russia. What do you see as the decisive moments in this process?

SW: The Bolshevik Party had led the revolution and legitimized its leadership by winning formal majorities for its program in the soviets. But, as your question implies, the young revolution faced huge challenges and impediments, even before the ruling classes of the world came together to (try to) stop the revolution in its tracks.

Most writers would no doubt begin in January 1918, when the Bolsheviks dissolved the Constituent Assembly because the assembly was dominated by the right SRs who opposed the soviets—and most writers would denounce the Bolsheviks for this anti-democratic move. Lenin prioritized the implementation of revolutionary goals, encapsulated in the slogan “Bread, Land, and Peace,” and counterposed soviet democracy to the bourgeois parliamentary form the assembly represented.

Of these goals, the most pressing for the new revolutionary government—represented by the Bolsheviks—was to make good on its program, and that required securing peace. No reconstruction of society could be initiated without withdrawing from the imperialist World War. The debate over peace terms had to begin from the recognition of the immediate threat from occupying German forces—and be consecrated on unfavorable terms. While this debate caused substantial division in the party and society, it was also an example of the health and vitality of democracy in these early days. However, it led to divisions that had deep consequences, one of which was breaking the alliance with the Left SRs.

The Left SRs and Left Communists argued against the “peace of shame,” as they called the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. Bolshevik leaders Evgeny Preobrazhensky and Nikolai Bukharin, later to stand on opposite sides of the industrialization debates, joined with others to write the “Theses of Left Communists of 1918”⁵—opposing the treaty and proposing to wage a revolutionary war against the Central Powers, most importantly, Germany.

Lenin maintained that the old army didn’t exist and the new one was just forming, so the proposal was unrealistic. He said, “I want to lose space in order to gain time.” That is, he wanted to settle quickly and place his hope in the revolutionary developments in the West. His critics warned against trying to preserve the revolution at any cost. Policies that led to the soviets losing their independence would result in transforming Russia from a commune state to one ruled by a centralized bureaucracy.

Trotsky’s position, “neither peace nor war,” meant using the negotiations to stall for time, holding out to give strength to the western proletariat, who saw a separate peace as a capitulation to German imperialism. While it seemed to be the reverse of Lenin’s proposal, it was also based on the perspective of seeking aid from the western working class that would soon be in power.

The terms of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk were ruinous: revolutionary Russia lost Poland, the Baltic regions, and huge tracts of the Ukraine (in total, 27 percent of Russia’s farmland, 26 percent of the population, a third of the average crops, three-quarters of iron and steel, and 26 percent of the country’s railway network). The country was forced to pay six billion gold marks in reparations.

One last calamitous consequence was that the terms of the peace sealed the sacrifice of the Finnish proletariat: The Finnish Commune went down in bloodshed in April 1918, in part

because Soviet troops had to leave the border under the treaty's provisions. Forced to accept the harsh terms by the advance of the German army, Lenin signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918.

The Civil War (1918-1921), brought on by the world bourgeoisie, led to the destruction of a significant proportion of the agent of the revolution, the urban working class—already a minority of the society, now even more so. This long and bloody conflict, in which some nine million died, was in dramatic contrast to the relatively bloodless revolution carried out against the defenders of the old order from March through October 1917. It could be said that the Civil War was world capitalism's revenge for the victorious socialist revolution.

By the end of the Civil War, famine and epidemic had taken hold; the economy was in ruins. The famine necessitated rationing in the cities and requisitions in the countryside—and that provoked peasant uprisings. Ironically, the former propertied classes also lost everything, even “factory owners ask to be nationalized, as they cannot live otherwise.”⁶ The economic policy of this period, dubbed “War Communism,” was described by Lenin as “thrust on us by war and ruin. It was not, nor could it be, a policy that corresponded to the economic tasks of the proletariat. It was a temporary measure.” In simple terms, it meant the allocation of whatever was available.

Direct exchange between town and country was imposed by the requisitioning of grain and direct state distribution of industrial goods under concentrated economic authority and power. Money was eliminated. Although this reaction to circumstances had nothing to do with Marxism, it became an unfortunate source of illusion about the possibility of a rapid and immediate transition to communism.

How could the horrendous conditions of life under War

Communism be construed as having anything to do with communism? The abolition of the market was not based on material abundance, a highly developed productive base, advanced forms of democracy, and citizen participation, but instead on social disintegration, destroyed production, absolute scarcity, and centralized authority. It wasn't viable. Everyone had to use the black market, even party members. Yet Stalin in the 1930s would borrow these methods in peacetime and call it communism.

The Bolsheviks won the Civil War because they were able to mobilize the population, especially the urban proletariat, to defeat the invading armies and the White "contras" of the day. But much of the revolutionary urban working class was destroyed in the process.

With a return to peace, the urban working class could be reconstituted, drawn from the peasants of the nearby countryside. But how to regenerate revolutionary consciousness in a semi-literate peasantry with no class traditions? Without any revolutionary practice, this new urban working class lacked revolutionary politics and labored under conditions remote from socialist goals.

War Communism, with forced seizures of grain and the militarization of labor, had effectively put an end to democratic workers control. The newly recruited working class had no say in factory management and no voice in political decision-making. The revolutionary momentum was lost, as well as the front-line workers who made the revolution. Had there been elections at that point, the Bolsheviks would likely have lost.

The Civil War came to an end with society in a state of siege and democracy curtailed—other political parties were not allowed and factions within the Bolsheviks were banned at the Tenth Party Congress, convened in Moscow in March 1921, just as the Kronstadt revolt began. The sailors at the Kronstadt

naval garrison were protesting the economic regime of War Communism and the dictatorship of the party. They called for freely elected soviets and a third revolution. Ironically, just as the Red Army was attacking the Kronstadt fleet, the Tenth Party Congress abolished requisitioning and heralded the transition from the hated privations of unlivable War Communism to the relaxation under Lenin's New Economic Policy, in effect conceding to the demands of the Kronstaders at the moment they were being massacred. The rebellion was handled terribly by the Bolsheviki, who panicked at the revolt. The ideas the sailors expressed were the same ones the Bolsheviki had championed in revolution, but now, after the Civil War had literally destroyed the revolutionary working class, these demands, they reasoned, threatened the survival of the revolution. The party could not govern a starving nation and maintain its popularity. This was the breaking point for the anarchists and a watershed for the revolution.

The Bolsheviki understood that their survival depended on successful revolutions in Germany and Europe—they could not advance to socialism on their own, surrounded by a hostile world capitalism. But they couldn't just wait, they also had to begin to undertake the socio-economic prerequisites of socialism, at minimum the industrialization of the economy, so as to produce a working-class majority. That could not happen if the revolution remained isolated in a backward country with a peasant majority. The revolution would have to spread to countries where capitalism was developed, workers were closer to being a majority, and socialism was on the agenda. Aid from socialist economies in advanced industrial countries could provide the surpluses needed for socialist industrialization in Russia.

The Bolsheviki's hopes for extending the revolution to the more advanced capitalist West depended on their inspiring workers' risings internationally. This was not a fantasy—militant workers across the West saw the Russian working class as

speaking for them. They appropriated this novel, profoundly democratic form of organization, the soviet, as a new tool in the arsenal of class struggle. Thanks especially to the centrality of the soviets in the Russian Revolution, but also to syndicalist- and anarchist-led uprisings in places like Spain, direct democracy was the order of the day. Indeed, in the early years of the revolution, the Bolsheviks hoped to forge alliances with revolutionary syndicalists and anarchists to serve as partners in overthrowing bourgeois democracy.

In the wake of the October Revolution that brought the working class to power, committees and councils appeared in sit-down strikes, general strikes, occupations, and insurrections from Glasgow to Belfast, Winnipeg to Seattle, Bavaria to Barcelona. From 1918 to 1920, revolutionary crises rocked Europe's capitals. These insurrectionary general strikes, with soviet or council power, were inspired by the Russian Revolution and aimed at extending it to Europe, the Americas, and beyond. But the German revolution, the Finnish and Hungarian communes, all the insurrectionary general strikes went down to a series of defeats. In Germany, the main hope, the revolutionary possibility breathed its last in 1923.

The tragedy of the defeated revolutionary insurrections in Europe was that they threw the Russian revolutionary leadership back on its own resources, in domestic circumstances of political isolation that were decreasingly favorable for pushing the revolution forward. The Bolsheviks adopted authoritarian practices as emergency measures in reaction to the brutality of the Civil War, and afterward to defend the revolution in power, and in so doing, bit by bit, they transformed themselves politically and the revolution itself. In this way, they preserved the revolution in the face of reaction and the fear of annihilation, but left it as a withering blossom in the eyes of the world, including other revolutionaries. The paradox was that the Bolsheviks used anti-democratic, anti-socialist methods to preserve themselves

in power, because they trusted only themselves, among all of the political tendencies, to be committed to the international revolution, to see the world advance to socialism as their only hope for survival. But in undermining the democratic and socialist foundations of their own rule domestically, they ended up greatly reducing the attractiveness of their revolution to the world's radical working class—improving the conditions for the counter-revolution that would be perpetually pursued by the international ruling classes.

When the revolutionary bridge to Germany was lost, as was the westward extension of the revolution, the Bolsheviks were caught in a bind. Had they handed over power, say, to the Constituent Assembly, the revolution would have had a brief half-life. Had they allowed legal forms such as elections, the Bolsheviks sooner rather than later would have been voted out of office. This might have served the cause of revolution by setting a democratic example, demonstrating an overriding commitment to ideals. But the resulting defeat of the Russian Commune State would likely have brought an even worse fate than the massacre of the Paris Communards in 1871, an outcome the Bolsheviks feared awaited them.

If the Bolsheviks could have allowed for the emergence of a broader, society-wide democracy, they might have created a model of socialist governance that could have inspired workers in advanced countries to emulate. Holding on to power as an example of revolutionary democracy rather than as a way to escape restoration would have meant a different political trajectory.

The Bolsheviks' reluctance to share or cede power in the interests of assisting world revolution—to save the revolution at home—is thus understandable. As we know, what actually happened under Stalin destroyed not only the majority of the Bolshevik leadership but many millions more. The failure to inspire successful workers' democratic revolutions abroad led, finally, to the construction of a top-down coercive regime at

home.

The Left Opposition from the mid-1920s proposed promoting industrialization to increase the size of the working class and to create a new generation of revolutionary workers with the habits and education of socialist industry under workers' control, hopefully serving as an inspiration to workers elsewhere. Had they been able to hold on as a model of workers' democracy, they might have prevented Stalin's ascendance to power. Revolution in Germany in the early 1930s or Spain in the middle 1930s could have been possible, saving the Russian revolution and sparing the world from the nightmare to come.

But left on its own, it was impossible for the Soviet Union to raise the resources internally without squeezing the population, and that couldn't be done democratically. Dictatorship became inevitable, though not one as brutal as Stalin's, and millions could have been spared.

NP: What do you think are the legacies of the Russian Revolution and the Stalinist counter-revolution today? What do we do with those legacies and where do we go from here?

SW: The Russian Bolsheviks, German Spartacists, and their revolutionary comrades around the world fought for revolution and fought to prevent the global calamity that became fascism, World War II, and everything that followed. They recognized the crisis of capitalism and understood that cataclysm was on the agenda. As Victor Serge said, "They were moved by a great will to liberation. Anyone who rubbed shoulders with them will never forget it. Few men in history have ever been so devoted to the cause of men as a whole."

Stalinism destroyed the essence of Marxism and stained it with blood, crushed democracy at home, and betrayed the revolution's promise—and in so doing, Stalinism acted as an essential prop for capitalism. Moreover, the Stalinist

dictatorship gave the international capitalist class a tool to use against the working class. The Cold War was beneficial and functional for each of its contestants, both of whom had a vested interest in labeling the Soviet system as Marx's vision of communism. It should be said that for Marx, communism and socialism were synonymous. Social Democrats, especially in Europe, furthered the confusion with their Socialist Parties that were little more than capitalism with a slightly more human face. The Cold War pushed the notion that capitalism and democracy were synonymous, that communism was synonymous with brutal dictatorship.

We are finally, one hundred years later, at a point where we can rescue with credibility the promise of the revolution and begin to call that its legacy. The Arab Spring and subsequent mass occupations and events represent the break with the negative past, and the credible candidacy of Bernie Sanders, an avowed democratic socialist in a mainstream party no less, would have been unthinkable at the height of the Cold War. Socialism is now seen as an attractive alternative to the present, miserable status quo. We can all quibble with Sanders' socialism but that misses the point. Millions voted for him in the heart of the beast, no longer afraid of being called pinkos, reds, or commies—and they weren't. The equation of socialism with anti-democratic statist dictatorship is broken.

The revolutionary working class in Russia developed profoundly democratic institutions and showed the world that workers' self-rule through bottom-up democracy was possible and necessary—that socialism and democracy are inseparable.

The relevance for today is enormous, and this is the message to get out to today's youth who are openly interested in socialism.

Footnotes

1. Victor Serge, *From Lenin to Stalin* (Pioneer Publishers, 1937), 22.
2. Leon Trotsky, *1905* (Penguin Books, 1971), 265-280.
3. Michael Urban, *More Power to the Soviets* (Edward Elgar, 1990), 3.
4. Serge, 10-11.
5. "[The Left Communists' Theses on the Current Situation \(Russia, 1918\)](#)," *Critique* (1977).
6. Serge, 31.