

# Trotskyist International

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## Yeltsin's October Counter-Revolution

In the days between 21 of September and 5 October the bloody events in Moscow have transformed the political situation. The result of the storming of the White House and Yeltsin's imposition of draconian emergency powers means that the social counter-revolution has been greatly strengthened. Yeltsin, representing the pro-imperialist, radical restorationist wing of the old bureaucracy and the new bourgeoisie, has taken a giant step towards unifying and concentrating the forces of the state into his hands. Pavel Grachev, Yeltsin's defence minister, claimed; "The people were tired of dual power and illegality". In fact the people have had no say in events and the bloody assault on the constitutional Russian parliament was a massive act of illegality. But he is right that Yeltsin and the restorationists could not carry on in the state of dual powerlessness where parliament and president obstructed each others every move.

### Democrats versus Communists?

The conflict between Yeltsin and the parliament was not a battle between democrats and communists as the western media claims. Yeltsin is no democrat. He has violated the constitution, killed or arrested hundreds of his opponents, clamped a near total censorship on the media and dissolved the legislature. This man, who since August 1991 was lionised as the great democratic defender of parliament, has bombarded it with tanks, all but destroying it. Now he boasts that he will rebuild the White House in six months but only to convert it into offices for the Presidency.

Rutskoi and Khasbulatov on the other hand are no communists. Rutskoi stood for election as vice-president on Yeltsin's anti-communist ticket. They both sided with Yeltsin against the Yanayev putsch in 1991, and supported him when he took power. They are openly in favour of the market, privatisation and a western capitalist parliamentary system. The differences they have with Yeltsin are rooted only in the method and the tempo of the restoration process. Rutskoi and Khasbulatov represent a layer of bureaucratic industrial managers afraid of losing their privileges in an imperialist dominated economy. They want to slow the pace of privatisation and allow the opportunity for the managers to become the key elements of the new ruling class. Their strident nationalism arises from their fear, correct in itself, that the neo-liberals like Yegor Gaidar will sell Russia's resources to the imperialist multinationals.

They are also afraid of provoking the working class by a too sudden and too savage attack on their jobs and wages. Yeltsin, on the other hand, has, so far, gone along with imperialism's

demands to accelerate the process. In this sense he is the direct agent of imperialism and the new bourgeoisie.

But the anti-Yeltsin block of parliamentary deputies never had a clear or common alternative programme. Their only point in common was their rejection of Yeltsin's attempt to consolidate his authoritarian rule. The social base of the hardline Stalinist and Russian nationalist opposition to him lies in the displaced bureaucrats and the newly impoverished layers such as pensioners, ex-soldiers and the unemployed. In the opposition various political forces converged; monarchists, Great Russian chauvinists and open fascists rubbed shoulders with hardline Stalinists and social democratised "communists".

### Yeltsin launches his coup

In March Yeltsin tried to by-pass the parliament and take all powers into his hands but he was forced to retreat. In the next six months he was preparing its final dissolution. He succeeded in splitting the Civic Union, (the managers coalition that dominated the parliament) and won to his side many of their members. Twice Yeltsin vetoed the budget adopted by parliament. The crunch came when the parliament was about to adopt a budget which Yeltsin claimed would prevent the government fulfilling its economic programme. He claimed that this would generate a 25% budget deficit. As part of the preparations for taking control Yeltsin decided to reinstate as deputy prime minister Yegor Gaidar, the author of the neo-liberal shock programme and the minister most hated by the parliament which had forced his sacking at the end of 1992.

Yeltsin's initial moves were not very decisive or effective. In the first 14 days of his presidential coup he did not even declare a state of emergency or send troops into the White House. Because of the dual power situation, in which the parliament had its own armed militia and where it was not clear whether the army would enforce "unconstitutional" measures by the president, he had to tolerate a situation in which the parliament continued to meet. Street demonstrations were held in support of it and Rutskoi was declared president of Russia. For nearly two weeks the vast Russian Federation had two presidents and two armed powers defying one another.

Yeltsin was obliged to tolerate this situation because he could not afford to be seen as the initiator of a bloodbath that would discredit his "democratic" credentials. Nor could he afford to ignore the advice he received from Clinton and Co not to resort to force. But above all it took enormous efforts to convince the

military chiefs to abandon their position of neutrality. To win them over he needed to demonstrate that he had negotiated seriously and that it was Rutskoi and Khasbulatov who were wanton disturbers of the peace.

The crisis revealed the full depth of the "dual powerlessness" which has paralysed Russia for over two years. Yeltsin was not able to persuade the parliament to give in, nor could he immediately coerce it with armed force. The Russian regions, increasingly independent from Moscow, took different positions. Since April with the stand-off between the parliament and the presidency, power was increasingly devolving onto regional bureaucrats and army chiefs.

Throughout the summer Khasbulatov had been touring the regions and republics trying to win them over, claiming that only a strong parliament could protect their autonomy. Yeltsin in turn tried to win them over by offering concessions and promising to create a new upper house parliament to which they would directly elect their representatives. Some of the regions expressed their passive opposition to Yeltsin's coup but they refused to launch any real actions to back either side in the dispute, and pressed for a negotiated settlement. The Orthodox Church started to play a role that it has not played since 1917. This arch-reactionary institution tried to appear as the mediator in favour of a peace agreement between the rival ruling elites. But it failed when parliament's proposed compromise—simultaneous presidential and parliamentary elections in December—was rejected by the would be dictator.

With the army already weakened and demoralised by the financial and political collapse of Russia and deeply reluctant to intervene, the weakness of Yeltsin's position was increasingly obvious. He desperately had to get military support in order to show the West and the rebellious regions that he could hold on to power.

#### **Why the putschists failed**

The parliamentarians' strategy proved to be a complete fiasco. They ended up playing right into Yeltsin's hands just as Yanayev and Pugo did in 1991. The deep social and historical reason for this is that they represent no real historic force. Yeltsin represents capitalism and the world bourgeoisie. But Rutskoi and Khasbulatov in no way represent the historic interests of the working class. Indeed they hate and fear the independent intervention of the workers more than they fear Yeltsin. Their programme for a "controlled" restoration of capitalism offers nothing to solve the problems facing the working class and Rutskoi's belated call for a general strike in support of parliament was ignored by the overwhelming majority of the working class. In fact neither of the two presidents demonstrated that they had mass support. Only a few thousand turned out to the rival rallies that Yeltsin and Rutskoi called. The overwhelmingly majority of the Russian toilers remained passive and deeply suspicious of both sides.

Why? Over the last two years Yeltsin has lost much of his initial popularity due to the savage effects of his policies on the working population. But, despite this the masses perceive all too well that Khasbulatov and Rutskoi are merely seeking to defend the privileges of the old bureaucracy. A majority of the population still retain illusions that the market can improve their living standards in the long run. Recent polls show that 60% of the population want more privatisations. Already 20% of the industrial workforce is employed in the private sector. Every month 700-800 firms are undergoing privatisation. In addition real wages for employed industrial workers have roughly kept pace with inflation. This is why working class anger is still not yet focussed primarily on Yeltsin. Apart from threats of action by the powerful miners' unions over subsidies, Russian workers, unlike those of Poland and the Ukraine, have not yet started a fightback.

The rump of three hundred or so parliamentary deputies who defied Yeltsin to the end were in the main totalitarian Stalinists and ultra-nationalists. They are deeply discredited in the eyes of the masses by their association with the old ruling bureaucracy and its dictatorship. Their authoritarian, anti-semitic and chauvinist propaganda alienates the democratic feelings of both the national minorities and indeed the Russian masses. Together

with the continued passivity of the working class this explains why no serious forces rallied to the defence of the parliament. The population of Moscow watched Yeltsin and Rutskoi fight it out like gladiators in the arena.

Yeltsin issued the ultimatum for them to quit the parliament building by 30 September or he would use force to eject them. Nevertheless he was obliged to postpone this deadline and resort once more to the negotiations sponsored by the church. But this too failed. Before Saturday, 2 October only a few hundreds, or at most thousands, had expressed their support for the parliament on the streets. On this date the first serious clashes took place between demonstrators and Yeltsin's riot police. In the afternoon of Sunday 3rd the largest demonstration took place with between 10,000-15,000 people. The demonstrators marched to the parliament and smashed through the besieging police forces and Interior Ministry troops. About 200 security troops deserted Yeltsin. Liberal journalists report that at this point there was near total panic in the Kremlin. Yeltsin himself was reported to be in a state of paralysis.

Revolutionaries should have critically supported the demonstration's aim of breaking the siege of parliament. Once it succeeded it was essential to try to regroup more people, to develop much bigger demonstrations and to launch mass actions in the different cities and regions. But, Rutskoi appears to have called for an insurrection. Without any determined effort to involve the masses, above all the working class, this could only prove a total adventure ending in a putsch not a revolution.

The rebels successfully occupied the Moscow mayor's officers, from which the siege of the parliament had been co-ordinated, but they were bloodily repulsed when they tried to take *Ostankino*, the main TV station. This attack gave Yeltsin just the pretext he needed to get the army to act. He could now claim that he was facing an attempt to seize power by the Stalinist-nationalist-fascist block, that they had shed the first blood and that he was the injured party. Thus, after an initial very dangerous reverse, Yeltsin was able to launch a devastating counter-offensive. In the following hours he comprehensively defeated the rebels after nearly destroying the White House in a violent assault in which several hundred people died.

On Sunday, 3 October the conditions simply did not exist to launch an insurrection. It was an indispensable precondition to draw much greater numbers into mass protests against Yeltsin and not just in Moscow but throughout the country. Faced with the masses on the streets it is very likely that the army would have refused Yeltsin's requests to fire on the masses or that more troops would have deserted to the anti-Yeltsin forces. Instead the Stalinists and the nationalists showed their fear and contempt for the masses, as well as their total lack of realism, by engaging in an attempt to seize power with a few hundred armed civilians or ex-soldiers. Until now it is not clear who really initiated and led this putsch.

Khasbulatov's actions were completely contradictory. He tried to persuade the parliament to compromise with Yeltsin several times during the siege. After calling for armed action outside the White House he later denied knowledge of who had ordered the armed assault on *Ostankino*. Rutskoi seems to have been swept along by events rather than shaping them. It seems likely that it was the hardline Stalinist and ultra-nationalists who were the real organisers of the abortive insurrection. They were doubtlessly seeking to carry out a rapid coup d'etat in which the broad masses would not get the opportunity to play any significant or independent role. The elitist squads of *Afghantsi*, trained commandos from the Union of Officers, or the brownshirts of *Pamyat* tried to overthrow Yeltsin with their own puny forces. They clearly hoped that if they could take control of the TV and other important buildings the army chiefs would decide to support them. Their goal was an ultra-nationalist conservative dictatorship. Clearly revolutionary communists could and can have no political solidarity with this reactionary objective.

#### **The Imperialists and the Moscow battles.**

The most fervent supporters of Yeltsin's coup were Clinton, Major and the other EC leaders. Despite their hypocritical claims to be the champions of democracy, as soon as their economic

interests dictate it they sacrifice it without a moments hesitation. The West's interference in the internal affairs of Russia has been incredibly brazen. All the imperialists backed Yeltsin because they see him as their man in Moscow. They believe that he alone can complete the destruction of the workers' state, restore a free market economy and support their NATO and UN foreign policy. They knew very well that the big majority in the parliament were also pro-market. They knew its democratic credentials were no better and no worse than Yeltsin's. But his fall would create a situation in which the influence of the Stalinists and the nationalists would be much greater and Russia's willingness to do imperialism's bidding in world politics would be diminished.

But some imperialist commentators have been critical of the way in which Yeltsin managed the situation. Several western journalists criticized Yeltsin for issuing authoritarian ultimatums instead of trying to make a deal. Some are even claiming that we are witnessing the end of the Yeltsin era. Just as Gorbachev was useful to the West to reform the totalitarian state and later Yeltsin served them in demolishing the remnants of the Communist Party and the USSR, so now they are talking about finding new figures without a Stalinist background who could be more easily managed by the the US and the EC.

The outcome of the crisis has not completely satisfied the West. Yeltsin showed that he had little active popular support and that his military backing was far from total and whole hearted. The troops that he used to attack the parliament had to be brought from cities some distance from Moscow and they obviously had problems with their supplies. Several army units clearly resisted being used to repress the parliament. Even the Interior Ministry's Dzerzhinsky Regiment (Yeltsin's main pillar of support and responsible for Moscow security) is rumoured to have split.

But most worrying for the West is the fact that to obtain the support of the army Yeltsin has probably made a series of concessions to the High Command, concessions that could prove irksome to imperialism. Thus he has warned the East European states against joining NATO and claimed an equal say in the security affairs of the region with the West. He has claimed the right to intervene in events in what is called the "near abroad", (ie all the former USSR states), to protect Russian minorities. He has allowed the Russian military to bring about the defeat of pro-US Eduard Shevardnadze in Abkhazia.

The army when it came to the crunch decided to back Yeltsin because they realised that the parliament had no clear programme, little popular support and would be unable to appease the powerful West. The Russian army wanted above all to avoid any threat to its unity, and desperately feared the prospect of civil war. They preferred to use the events to wring concessions from Yeltsin and to use him for their own purposes. Now Yeltsin has trampled the constitution under the boots of the soldiers. He is henceforth much more vulnerable to blackmail by the military and to any future coup d'etat.

### **The Revolutionary Alternative**

During these two decisive weeks the key task of Marxists in Russia was to fight for a general strike to smash Yeltsin's grab for total power. Revolutionaries should have agitated for the trade unions and the workplace committees to form strike committees with delegates elected by rank and file workers to organize the struggle. The workers should have tried to arm themselves, calling on the soldiers to disobey Yeltsin's orders and create soldiers' councils. To aid in mobilising the working class it was indispensable to raise demands that workers could feel as vital to their interests and that they would be willing to defend with their own lives. Revolutionary communist should raise these slogans:

- For a minimum living wage and pensions with a sliding scale to protect it against inflation Organise the supply of foodstuffs and basic products at low prices under the control of workers' and farmers' direct exchange committees

- Defend full employment and job security! No sackings or factory closures! Occupy any factory that management tries to close!

- \* Expel the corrupt bureaucracy from the management of the factories, pits and commercial enterprises! Open all the books! Investigate and expropriate all the mafia businessmen! For

workers' control, exercised by the producers, users and consumers, over both production and distribution!

- Restoration of cheap housing and the health service under workers' control! Seize the Dachas and the big apartments of the old nomenklatura and those of the new rich. Confiscate all state buildings that are not serving the collective good of the working class and convert them to accommodation for young, the unemployed, the homeless, and returning soldiers!

- For workers' management in every enterprise! Stop any more privatisations! Re-nationalise the privatised companies and banks!

- Confiscate all the accumulated privileges of the bureaucrats, the special shops and cars, bank accounts, their high and corruption-based incomes! Expropriation of the new rich and the foreign multinationals! Renounce all the agreements with the IMF!

- Full restoration of the monopoly of foreign trade and planned economy but under the control of workers' councils.

- Complete freedom for the workers' movement! End the government's monopoly of the TV stations putting them under the control of the workers' organizations. Repeal all repressive legislation and abolish internal passports and residence permits. Immediate dissolution of the KGB, Interior Ministry troops, the Omon and other the repressive forces!

- For the formation and arming of a workers' militia based on the factories and other workplaces.

- Complete democratization of the Russian army. Expel all the restorationist and anti-working class officers! The soldiers should create democratic soldiers' councils and have the right to strike, reject anti-working class orders and elect their officers!

- For the right of self-determination, including secession if they wish it, of all the oppressed nationalities!

- For independent and militant trade unions! For workers' councils with delegates elected and recallable by rank and file assemblies! All power to the workers' organizations!

- Instead of currying favour with the Western imperialists we need to appeal to the workers and peasants which they exploit worldwide! The workers need an internationalist policy to replace Yeltsin's support for the USA. Down with secret diplomacy! Publish all the secret agreements made by Yeltsin and Gorbachev with imperialism!

### **Tactics during the October battle and after**

Since the collapse of Yanayev's coup in August 1991 Boris Yeltsin has been the main enemy of the workers of the Russian Federation. It has been the central task of revolutionaries to work for his overthrow by the class action of the proletariat. In the battle between the parliament and Yeltsin, revolutionaries had to defend the White House and the parliament against Yeltsin's siege and attack but without giving any political support to Khasbulatov, Rutskoi, or the hardline Stalinists. We would not have made any sort of "popular front" with the ultra-nationalists and fascists. Indeed we would demand that the self-proclaimed socialists and communists break with them. The presence of these groups could only discredit the anti-Yeltsin opposition. If they gained any hold on power they could be expected to launch pogroms against Jews, national minorities and genuine communists.

When Yeltsin launched his coup he promised elections for a new powerless parliament in December and, six month later, presidential elections. The parliament sought only to oblige him to convene simultaneous presidential and parliamentary elections in December. This squabbling over equally bourgeois constitutional forms could present no real alternative to the population. Revolutionaries should demand the abolition of both the presidency and the parliament in favour of a republic of workers' councils.

But we have to recognize that the masses remain heavily imbued with bourgeois democratic illusions. That is why we have raised and continue to raise the demand for a revolutionary constituent assembly. Elections to it should be conducted under the control of the mass workers' organisations and voting should take place in the work places. We should fight to make its representatives accountable to, and recallable by, assemblies of their electors, held both in the workplaces and on working class housing estates. This would give the masses the means of doing

away with Yeltsin's bonapartist presidency and with the corrupt caricature of a parliament. A campaign for the convening of such an assembly could be a powerful weapon in awakening the Russian masses from their atomisation, political apathy, and cynicism. This slogan became particularly important with Yeltsin's dissolution of parliament. It could also have exposed Rutskoi for the empty populist demagogue he is.

#### **Yeltsin's next target**

Hard on the heels of the crushing of the White House rebels Yeltsin has imposed a severe state of emergency, a strict curfew and a ban on sixteen parties, and several newspapers. He has called on both local and regional soviets to dissolve themselves and has proclaimed that elections to new councils as well as the Federal State Duma will take place on 16 December. He has remained silent on his earlier promise to bring forward presidential elections to Spring 1994. Hitherto Yeltsin's writ has not run in vast areas of the country. In whole regions and autonomous republics the power is still in the hands of the local bureaucrats and nationalist leaders. Many of them want more autonomy and even independence. Thus for Yeltsin to finally and completely end the dual power situation throughout the entire Federation he must crush these parliaments and leaders over the next weeks and months. He must ensure that they elect compliant tools of Moscow in the December elections.

This may well prove a harder task than storming the White House. A majority, forty five out of the eighty eight regions and republics within the Russian Federation, refused to openly support Yeltsin's September 21st dissolution of the parliament. Instead they moved to set up a "Council of the Subjects of the Federation" as an alternative to Yeltsin's Federal Council and they decided to declare the Presidency vacant and to convene simultaneous presidential and parliamentary elections in February 1994. Forty three of the regions did not support his state of emergency. As the London *Guardian* commented on 6 October; "the regions have real power. Unlike parliament which Mr Yeltsin has succeeded in closing, they control Russia's purse strings. Some have already started a tax strike by refusing to send to Moscow the money they raise".

After the storming of parliament Yeltsin ordered the arrest of the head of the Bryansk region and dismissed the governors of Amur and Novosibirsk. The latter had recently declared a temporary suspension of privatisation in his region. Fourteen Siberian leaders had threatened to blockade the trans-Siberian railway. Medvedev, Yeltsin's representative in charge of the regions, has threatened them, saying, "political sanctions should be imposed on councils up to their suspension and the calling of new elections". The autonomous republics of Mordova, Tartarstan, Kalmykia, Chechenia and others have all been threatened.

In contrast to this the presidents of nearly all the independent CIS republics forcefully supported him. They did this both to help get Western dollars but also from fear of ending up with an expansionist Kremlin.

#### **For Political Revolution**

Revolutionaries should oppose each and every repressive measure from Yeltsin against these regions or republics, whether their leaders are old Stalinists or fast track restorationists that merely want to do independent deals with the imperialist multinationals. We should of course denounce the plots and manoeuvres of these local bureaucrats whose only aim is to maintain their privileges or reach lucrative deals with imperialism. Despite the fact that we were and remain opposed to the fragmentation of the Russian Federation we should nevertheless defend the right to self-determination of the republics and regions against the new dictator.

We do not believe that the present regime or its constitution can be democratically reformed. We fight for a political revolution that smashes the bureaucracy, the new rich and their repressive forces, reverses the process of capitalist restoration, expropri-

ates the privatised companies, restores in a new democratic form the planned economy with workers' management, adopts an anti-capitalist foreign policy that stops the selling out of Palestine, Afghanistan, Cuba, Eastern Europe and Southern Africa to the imperialists and promotes the international socialist revolution. We want a revolution that gives all power to workers' councils. Because the level of concessions already made to capitalism this revolution will have to take on an important social dimension.

We fight for the organization of democratic local and regional workers' councils that take all the power in these regions and republics. Only a socialist, voluntary, federation of these councils could open the way to a genuine working class solution. We are against a new Great Russian Empire nor do we support the re-establishment of a bureaucratic USSR. We are in favour of a new socialist federation of all the Russian and non-Russian republics and regions of the former USSR, the former Comecon states and beyond.

The working class must now be prepared for new and far worse attacks. For over seventy years since Stalinism crushed the self-organisation and democracy of the Russian proletariat. So far this colossal working class has been unable to recover its revolutionary traditions. Now, faced with the attacks Yeltsin will try to launch, with the backing of the army, the working class must recover its fighting capacities or it will suffer a truly historic defeat that will effect the entire world working class. The situation is not hopeless. In Poland after four years of a Solidarnosc regime's attacks, the pro-imperialist neo-liberal's are largely discredited and the social democratised Stalinists have massively increased their influence.

In the Ukraine, Lithuania and Albania similar processes are taking place. In the absence of any revolutionary leadership disillusion with a market, that not only failed to bring prosperity but brought hunger and poverty, is turning the working class towards the renovated former Stalinists. But there are doubtless sections of workers who are seeking an alternative to the "social market economy" or the return to some sort of *nomenklatura* dictatorship. It is to these workers that revolutionaries must urgently address themselves.

Throughout the former USSR and Eastern Europe it is indispensable to lay down the basis of a new Bolshevik, Leninist-Trotskyist party that seeks to organize and promote working class resistance and fight for workers' council power. Only such a party can lead the masses in all their fights against the economic attacks, against the attacks on their democratic rights. Only such a party can unmask the nationalist fomentors of strife and pogroms, the sinister Stalinist plotters and their fascist allies who want a capitalist totalitarian dictatorship. Only such a party can fight the social democrats, centrists and liberals who want to prostrate the workers before the multinationals. Only such a party can lead a proletarian revolution for a socialist federation of workers' councils—east and west.

For decades the bureaucracy falsely said that the USSR had achieved socialism in one country. They identified the "proletarian dictatorship" with the uncontrolled dictatorship of a pampered and privileged bureaucracy. The Trotskyists were killed in their tens of thousands for fighting against the installation and consolidation of this regime. Yet we always defended the USSR and the gains of the planned economy, for all its distortions, against imperialist attack. Now we alone consistently and openly fight against all attempts to transform the country into an openly capitalist dictatorship. We want to smash both the remnants of the old privileged oligarchy and the embryo of the new capitalist class. We want to re-impose a revolutionary proletarian dictatorship such as that which Lenin and Trotsky led. This would in fact represent a huge extension of democracy for the toilers themselves whilst acting as an iron fist against all the new rich, the black marketeers, the mafias, the old bureaucrats and the new capitalists.

**Statement of the International Secretariat of the LRCI  
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