



Politics, Not Economics Was the Key

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Politics, Not Economics Was the Key

In his article William Rosenberg raises a very important question: How did the relationship between the workers and the Bolsheviks change in the months after October 1917, and what accounted for these changes? The article is truly a remarkable piece of research on the social history of Petrograd workers. The detailed study of changes in various branches of industry under the impact of the world war and the revolution is of particular value.

Rosenberg conceives relations between Bolsheviks and workers after October as going through three major chronological stages: triumph and jubilation after the overthrow of the bourgeoisie in October; trauma when economic difficulties mounted in January; and disillusionment beginning in March 1918, which manifested itself in the creation of the Conference of Factory Representatives. I wholeheartedly agree with this breakdown; but I find myself in serious disagreement with Rosenberg on the nature of the workers' conflict with the Bolsheviks, the political orientation of the conference, and the causes of its demise.

The workers' political experience in 1917 was not limited to pro-Bolshevik radicalization. During this period they developed a sense of political independence, a conviction that any government had to take into account what the workers wanted. Above all, they had begun to take it for granted that there had to be free elections and other democratic practices. This was bound to bring them into conflict with the Bolshevik authorities in 1918, irrespective of the economic situation. From the outset Rosenberg questions the validity of conceptualizing anti-Bolshevik worker protest in political terms and focuses instead on the workers' social characteristics and economic circumstances. It is only "on the surface," he suggests, that "workers' protests seemed to be assuming a new and stronger political content"; in fact, "on closer examination . . . social issues continued to be as important, and perhaps more important, than politics per se."

It is true that in February and March the main concerns of the workers were unemployment, evacuation, job security, wages, and the like. It is also true that the workers were tired of the "big" questions of the revolution, like the Constituent Assembly and the Soviet republic. Indeed, by mid-March pervasive disillusionment with Bolshevism sometimes appeared to be disillusionment with politics altogether. Workers' resolutions from this period convey hopelessness and despair. This was, however, only a passing stage in their outlook, and in April and May discontent crystallized in specific demands that brought the workers into conflict with the Bolshevik authorities. From March to July 1918 the Conference of Factory Representatives was transformed from a debating society into the headquarters of the general strike.

It may have appeared or may still appear that Russia's economic problems in spring 1918 were "insoluble," as Rosenberg puts it. The economic collapse of early 1918 he presents as a phase in a larger historical process that had started several years earlier. Even in an apparently hopeless situation, however, there are better and worse courses of action. No doubt the economic collapse was well under way under the Provisional Government; but Bolshevik economic policies such as seizure of the banks caused even greater dislocation and chaos in industry. The Bolshevik party, its economic policies and institutions are hardly even

mentioned in this article, even though these policies and these institutions were at the root of the workers' discontent. The Mensheviks were able to remind the workers of their warning that by seizing the factories one could not solve economic problems, and that by seizing the banks the Bolsheviks were destroying monetary circulation—a policy which was going to bring the factories to a halt. The Menshevik resurgence in spring 1918 was very much connected with this fact. In other words, *political* struggle over economic policies continued. Certain economic policies were associated with certain parties.

The workers' opposition movement in spring 1918 emerged as a protest against Bolshevik policies. Not only did the workers not find protection in the "workers' " state, but they found themselves defenseless vis-à-vis that state. This is evident from many of the resolutions of the conference which Rosenberg cites. The workers no longer trusted the trade unions, because under the Bolsheviks they were "organizing, all right, but the administration and not the workers."¹ The workers could not rely on the soviets because under the Bolsheviks the soviets were "only trying, punishing, levying taxes, organizing Red Guards, and sometimes shooting."² That is why the Menshevik platform—which insisted that the unions must be independent from the employer, be it a "workers' state" or a private entrepreneur; that the soviets had to remain what they had been in 1917: workers' political organizations and not agencies to run municipal services—was gaining wide popular support.³ Rosenberg mentions the workers' discontent over the evacuation of Petrograd, the appointment of railroad dictators, dismissal of factory technicians, and the Peace of Brest-Litovsk. These were protests over Bolshevik decisions, not merely over economic difficulties. Opposition to Bolshevik actions was by its very nature political; and it is almost impossible to draw a distinction, as Rosenberg attempts to do, between politics per se and social issues. In fact, every social issue, every economic demand, no matter how small, brought the workers into political confrontation with the Bolshevik authorities. Many of the workers' demands the Bolsheviks did not fulfill and could not fulfill if they were to remain true to their economic ideas in some cases, and to their desire to stay in power in other cases.

One of these demands was that the *zagraditel'nye* detachments at the railway stations which prevented private importation of food into the city be liquidated, and that free movement in and out of the city to purchase provisions be allowed.⁴ Another demand was that the workers' bread ration be equalized with that of the Red Guards.⁵ (The Bolsheviks needed to assure themselves of the loyalty of the Red Guards, not necessarily of that of the workers.) A third demand was

1. This is a passage from the declaration of the Conference of Factory Representatives adopted at its first session on March 13, 1918, and sent to the Fourth Congress of Soviets, cited from "Sobranie fabrik i zavodov," *Novaia zhizn'*, no. 52 (Petrograd, March 26, 1918); also reprinted in M. S. Bernshtam, ed., *Nezavisimoe rabochee dvizhenie v 1918 godu. Dokumenty i materialy* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1981), pp. 87-90.

2. *Ibid.*

3. For a detailed discussion of this process, see Vladimir Brovkin, "The Mensheviks' Political Comeback: The Elections to the Provincial City Soviets in Spring 1918," *The Russian Review*, vol. 42, no. 1 (January 1983): 1-50.

4. For a debate among the workers on the restrictions on traveling in and out of the city, see "Raboचाia konferentsiia," *Den'* (Petrograd, March 30, 1918), p. 7.

5. See, for example, the resolution of the Putilov workers, "Raboचाia zhizn'," *Novyi den'* (Petrograd, April 30, 1918), p. 4.

for new elections to the trade union boards and factory committees.⁶ Already at the second session of the Conference of Factory Representatives, Korokhov (Obukhov plant) expressed the frustration of the workers:

Our factory committee has always been SR, but the Bolsheviks rigged the elections and now they have a majority in the committee. Already four months ago we passed a resolution: no confidence to the factory committee; but this does not help. They only laugh when "no confidence" is passed against them.⁷

Rosenberg's article does not even mention one of the key demands of the conference: that there be new elections to the Petrograd soviet, whose term had ended in March.⁸ The Bolsheviks continued to postpone new elections because they feared that the opposition parties would show gains.

It was not only economic interest that guided the workers by late spring, but political issues first and foremost, demands for justice and free elections. Yet despite overwhelming evidence of worker opposition to Bolshevik policies, Rosenberg does not see any real "weakening of Bolshevik support." Why is it so hard to believe that people simply withdrew their support from a ruling party whose policies they disapproved of, and that they turned to the opposition parties? Rosenberg concludes that "many in Petrograd seem to have become genuinely indifferent to the struggles and the fate of other parties as political organizations, as if they belonged to the days before October." The evidence speaks for itself, however: the resolutions of the conference were identical with the statements of the Menshevik Central Committee, as the Bolsheviks themselves recognized in dozens of editorials.⁹ For example, the conference endorsed the economic platform adopted at the Menshevik party conference in May. By mid-May, as Rosenberg acknowledges, the conference represented 100,000 out of the 140,000 employed workers in Petrograd. During the elections to the city soviet in June, the conference publicly endorsed a Menshevik-SR slate of candidates.¹⁰

In Rosenberg's judgment, "neither the Conference of Factory Representatives nor other opposition groups had . . . a clear and convincing vision of a viable alternative social order." Such a conclusion requires an analysis of the alternative proposals of the opposition parties, and that analysis is missing. It is, moreover, important to differentiate between proposals for an alternative social order and proposals for alternative economic policies. It is obvious that the economic policies which the Bolsheviks pursued were not the only ones possible.

6. "Protokoly chrezvychainogo sobranija upolnomochennykh . . ." in Bernshtam, *Nezavisimoe rabochee dvizhenie*, p. 84.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 82.

8. "Rabochaia zhizn'. Nastroenie rabochikh. Putilovskii zavod," *Delo naroda*, no. 4 (March 26, 1918), p. 4; and "Delovaja chast'. O perevyborakh soveta," *Vecherniaia zvezda*, no. 51 (Petrograd, April 6, 1918), p. 3.

9. Compare, for example, the *nakaz* of the Conference of Factory Representatives to the Moscow workers in "Sredi rabochikh. Na perevale," *Delo*, no. 10 (June 12, 1918), pp. 15-16 with the resolution of the Menshevik Central Committee: "Sovety i taktika Sotsial Demokratii," *Novaia zaria*, no. 5-6 (June 10, 1918), pp. 82-83.

10. "Perevybory v Petrogradskii soviet," *Novyi vechernii chas*, no. 93 (Petrograd, June 19, 1918), p. 2.

The Menshevik party conference in May came out with concrete alternative proposals, some of which (on grain supply, for example) were defended by Rykov and other high-ranking Bolsheviks.¹¹

Between the Kolpino shooting in May and the strike of July 2, Rosenberg counts seventy incidents in Petrograd alone, "including strikes, demonstrations, and anti-Bolshevik factory meetings"; eighteen strikes with "an explicitly anti-Bolshevik character." The weight of this evidence should have deterred Rosenberg from concluding that the metal workers still "probably" supported the Bolsheviks. We must see the unfolding political struggle in these examples and also consider the experience of the Petrograd workers within the larger context of what was going on in the country. Little attention is paid in this article to the denouement of the confrontation between the Bolshevik authorities and the Conference of Factory Representatives in June–July 1918.

The strikes in Petrograd at the end of May broke out in response partly to the persistent Bolshevik refusal to hold new elections to the soviet, partly to threats against the conference, and partly to arrests of workers' delegates (Mensheviks and SRs). Yet Rosenberg suggests that the workers' "dissidence seems to have had as its goal obtaining effective relief rather than giving support to the Mensheviks or other opposition parties." In fact, exactly the opposite was the case at the end of May. The matter of first priority for the workers became the release of their arrested Menshevik and SR comrades, and not economic relief as such. The Obukhov workers asked for help from the sailors of the mine division (also, incidentally, represented in the Conference of Factory Representatives).¹² The sailors pointed their guns at the soviet and sent an armed delegation to demand the immediate release of those arrested; they were released.¹³ Moreover, when the Bolsheviks, frightened by the strikes, increased the bread ration of the workers, thus providing some relief, the conference rejected what it called "paltry dole" (*podachka*):

The Soviet power has come up with a new means of struggling against famine—to feed the hungry workers at the expense of the rest of the population. People are dying from hunger on the streets; small children are dying; but for us they increase the bread ration. . . . We, the Conference of Factory Representatives from the Petrograd factories and plants, reject with indignation the authorities' attempt to bribe the workers with an additional portion of bread, and we call on the Petrograd proletariat to protest with all its might this attempt.¹⁴

A delegation of Putilov workers went to Smol'nyi and presented Zinov'ev with an ultimatum; elections to the soviet must begin immediately, or else the workers would start revolutionary new elections.¹⁵ These were not unemployed, semi-

11. "O golodnom dvizhenii. Postanovlenie Moskovskogo biuro tsentral'noi oblasti RSDRP, 28 maia 1918 goda," *Novaia zaria*, no. 5–6 (June 10, 1918), pp. 42–44.

12. On the opposition of the mine division and its demand that the Bolshevik government resign, see Bernshtam, *Nezavisimoe rabochee dvizhenie*, doc. no. 44, pp. 176–79.

13. "Rabochii Petrograd (Pis'mo iz Petrograda)," *Novoe delo naroda*, no. 3 (Moscow, June 20, 1918), p. 1.

14. Cited from "La vie politique et sociale," *Les Echos de Russie*, no. 18–19 (Stockholm, August 1, 1918), p. 22.

15. "Na Putilovskom zavode," *Petrogradskoe ekho*, no. 71 (May 29, 1918).

skilled metal workers in search of relief and pleading for state protection; these were employed workers from Petrograd's biggest plants demanding political concessions from the Bolsheviks.

Bolshevik concessions in Petrograd were combined with intensification of repressive measures elsewhere.¹⁶ Rosenberg mentions strikes in Tula and other cities; yet this evidence does not seem to change his overall view of the irrelevance of organized party politics. In fact, Bolshevik disbandment of newly elected soviets in numerous cities where the opposition parties had won led to a galvanizing of the existing Conferences of Factory Representatives and the creation of new ones in April–May 1918. This development culminated in an attempt to convene an intercity Conference of Representatives in Moscow on June 13. All the participants were, however, arrested.¹⁷ On June 10 machine guns were installed in the building of the Conference of Factory Representatives in Nizhnii Novgorod just before a regional conference of representatives was to take place. During the ensuing protest demonstrations the workers were fired upon. One worker was killed and five were wounded.¹⁸ Four days later the Mensheviks and SRs were expelled from the Central Executive Committee.¹⁹ It is in this context that a wave of general strikes rolled across European Russia. In the following two weeks general strikes took place in Tula, Nizhnii Novgorod, Kaluga, Tver', Iaroslavl', and other cities.²⁰ The Bolsheviks arrested strike committees, imposed curfews, and declared a state of emergency.²¹ Violent clashes took place between the Cheka and the workers. The general pattern in the escalation of conflict between the Bolsheviks and the workers repeated itself over and over: the workers, angered by the Bolsheviks' disbanding of the newly elected soviet, where the opposition had won, or by the postponement of elections, resorted to strikes and protest marches. The Bolsheviks responded with arrests and shootings, which in turn led to general strikes and uprisings, and on the part of the Bolsheviks to mass arrests, the complete shutdown of the opposition press, and terror by August 1918.

Undaunted by this evidence, Rosenberg surmises that "many who in the soviet elections voted for the Mensheviks and especially Left SRs were really seeking 'better' Bolsheviks." The Left SRs, as it happened, were on the verge of an open break with the Bolsheviks which was to lead to an anti-Bolshevik uprising. There is no evidence to suggest that the workers who voted for the opposition did not really mean it. "Votes of protest are never the same as a commitment to the opposition," says Rosenberg. But how else could the workers have demonstrated their commitment to the opposition than by voting, striking, and staging protest marches?

16. "K arestu delegatsii Petrogradskikh rabochikh v Moskve," *Novaia zhizn'*, no. 114 (Petrograd, June 12, 1918), p. 3.

17. "Bol'shevistskaia vlast' i rabochie," *Nash golos*, no. 9 (Moscow, June 18, 1918).

18. "Po Rossii: V Sormovo," *Novyi vechernii chas*, no. 91 (Petrograd, June 17, 1918), p. 4.

19. For a discussion of the circumstances preceding the expulsion, see Vladimir Brovkin, *The Menshevik Opposition to the Bolshevik Regime and the Dilemma of Soviet Power, October 1917–January 1919* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilms International, 1984), pp. 377–402.

20. "17 iunija v Tule ob"javlena vseobshchaja zabastovka," *Delo narada*, no. 47 (June 19, 1918), p. 4, and "Po Rossii: V Sormovo," *Novyi vechernii chas*, no. 91 (June 17, 1918), p. 4.

21. "Posledstviia Nizhegorodskoi zabastovki," and "Zabastovka v Tule," *Vozrozhdenie* (Moscow, June 20, 1918), p. 3; and "Die Bolschewiki und die Arbeiterbewegung," *Stimmen aus Russland*, no. 4–5 (Stockholm, August 15, 1918), p. 15.

Discussing the events in Petrograd at the end of June, Rosenberg suggests that "the role of such issues as the Constituent Assembly and democratic government again seems to fade." This conclusion is not substantiated by evidence. A call for the reconconvocation of the Constituent Assembly was included in numerous workers' resolutions.²² On what grounds is it possible to doubt that the workers meant what they said? It is essential to see this demand in the light of the overthrow of the Bolsheviks on the Volga by SRs and the Czech Legion in the name of the Constituent Assembly in mid-June. The convocation of the Constituent Assembly once again seemed attainable. Frightened by the initial success of the SRs' undertaking, the Bolsheviks resorted to ruthless repression. The Petrograd factory representatives did not doubt by this date that the Bolsheviks would disband the conference after the elections to the Petrograd soviet. The Bolsheviks had arbitrarily changed the norms of representation on June 16 to guarantee their "victory."²³ An examination of the election results shows that the "comfortable [Bolshevik] majority" to which Rosenberg refers was due to the inflated representation of Bolshevik-controlled organizations at the expense of the popular vote. The Menshevik Central Committee reported: "What is especially significant is that all big factories and plants in Petrograd without exception voted for the Socialist Revolutionaries and Social Democrats."²⁴ These delegates elected on the factory floor were, however, drowned in the sea of representatives of Bolshevik agencies and Red Army units. It was outrage at this kind of "representation by means of fraud" that brought the conference into head-on collision with the Bolsheviks and provoked the desperate decision to go ahead with the general strike on July 2. One of the last resolutions of the conference read:

We are strangled by hunger. We are mangled by unemployment. Our children are dropping from lack of food. Our press has been crushed. Our organizations have been destroyed. The freedom to strike has been abolished. And when we raise our voice in protest they shoot us or throw us out as they did with the Obukhov comrades.²⁵ Russia has again been turned into a tsarist dungeon. We can't keep on living like this (*tak dol'she zhi' ne v mogotu*).²⁶

Shortly after the brutal suppression of the strike on July 2, the Bolsheviks liquidated the Conference of Factory Representatives and arrested its key leaders on charges of "anti-Soviet conspiracy."²⁷

Rosenberg concludes that it was not the Bolshevik repression but the workers' "inability to organize effectively" that accounted for the failure of the work-

22. See, for example, an election leaflet of the opposition in Petrograd in "Perevybory v Petrogradskii soviet," *Molva*, no. 11 (Petrograd, June 18, 1918), p. 1.

23. For the new representation norms, see "Polozhenie o vyborakh v Petrogradskii soviet," *Severnaia kommuna*, no. 14 (Petrograd, June 18, 1918), p. 1.

24. Vassili Soukhomline, "Le Bluff bolchéviste des élections de Petrograd," and "Les Bolchéviki sur leur déclin," *Les Echos de Russie*, no. 18-19 (Stockholm, August 1, 1918), pp. 13 and 23.

25. On June 25, 1918 the Bolshevik authorities shut down the Obukhov plant and locked out the workers in response to their strike.

26. Cited from Grigorii Aronson, *Rossia v epokhu revoliutsii* (New York, 1966), p. 193.

27. Soviet source: "K arestu 'rabocher' konferentsii," *Izvestiia*, no. 156 (Moscow, July 25, 1918), p. 3; opposition source: "The Arrest of the Labor Conference," in *The Case of Russian Labor Against Bolshevism* (New York: Russian Information Service, 1919), p. 7.

ers' protest movement. This is putting the cart before the horse. The unprecedented Bolshevik repression thwarted opposition organizing at every step. Fearing an all-out Bolshevik attack on the Conference of Factory Representatives, the Petrograd Menshevik party conference at the end of June agreed only with great reluctance to endorse the call of the conference for a general strike.²⁸ It urged the workers to demand changes in Bolshevik policy and not to expect "miracles." If friction existed between the conference and the Menshevik party leadership, it was due to the fact that the conference had become much more radically anti-Bolshevik by the end of June than the Menshevik party leaders found politically expedient.

The stormy events in Petrograd at the end of June must be seen in conjunction with general strikes in major cities, the Red Army rebellion in Saratov, the anti-Bolshevik uprisings in Tambov and Iaroslavl', the Czech-SR uprising in Samara, the workers' overthrow of the Bolsheviks in Izhevsk and Votkinsk, and dozens of peasant uprisings in the countryside. By June 1918 the Bolshevik regime was in deep crisis. The Bolsheviks had lost the support of the social groups which had backed them in October. Rosenberg's own important research data on metal workers confirm this fact. By June the peasants, who in October had welcomed the redivision of land, were angered by grain requisitioning. The army had disintegrated, and the soldiers, formerly the backbone of Bolshevik support, had become peasants, bagmen on the roads, and unemployed—groups not friendly to the Bolsheviks. Even the sailors, whose intervention into politics had been decisive for the Bolshevik victory in October, had begun to turn against the Bolsheviks.²⁹ This was the beginning of a long road that was to lead to the sailors' revolts in 1919 and Kronstadt in 1921.

Rosenberg has amassed remarkable evidence not only about social conditions and grievances but also about the growing dissatisfaction of the workers with the Bolshevik regime. Although he chooses to emphasize the former, there are also important conclusions to be drawn from this material about the changing political allegiance of the workers in spring and summer 1918.

28. "Men'shevistskaia konferentsiia," *Novyi vechernii chas*, no. 102 (Petrograd, July 1, 1918), p. 2.

29. See the proceedings of the Baltic Sea sailors' conferences in Moscow in April and in Petrograd in May 1918: "Sobranie matrosov," *Delo naroda*, no. 41 (May 14, 1918), p. 3, and B. Rossov, "Sredi nedovol'nykh moriakov," *Utro Petrograda*, no. 4 (Petrograd, April 22, 1918), p. 2; and "Rezoliutsiia moriakov," *Novyi den'*, no. 21 (Petrograd, April 18, 1918), p. 4.