

HOW THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION CAME TO S.AFRICA

by Z. NKOSI

On November 7 the progressive forces of the whole world will celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Russian Revolution. In a resolution adopted on January 31, 1977, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union declared: "The triumph of the October Revolution¹ is the major event of the 20th Century, which radically changed the course of development of all mankind". After describing the transformation brought about by the revolution in Russian society, laying the foundations for the establishment of socialism, the resolution added:

"At the same time the heroic struggle waged by the workers and peasants of Russia, to which working people around the world gave their warm and effective support, revealed, as Lenin wrote, 'to all countries something — and something highly significant — of their near and inevitable future'. It enabled all oppressed and fighting peoples to also see their own impending victory".

Few people today can properly realise the tremendous impact made by the Russian revolution at the time. It came in the middle of a bloody and protracted war in which millions of people had lost their lives and lands had been devastated for the greater glory of imperialism,

for a redistribution of the markets and assets of international capitalism. In war as in peace the majority of the victims of imperialism were the working people, fodder in war for the capitalists' cannon as they were in peace for his forges, mills and mines in the overall interests of profit-taking.

For centuries men had dreamed of a social order based on peace and justice in which all would co-operate for the common good, sharing the toil and the fruits of labour in a spirit of harmony which knew no barriers of class, creed or colour. Sir Thomas More's "Utopia" written in 1515/16, William Morris' "News from Nowhere", Butler's "Erewhon" ("Nowhere" spelt backwards) — the very names of books seeking to describe the ideal society carry with them the aura of scepticism about the possibility of their achievement in real life. The world had seen the English, French and American revolutions with their magnificent declamations of liberty congeal into bourgeois class tyrannies in which the exploitation of man by man had not been abolished. The most advanced lands were dominated by capitalism, the more backward by the remnants of feudalism, tribal or clerical despotism. In the period before the first world war imperialism had thrust its greedy and bloodstained tentacles into every corner of the globe, justifying its rapacity and atrocities by deliberate resort to racism of the most blatant kind.

The Russian Revolution at a stroke tore aside the horrible curtain of lies and blood which concealed from man's sight the path forward to the socialist future. The world-wide system of class exploitation was broken for the first time as the working men and women of Russia, led by the Bolshevik Party and guided by the theories of Marx, Engels, Lenin and their comrades, took power and began to lay the foundations for the new socialist order.

Without doubt the Russian Revolution has been the outstanding historical event of our era, marking a decisive turning point in the struggle for the elimination of class conflict and class tyranny and exploitation, opening up for the oppressed peoples of the world the glittering prospect of liberation, the ending of imperialism and steady advance on the road to socialism, the ultimate achievement of that communist society for which men had fought and sacrificed down the ages. Though there was no radio or television in those days, the news was flashed round the world by telegraph and made an electric impact everywhere. Its reverberations are being felt with ever-increasing intensity today as the contending class forces engage in the last rounds of struggle.

Instant Recognition

Nowhere was the Russian Revolution greeted with more ready understanding and sympathy than in South Africa, where the progressive forces headed by the International Socialist League immediately recognised both its character and its long-term significance.

There were, of course, two revolutions in Russia in 1917. The first in March (February old style), succeeded in overthrowing the Czar but, although brought about largely by the struggle of the revolutionary forces, did not transfer power into the hands of the people but into those of the bourgeoisie with Kerensky as their eventual leader. The Provisional Government, in fact, took fright at the revolutionary force which had been unleashed, and which coexisted with it in the succeeding months in the form of the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies. The bourgeoisie tried to halt the further progress of the revolution, and did nothing to solve the major issues which had brought about the revolution in the first place — the questions of land, the 8-hour working day, the problem of the oppressed nationalities. Above all, the Provisional Government did nothing to end the slaughter of the Russian soldiers on the battlefield where, ill-led, ill-fed and ill-equipped they were hapless victims of the German war machine. On the contrary, within days of the overthrow of the Czar, the Provisional Government had issued a manifesto to the army at the front and to the fleet assuring them that "the struggle against their foreign enemies will not for a moment stop". The war was to be pursued with new vigour.

It was for this reason that the March Revolution was welcomed unreservedly by Russia's wartime allies. In an editorial "The New Russia", the *Star* of March 19, 1917, proclaimed that on the whole the news was welcome. The Czar had stood for illiberal and tyrannical rule.

"The fact that this deposition was effected in a few hours and bloodlessly, is, perhaps the most remarkable proof of all of the strength of the movement which has swept like a flame through Petrograd and Moscow and the provinces — devouring the old regime, cleansing Russia of the foulness and rottenness which have hitherto been the despair of every good patriot.

"Nothing quite like this revolution has ever happened in history".

News reports stated that the old regime had been penetrated by German agents, the Empress herself was a German. "The shortage of food, the lack of organisation and the neglect of the most elementary precautions are ascribed to German influences". There was the evil influence of the court monk Rasputin, whose assassination in 1916 had

triggered off the disturbances leading to the March revolution. All these were advanced as reasons for the Russian debacle on the battlefield, and the *Star* editorialised further:

“It would be quite wrong to suppose that the Russian revolution is anti-dynastic in character We may well believe that in this upheaval Russia has found herself; that a nation has been born again; and that for the future the war against the common enemy will be waged with a vigour and a determination surpassing any previous effort of our ally”.

The French and British Ambassadors in Petrograd entered into business relations with the executive of the Duma. Lloyd George declared in the Commons: “It is satisfactory to know that a new Government has been formed for the express purpose of carrying on the war with increased vigour. Free peoples are the best defenders of their own honour” – remarks greeted with cheers by his supporters but amidst ironical Irish jeers and cries of “Why don’t you practise what you preach?” The Commons passed unanimously a motion of “fraternal greetings” to the Duma and heartfelt congratulations to the Russian people. Pro-war Labour leaders in Britain – Henderson, Hodge, Barnes and Brace – sent a message to Russian Labour leaders stating that organised labour was watching with the deepest sympathy the efforts of the Russian people to rid themselves of the reactionary elements which are impeding the advance to victory. A Reuter report stated that the British press greeted the revolution with “unmixed joy”, regarding it as “the most crushing blow yet dealt at Germany”.

In its weekly journal *The International* the International Socialist League of South Africa saw the situation more clearly. The revolution was instantly recognised as having brought about a transfer of power to the bourgeoisie, and in the March 23 issue of the journal a contributor signing himself J.M.G. (Gibson) wrote deprecatingly:

“No, let us have no delusions, we don’t expect a Socialist State from this Revolution, it is nothing but the rising middle class securing the reins of Government for their own ends and bribing the workers with a few sops, as it is only by their power they will be able to reach their goal. The material conditions are not sufficiently developed to form that class consciousness that must manifest itself and be the deciding factor in the struggle to bring about the Socialist Commonwealth. Undoubtedly there is a strong Revolutionary Party, but a party that must necessarily be small and not sufficiently strong to carry the mass, who will be quite content to accept the sops thrown to them”.

Gibson’s interpretation of the nature of the Provisional Government was correct, but his understanding of the nature of the revolutionary process which was under way in Russia was sadly at fault. However, the

readers of *The International* did not have to wait until November to realise the truth. In the same issue editor Ivon Jones in a front-page editorial "170 Million Recruits" replied to Gibson:

"The Socialist International has become a far more tremendous thing by the Russian Revolution. It means that a people of 170 million has swung into line with the great proletariat of all countries on its march to the Revolution by the side of which this and all previous ones are but 'shopkeeper's riots' in immensity . . .

"The importance of this step forward in the world's history can hardly be exaggerated. The rising capitalist class cannot achieve its political revolution without the aid of the workers, nor without sharing the fruits with them. The capitalist looks only to the immediate necessities of industry, no matter if his successors have to reap the whirlwind. The proletariat must look to the end; for in its fight the means and the end, the method and the objective, are at one. The capitalist seeks a political railroad for his system. He cannot win it without providing a railroad for the working class revolution.

"We see two streams in this, as in all previous revolution. The Industrial Capitalist cry is now 'ORDER'. The proletariat driving power cries 'Liberty'. But the workers having won their 'Programme of the Day', and the Capitalist the control of the State, the two streams immediately disunite and the class war begins on the last lap to the Socialist Revolution. Now is the dangerous hour. Now the dominant capitalist cry will be 'order', and it will be enforced at the cannon's mouth if necessary, 'tearing the side of the proletariat', as Marx once said, if the workers are not organised independently and strong to bear the shock of the recoil

"This is a bourgeois revolution, but arriving when the night of capitalism is far spent, it cannot be a mere repetition of previous revolutions. It partakes infinitely more of a victory for the proletariat, as well as for the industrial capitalist. Now the two classes pursue their several ways; one 'to prosecute the war abroad' and 'law and order' at home; the other to pursue the class war at home and 'the Socialist republic in all countries'. Let us look forward with great hope to the entry of the Russian elemental mass into the International class struggle for human emancipation. The day of its coming seems immeasurably nearer by this awakening."

The War on War

It is doubtful if any more perceptive or more prescient evaluation of the March revolution was published anywhere at the time. This can be

attributed not only to the insight of that remarkable Marxist thinker Ivon Jones but also to the collective wisdom and experience of the body of socialists who had organised themselves into the International Socialist League. The League had been born of a split in the ranks of the Labour Party caused by the war. While the majority of the Labour Party, after opposing the war at the outset, had eventually been swept by patriotic fervour, jingoism and chauvinism into supporting the pro-war stance of the Botha-Smuts Government, the minority remained true to the Stuttgart-Basle anti-war resolution of the Second International to which the Labour Party had declared its adherence at its 1913 conference.

The anti-war resolution of the Second International, formulated largely on the initiative of Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg, declared:

“If a war threatens to break out, it is the duty of the working class and of its parliamentary representatives in the countries involved to exert every effort to prevent the outbreak of war, using all the appropriate means, which naturally vary and rise according to the degree of sharpness of the class struggle and of the general political agitation. Should war none the less break out, it is their duty to intervene to bring it promptly to an end, and to strive with all their energies to utilise the economic and political crisis brought about by the war in order to stir up politically the masses of the people and hasten the downfall of capitalist class rule”.

The preamble to the resolution made it clear that the reference was to wars between capitalist states, in which the working class were the cannon-fodder and the victims. The 1914-1918 war fell clearly into this category. Defeated at the August 1915 conference of the Labour Party, the true socialist elements who had already formed themselves into a War on War League which attempted to function within the Party, were forced to leave its ranks and found the International Socialist League. In its first issue on September 10, 1915, the League's organ *The International* proclaimed: “Here we plant the flag of the New International in South Africa International working class unity . . . is now the only way of advance for Labour. The other way presents a vista of interminable despair with bayonets and cross bones stacked on either side. By this way of the New International alone can mankind hope for a release from the toils of the brute and rise to that higher plane where men shall scorn all conflict other than the conflict of mind with mind in the realm of the intellect.”

In the same issue an article by W.H. Andrews, the Labour Party chairman who had vacated his office to help form the ISL and became its first chairman, condemned as anti-socialist the “see it through”

policy advocated by Creswell, the leader of the pro-war majority of the Labour Party.

“Socialism can only succeed if it is international in its scope”, he argued. “Workers of the World unite was Marx’s clarion call One of the most fatal (errors) is that socialism can be established in water tight compartments the true path to human emancipation (is) the International Unity of the Working Class.”

The objects of the ISL were inter alia “to propagate the principles of International Socialism and anti-militarism and to promote International Socialist unity and activity”; one of the methods advocated was “to maintain and strengthen International working class organisation”.

From the very outset the ISL called for the formation of a new international. In the second issue of *The International* appeared an open letter from Ivon Jones as secretary addressed to the British section of the International Socialist Bureau and calling for the establishment of a World Party.

“What we have looked for so far in vain”, he said, “is news of any attempt to link up these anti-militarist minorities of the world into one New International Organisation to replace the old one which must be admitted to have failed.” He singled out the Italian Socialist Party and the Russian Social Democratic Party as the only ones which had remained true to their principles and suggested that they, together with the afore-mentioned minorities in other countries, formed the obvious foundations for the suggested new international structure. When, later in the year, the Zimmerwald conference decided to form an International Socialist Bureau, the ISL greeted the news with enthusiasm and *The International* commented in an editorial on December 17: “Now they (our members) can surely feel that we form at least a lowly outpost of the fast mobilising world army of Militant Socialism, members of a real Executive Internationale”.

At the first conference of the International Socialist League held in Johannesburg in January 1916 the Zimmerwald manifesto was endorsed and the League’s affiliation with the International Socialist Commission at Berne was carried unanimously. The Commission was urged to form a permanent commission to prepare for “a probable uprising of the proletariat at the conclusion of the war”. The ISL was to stress continuously that only international socialism could free the world from the horrors of capitalism and war.

Internationalism at Home

The founders of the ISL were whites, former members of the Labour Party and trade unionists who had borne the brunt of the many fierce

and bloody struggles of the white working class against the employers and the state during the previous decades in pursuit of their right to recognition of their unions, the right to collective bargaining and improvement of their wages and working conditions. They had joined the Labour Party because they realised that only through political action could the working class achieve its objectives. They left Labour and formed the ISL out of a commitment to anti-militarism, socialism and the international solidarity of the working class. Most of them were English-speaking, which meant that in the South African context they were in danger of becoming isolated from the mass of the working class, both white and black, as Afrikaners and Africans were sucked in increasing numbers into the industrial machine. Not all of them were Marxists, and not all of them proved able to extend their international outlook to include members of different national groups in South Africa itself, though from the outset the ISL had no colour bar.

The most forward-looking elements quickly realised that any true internationalism must not only aim at unity with Russian, Italian and German social-democrats but must also embrace unity of all sections of the working class in South Africa, black and white.

“An internationalism which does not concede the fullest rights which the Native working class is capable of claiming will be a sham”, wrote Ivon Jones in *The International* of October 1, 1915. “One of the justifications for our withdrawal from the Labour Party is that it gives us untrammelled freedom to deal, regardless of political fortunes, with the great and fascinating problem of the native. If the League deal resolutely and in consonance with Socialist principles with the native question, it will succeed in shaking South African capitalism to its foundations. Then and not till then, shall we be able to talk about the South African Proletariat in our International relations. Not till we free the native can we hope to free the white.”

A resolution moved by Bunting calling for “the abolition of all forms of Native indenture” and “the lifting of the Native worker to the political and industrial status of the white” was passed at the ISL’s first conference in January 1916. That same week *The International* stressed that the race question was the most burning issue confronting the movement and went to the root of socialist theory.

“Here we have a fight before us of a magnitude unexampled in any other section of the Socialist International. But a fight fraught with wonderful possibilities for the native and for the movement which he must inevitably dominate”.

Though Marxist writings on the national question had not yet reached South Africa, there were even the first glimmerings of the reali-

sation, later to dominate Communist thinking, that South Africa was confronted by a national as well as a class problem.

An editorial in *The International* of December 15, 1916, stated: "We do not believe in native, any more than we do in British or German, agitations *as such*. But we are not foolish enough to suppose that the economic emancipation of the worker can avoid taking special native forms in the case of the native workers, more especially as they are placed under special native forms of slavery today".

The pioneering nature of ISL thinking and action at this time can be appreciated only when one bears in mind that the national liberation movement itself was in its infancy. The African National Congress, formed only a few years previously in 1912, was largely under bourgeois influence and on the outbreak of war decided "to hang up Native grievances" and to support the Botha Government's war effort. Dube and other leaders hurried off to Pretoria to offer the services of Congress, only to receive the reply that this was a white man's war and the services of Africans in a combatant capacity were not wanted. As for the African working class, despite a history of militant strike actions stretching back to the beginnings of industrialisation in the 1880s, there was at the time of the first world war no organised African trade union movement. As far as the ISL could see, no vehicle existed either in the national or the class sphere which was capable of mobilising the African people for mass action against the colour bar, and for peace and socialism. Though at this stage lacking in theoretical understanding of the relationship between national and class struggle (a theory which was still to be elaborated in its modern form over the next two decades by the international as well as the South African working class movement), the ISL straight away began to accept the implications of its internationalism in the national context. Contacts began to be made with African leaders, there were appearances on joint platforms, the ISL and later the Communist Party promoted the organisation of the first African trade unions. Contact was also made with Coloured and Indian national organisations and trade unions and wherever possible joint activities were undertaken. Nor was this "reaching out" process restricted to blacks. Articles in Dutch were printed in *The International* and literature produced in Dutch for distribution amongst the Afrikaner workers.

Afrikaner Nationalism

For historical and national reasons, Afrikaner nationalists and international socialists shared common attitudes on a number of issues,

though their ideologies were quite different. They were both against the war. This led to Afrikaner nationalist identification with the Germans as the enemy of the English, something quite different from ISL opposition to militarism and war springing from equation of Allied and German imperialism alike as the enemies of the working class. But in addition there was a strong anti-capitalist strain in Afrikaner nationalism at this time, and indeed for many decades thereafter, deriving from the class background of the Afrikaner people, either on the land, or newly driven therefrom to join the ranks of the urban proletariat. It was the Englishman and the Jew who dominated in the mining houses, in business and on the stock exchange, and it was British imperialism which had destroyed the national independence of the Afrikaners embodied in the Boer republics.

These were some of the reasons leading Afrikaner nationalists to share in the general welcome for the Russian revolution, not only in March 1917 because it weakened the Allied front against the Germans, but also after November because it threatened international capitalism from which the Afrikaner was still largely excluded. There were other historical links between the Afrikaners and the Russians. The Czar had sent aid to the Boers during the 1899-1902 war. When the Russo-Japanese war broke out ex-President Kruger, then in exile in Switzerland, sent a donation of 500 roubles for the Russian wounded. After the Russian Revolution, many Afrikaner leaders openly expressed their interest in the Revolution and some even their sympathy with the Bolsheviks. In April 1917 the Nationalist paper *The Interpreter* advised South African Nationalists to "keep friendly eyes open to events in Russia", and in November Tielman Roos voiced the hope that the Germans and the Bolsheviks would, once the war was over, look with sympathy on the stand Afrikaner nationalists had taken. In 1919 General Hertzog "warmly commended Bolshevism to the public" and told a Nationalist Party congress that "Bolshevism is the will of the people to be free". His lieutenant Dr Malan, later to be Prime Minister after the 1948 elections, told a public meeting in Vryburg in 1920: "The aim of the Bolsheviks was that Russians should manage their own affairs without interference from outside. This was the same policy that Nationalists would follow in South Africa. The Bolsheviks stand for freedom, just like the Nationalist Party".

Nationalist Party ideas of freedom, of course, did not extend to blacks, and their philosophy was light-years away from that of the International Socialists. Nevertheless, their activities and propaganda at this time had some anti-imperialist content, and had the effect of leading some of the finest spirits among the Afrikaners towards the ISL

and later the Communist Party. It also helped to create an atmosphere in which all progressives would look with sympathy on the Russian revolutionaries. Bill Andrews noted in his diary at the time that in celebration of the March revolution at "Springs mine bottom shaft a kaffir blanket (red) flies from the shaft head", indicating support for the revolution at grass roots level. And an outstanding spirit like Olive Schreiner, according to the autobiography of her husband Cronwright, "looked upon Lenin as incomparably the greatest — if not the only great — man the European situation had produced and as a statesman of outstanding genius".

Yet nowhere was the true significance of the Russian revolution appreciated so keenly and with such enthusiasm as in the ISL, and especially in the columns of *The International*. As has already been indicated, the March events had been correctly interpreted by Ivon Jones and his colleagues, and as news of the intense struggle for power between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat in the ensuing months reached South Africa, *The International* continued to provide an uncannily accurate assessment of the contending forces. On May 11, 1917, the paper commented:

"The Russian workmen are simply wonderful. The joyful part of it is that there is going to be so many of them. To lead the world back from savagery to humanity seems to be their great mission. They are leaving capitalist government severely alone. The working class of Germany, France and England alone concerns them. And from their dominating position in the great Russian Revolution — and every new report enhances its greatness — they are going out to reclaim the lost sheep of the Socialist International, bringing international working class action to bear for the confounding of the capitalist conspiracy to murder off the best sons of Europe. Hail to the coming Revolution, now within living sight".

Whereas the first call of the Russian Soviet to the German Socialists to end the war had turned the Revolution sour in the eyes of the international bourgeoisie (the *Star* called it "a silly Utopian thing to do", and warned against the Left trend which it described as Jacobin). *The International* replied that this was "exactly what the ISL would have done They (the Russian workers) have proved that international united action of the workers is the only practical solution".

The ISL correctly evaluated the situation arising from the dual government of the Duma and the Soviet, the former an "engine of capitalism" resorting more and more to dictatorial methods in its attempts to hold back the popular forces, the other operating independently in its historical task of mobilising the masses to complete the socialist

revolution. Marx had said that “new and higher social institutions are never established until the material conditions of life to support them have been prepared in the lap of the old society itself”. *The International* regarded the Soviet as proof that these conditions were maturing in Russia. “Here we see ‘in the lap of the old society’ the Socialist Commonwealth forming, the workers directing society as workers and not as voters The Council of Workmen has given the nudge to the whole working class movement of Europe as to the lines on which the Social Revolution can be made imminent”. (May 18, 1917.)

The Return of Lenin

Lenin’s return to Russia in April spurred on the revolutionary forces. The bourgeoisie in Russia and abroad were getting more and more alarmed, and there were even those – as there were at the time of the Finnish war in 1940 – who were prepared to switch the war against the Reds. Worried by the de facto armistice which had been in effect on the Russian front since May, *The Star* on May 17 suggested: “Perhaps the most effective cure would be the most drastic – a German attack on the Russian soldiers who, reacting to the peace movement, have been so ready to ‘fraternise’ with the enemy”. *The International* replied: “Now *The Star* is showing the capitalist death’s head. The Hun, the destroyer of human freedom, is now preferable to a Russia controlled by working men. Workers, take note, when you take control, the Capitalists will forget their quarrels to shoot you down”. (May 18, 1917.) *The Star*’s thinking was shared by Smuts who at the end of the war argued for lenient treatment of Germany – “her appeasement now may have the effect of turning her into a bulwark against the on-coming Bolshevism of eastern Europe”. (Hancock: *Smuts, The Sanguine Years* pp. 510-512.)

The ISL did not confine their analysis to the columns of *The International*. Nominated as ISL candidates in the Provincial Council elections scheduled for June 20, Andrews and Bunting in their manifesto called on the electorate to vote socialist. “Fellow workers of South Africa, it is high time for you all to rise to the occasion, following the bold and inspiring lead of the Russian Workers”. In *The International* of June 8 Bunting contributed an article “The Star in the East” in which he said:

“Today we have the glorious opportunity by voting Socialist on June 20th of associating ourselves unmistakably with the magnificent lead of the Workmen’s and Soldiers’ Committees . . .

“ ‘Workers of the World’ cry the Russian revolutionaries to all nations, ‘for very shame arise! Unite! Assert yourselves! Shake off the

besotting fumes of your mad patriotic carouse. Be free men! Help us! Carry on forthwith throughout the earth what we have begun here! Already we are gripping the ruling class by the throat. The hour has arrived for us, all together, to fling away our chains! Thus alone shall we 'stop the war', rid the world of all its Kaisers and secure the only victory worth having. For all your dearly bought war 'gains' and the enemy's alike must inevitably, as by a stroke of the pen, become neutralised and of no avail once man's Empire over man is swept away, and real liberty, transcending parties, frontiers, races and nationalities, is won at last' ”.

Bunting and Andrews, both of whom had been elected to the Provincial Council when members of the Labour Party, lost the election because, in the words of *The International* after a previous election defeat, the “great mass of the proletariat . . . happens in South Africa to be BLACK, and therefore disfranchised and totally outcast”.

The appeal of the Russian Soviet for international working class action to stop the war and spread the cause of socialism began to take practical shape, and it was proposed that an international socialist conference should be held in Stockholm in September 1917. The ISL supported the proposed conference from the outset, and an article on the conference in *The International* of June 8, 1917, revealed that the South African internationalists had grasped the essence of internationalism.

“The ISL has been carrying on alone in South Africa the same fight that the Russian Socialists have waged – the international class war.” Warning against the hypocrisy of some of those claiming to be socialists who had advanced a claim to attend the Stockholm conference, the article stressed that no one who practised or accepted a colour bar had any right to be called a socialist, least of all Creswell, whose name was being bandied about by the Labourites.

“What does sympathy with the Russian Revolution imply, comrades?” asked *The International* indignantly, and explained: “It implies the solidarity of labour irrespective of race or colour. That phrase may be hackneyed so let us be precise. The Russian Revolution in South Africa means the welcome hand to the native workingman into the fullest social and economic equality he is capable of attaining with the white workingman. This is the bedrock on which we split in South Africa”. Nobody who acknowledged the colour bar had any right to represent South African workers at Stockholm. In the event a conference was held in Johannesburg on August 5 with delegates drawn from all parts of the country and a motion was passed reading:

“That a delegate be sent to the International Socialist Congress to be held at Stockholm or elsewhere to co-operate with the Socialist

comrades of all countries, belligerent or neutral, with a view to establishing a new International, and that the delegates be instructed to advocate and vote for a peace on the lines of a complete destruction of the Capitalist system and the introduction of the Socialist Commonwealth". Andrews was elected unanimously as delegate. He got no further than London, for the Allied authorities took steps to prevent the delegates from getting through to Stockholm, but his mission was not entirely wasted. He made contact with all sections of the British working class movement, in particular with those elements moving in the same direction as the ISL. He also made contact with Maxim Litvinoff, the Bolshevik representative in London, and in many long conversations with him both apprised him of the realities of the situation in South Africa, and learnt in return of the implications, national and international, of the Russian revolution. On his return home in June 1918, Andrews produced a pamphlet *The Workers' Revolution in Russia* which was printed in English, Afrikaans and Yiddish, giving the first comprehensive account of the Revolution, together with the first constitution of the new workers' state. It is perhaps symptomatic of the distance the movement still had to travel in South Africa that this pamphlet was not translated into any of the African languages.

Bolshevik Victory

Meanwhile, news of developments in Russia appeared regularly in *The International*, which throughout 1917 consistently supported what it described as Lenin's class war slogan that the aim of socialists should be to turn the national war into an international class war. The Bolsheviks, who had been in a minority in the Soviet in March, gained ground steadily as the Provisional Government and the Mensheviks failed to come forward with solutions for the pressing problems facing the people, peace, land and bread. The history of the months between March and November is full of lessons for revolutionaries everywhere, a fascinating story of the development of working-class consciousness and power in the face of the attempts by Kerensky and the bourgeoisie to suppress the Bolsheviks and halt the progress of the revolution. By refusing to be provoked into premature revolt, by constant and painstaking agitation and organisation among the workers and soldiers, the Bolsheviks eventually won the support of the majority for their policies. It was thanks not only to objective factors but also to the inspired work of Lenin and the Bolsheviks that the progression from the bourgeois to the proletarian stage of the revolution took only 8½ months.

Equally remarkable for South Africans is the fact that the ISL's thinking kept pace with that of Lenin and his comrades during this

period. It is easy enough to be wise after the event, to see links and make connections, knowing in advance what the outcome is to be. But to make a correct analysis in the confusion of the war atmosphere from a distance of 8,000 miles is testimony of the depth of Marxist understanding among the members of the ISL. On the eve of the Bolshevik revolution an article in *The International* of November 2 sensed that the crisis was nearing its climax.

“The Russian Revolution, like all previous revolutions, is incapable of coming to a resting place”, the paper stated. “It must either go forward to its proletarian end of a Social revolution or back to reactionary capitalism. It cannot poise at the moderate, enlightened bourgeois, pacifist, liberal-labour stage . . . the fight is becoming clearer cut between Lenin, out for the Social Revolution, and Milvukov (sic), out for capitalist reaction”. (Miliukov was the leader of the Constitutional Democrats, known as the Cadets, the party of right-wing reaction.)

On November 7 the guns of the *Aurora* battleship signalling the opening of the attack on the Winter Palace in Petrograd and the consummation of the socialist revolution reverberated not only in the Russian capital but through all the world. In Johannesburg, Cape Town, Durban and other centres where socialist groups had been functioning, the news was greeted with enthusiasm. *The International* of December 7 said:

“The developments in Russia baffle comment. Exultation admits of no commentary. What we are witnessing is an unfolding of the worldwide Commonwealth of Labour which, if the oppressed of all lands only knew, and knowing, were only free from the miasmas of the system and of hopes deferred, would sweep them into transports of gladness. It is this high ecstasy which animates the Russian people today . . .

“Our task in South Africa is a great one. We must educate the people in the principles of the Russian Revolution as we have never done before, by tens of thousands of leaflets. No comrade can stand today with arms akimbo, no branch should languish. It were a desertion of the cause. We have to prepare the workers against any attempt to mobilise them against their Russian comrades, and in so preparing spread the flames of the most glorious and most peaceful revolution of all time”.

The bourgeoisie, naturally, was less enthusiastic, in fact downright hostile, and the bourgeois press descended to the gutter in its search for epithets to smear the Bolsheviks. Reporting the revolution in its issue of November 9, *The Star* described Lenin as “the notorious German agent” and the following day alleged that his activities had been directed from Berlin via Stockholm. After reporting Lenin’s call for an end to the war,

the paper added hopefully that "a faked peace with Lenin and his gang of thieves, cut-throats and spies, is not likely, however, to be an enduring pact". It doubted whether outside Petrograd and Moscow Lenin had much support. In its issue of November 12 a headline proclaimed: "Lenin Regime Doomed Kerenski's Army Approaching" and its news report from London included a proclamation by Commissary (sic) Stankevich to the effect that: "The termination of the Bolshevik adventure is only a matter of days or hours". On November 14 the paper carried a report in which the Bolsheviks were described as "a herd of lunatics headed by a gang of scoundrels".

The Bolshevik regime survived the insults, the counter-revolution, the civil war, the famines and perils of the ensuing years, the rise of fascism and the horrors of the second world war, the threats of atomic devastation at the height of the cold war, the vicious provocations, intrigues and betrayals of the present day – the bastion of social revolution in the modern world as it was in 1917, enemy of imperialism, friend and ally of the forces of national liberation and progress everywhere.

And just as the Bolsheviks remained true to their mission, so too did the South African International Socialists. Their third annual conference in January was attended by a record number of delegates from many centres in an atmosphere described by *The International* as "jubilant and happy". Comrade Wade moved a resolution: "That this Third Annual Conference of the I.S.L. rejoices beyond measure at the triumph of the Russian Revolutionary proletariat under the banner of the Bolshevik wing of the Social Democratic Party, and pledges on behalf of the advanced proletariat of South Africa its growing support to stand by the Russian workmen against the Capitalist Governments of the whole world, that of South Africa included". It was further resolved to send greetings to the representative of the Russian Revolution in London, and Andrews was asked to get in touch with Litvinoff. The incoming Management Committee was instructed to concentrate on the organisation of the workers and to keep the principles of the Russian Revolution before the workers, by leaflet distribution and public meetings. The conference dispersed to cheers for the Russian Revolution and the singing of the Red Flag.

The Russian Revolution had made its indelible mark on the political situation in South Africa. It led to a great political upsurge in the post-war period, and provided the national and working class movements with immense new perspectives. The ISL was not the only socialist organisation in South Africa. Smaller groups existed in the other main centres of South Africa; one, the Industrial Socialist League of Cape

Town, called its monthly journal *The Bolshevik* under the impact of 1917.

After Lenin had launched the new world working-class organisation The Third International, the International Socialist League was among the first to affiliate, and called on all Marxist groups in South Africa to unite and establish a single revolutionary party. After a number of preliminary discussions, The Communist Party of South Africa was formed on July 31, 1921, a declaration of aims and a constitution were adopted and application was made for affiliation to the Third International. The revolutionary process in South Africa was now well under way.

In the ensuing years, the South African Communists have strengthened their links with the international Communist movement, of which its Party has been one of the most active and consistent components. Above all, the fraternal relationship between the South African Communist Party and the CPSU and the Soviet Union has developed and deepened over the years on the basis of the abiding principles of proletarian internationalism. Lenin said: "No force on earth is capable of taking from us the principal gains of our revolution, for they are no longer 'ours' but have become the gains of world history".

In the words of the late J.B. Marks, national chairman of the South African Communist Party, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Russian revolution: "In a very real and concrete sense, we of Africa, and all the world's fighters for national liberation, understand that those gains are ours as well, and we are standing up to claim them".

Note

1. Although the Russian Revolution occurred on November 7, 1917, and its anniversaries are celebrated on that date, it is often referred to as the October Revolution because Tsarist Russia was at that time using a different calendar from the rest of the world, the Julian Calendar, which was 11 days behind. Thus November 7 was October 25 in the old Russian calendar. Most other countries had long since abandoned the Julian calendar — Italy in 1582 and England in 1752.