

THE STRUGGLE FOR CONTROL OF SOVIET INDUSTRY: THE WORKERS' OPPOSITION, 1919-1922

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I.

The road the Bolsheviks travelled toward the consolidation of power in the early years after 1917 was not a smooth one. Civil war, famine, deprivation, economic chaos, and a host of other grave problems beset the new government. For a time, it appeared that each crisis resolved meant a new crisis on the horizon. Under such conditions of constant adversity, it is hardly surprising that some rank and file workers experienced a certain disillusionment with the revolution and its bearers in whom they had placed such high hopes.

One section of workers whose faith in the revolution suffered severe damage came to be known as the Workers' Opposition.¹ This essay will examine the composition of the Workers' Opposition and explore its platform and objectives. In addition, it will outline the steps taken by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (VKP[b]) to suppress the Workers' Opposition and the significance of this suppression for later opposition movements within the VKP(b). Finally, it will discuss the last-ditch effort by the Opposition to appeal to international communism for support.

To provide a frame of reference with which to view the Workers' Opposition, it is first necessary to review the evolution of organized labor in Russia just before and during the October Revolution. For it may be said that the Workers' Opposition, more than any other dissenting group, had its roots in the proletariat.²

II.

At the time of the February 1917 Revolution, Russian labor was still ill-organized and inchoate.³ Following the February upheaval labor searched for a handhold to which it could cling, with the result that trade union membership grew rapidly between February and October. Along with the increase in union membership came demands for higher wages, shorter hours, and finally, the key issue, workers' control over production.⁴ As will become evident later on, the proletarians who came to be associated with the Workers' Opposition were in the forefront of those who voiced these aspirations.

The movement toward workers' control was apparently relatively spon-

taneous.⁵ Lenin and the Bolsheviks, not for the first time, lagged behind the mood of the masses and it was June before Lenin publicly declared his support for workers' control.⁶ From the trade unions' standpoint, Lenin's support was not considered crucial, since they were controlled largely by the Mensheviks until October.⁷ But by the time of the Bolshevik accession to power the trade unions had become more radical and the march toward workers' control over production was in full stride. The fledgling Bolshevik dictatorship quickly seized the issue, no doubt hopeful that it might help shore up support among the proletariat.

On 26 October,⁸ just after the Bolshevik takeover, the II Congress of Soviets issued an appeal "... to the Workers, Soldiers, and Peasants in Connection with the Victory of the Bolshevik Revolution of November 8 [October 26], 1917." Among other things, the appeal stated that "The Soviet power . . . establishes workers' control over production. . ."⁹ The regime then promulgated a decree on 14 November 1917 which stated that workers' control was to be exercised through the already existing factory committees. The committees would be empowered to supervise production, fix output, and perform the various tasks of management necessary to running an industry.¹⁰ It thus seemed that the Bolshevik rise to power would assure for the workers that which they wanted the most — worker management.

Nor was there any sign of a Bolshevik *volte face* in the early months of power. On 13 December 1917 the government sent out instructions on the implementation of its earlier decree.¹¹ And by January 1918 the trade unions began to amass considerable power, an accretion which continued throughout most of the year.¹² The trade unions exercised autonomy for nearly two full years,¹³ but by the beginning of 1919 the first ominous signs of centralization had begun to appear.

What the Workers' Opposition would call the "stagnation" of the revolution can be discerned in the evolution of salary policies. At first, the ratio of wages seldom exceeded 2:1 (highest paid to lowest paid) in conformance with the notion that wages under socialism should converge in the direction of equalization.¹⁴ But in April 1919 salaries for high-ranking Soviet personnel were adjusted upward.¹⁵ Eight days later, "responsible political workers" were granted higher stipends.¹⁶ The bureaucracy had begun to reassert itself. And it was not only salaries which stirred the Workers' Opposition to life. As the Civil War outcome became apparent, the now more confident Bolshevik government retracted many of the concessions it had made to labor and favored a more centralized administration of industry. It appeared that workers' control over production was headed for extinction.

In the face of this drop in both the relative wages and power of the workers, a number of proletarians expressed their growing dissatisfaction with this newest turn of the revolution. In 1919 the Workers' Opposition appeared, at first as a holding action against the erosion of workers' control and later as a

vocal minority trying to regain that which had been lost.

It should be noted that the Workers' Opposition could scarcely have been called an organized group at all when it first appeared in 1919.¹⁷ It had no formal party organization, no official press organ, and it declared loudly that it adhered to the Bolshevik Party as the vanguard of the revolution. Nevertheless, the Workers' Opposition had a significant following and some notable leaders. Before looking at the demands of the Opposition, then, the nature of its leadership and the composition of its rank and fill will be examined.

It has already been mentioned that the Workers' Opposition was primarily a worker-based movement, rather than an intellectual one. This fact has led one historian to claim that the Workers' Opposition lacked any leaders of note.¹⁸ It is true that with one exception the Workers' Opposition lacked a spokesperson who occupied a leading place in pre-1917 revolutionism, but some of its leaders rose to prominence precisely as a result of their association with the movement.

The Workers' Opposition movement was founded by A. G. Shliapnikov in 1919, while he was the chairman of the Metal Workers' Union and a member of the Central Council of Trade Unions.¹⁹ Although he scarcely possessed the stature of a Lenin or a Trotsky, he *had* been Peoples' Commissar for Labor immediately after the Bolshevik Revolution.²⁰ The fact that he held this position for a time indicates that he was no stranger to the Social-Democratic ranks.²¹ Furthermore, Shliapnikov, a former metal worker, served on the Central Committee of the VKP(b) in 1921, a further indication of his political importance.²²

Alexandra Kollontai was perhaps the best known leader in the Workers' Opposition. She had not been a founder of the movement, only joining in January 1921,²³ but her prominence lent prestige to the Opposition's platform.²⁴ In 1921 she published a pamphlet, *The Workers' Opposition*, which became the definitive statement of the goals of the movement.

Other notable leaders of the Opposition included S. Medvedev, a leading figure in the Metal-Workers' Union in Moscow,²⁵ A. Kiselev, president of the Central Committee of the All-Russian Miners' Union, and I. Kutuzov, president of the Central Committee of the Textile Workers' Union.²⁶ Also, G. Miasnikov, although a long-time advocate of peasants' unions, nevertheless closely associated himself with the Workers' Opposition.²⁷ As Kollontai correctly pointed out in her pamphlet, almost all of the Opposition leaders associated with the trade unions.²⁸

More important than the leadership, though, were the types of trade union workers who joined the Opposition. It is difficult to get accurate figures on the specific jobs of the Opposition backers, but judging from the trade union affilia-

tion of the leadership the Workers' Opposition appears to have been composed primarily of skilled (and, therefore, presumably more politically literate) workers in metallurgy, mining, textiles, and similar fields.²⁹ This fact carries a two-fold significance: first of all, it indicates that the workers who opposed the perceived "bureaucratism" of the Bolsheviks were likely to be more politically conscious and therefore antagonistic on ideological as well as secular grounds; in addition, it means that the Workers' Opposition posed a threat to the economically troubled Soviet government out of all proportion to the actual numbers of workers involved. The loss of man/days among skilled workers (who are always difficult to replace and were even more so under 1921 Soviet conditions) had the potential for causing serious harm to the economic recovery and stabilization of the Soviet regime. This potential for disruption may account for the rapid steps taken by Lenin and others to suppress the Opposition movement.

A good example of the salience of this skill-profile of Opposition members may be seen in the case of the powerful Metal-Workers' Union. A brief look at some of the activities of the metal workers will serve to illustrate both their political consciousness and their economic importance. In 1913, the average wage for a factory worker was around 22 rubles per month. But a skilled metal worker might make as much as 100 rubles per month or more.³⁰ The metal workers were, therefore, near the top end of the proletarian wage scale. After the February 1917 Revolution, the metal workers supported socialist demands, gave money to the committee to combat the Kornilov uprising, and allowed the Military Revolutionary Committee to have its headquarters in the Metal-Workers' Union building.³¹

Furthermore, early statistics regarding the social ties of urban workers reflect some illuminating data. One case is that of workers who labored in factories part of the year and then returned to their rural holdings (that is, workers who still had peasant ties and a peasant outlook). Of those engaged in the metal trades, only 11.1 per cent did so (the lowest percentage of all trades reported) while the percentage in other trades ranged as high as 65.4 percent (for the food and beverage industry).³² This indicates that the metal workers *were*, to a great extent, the very backbone of the Russian urban proletariat before 1917, and, as has been noted, they had been very active in the revolutionary struggle.³³

The importance of the Metal-Workers to the Bolshevik regime was underscored by the fact that the first trade union agreement of the new Peoples' Commissariat of Labor was with the Petrograd Metal-Workers.³⁴ At the height of the Civil War, a decree of 20 August 1920 held that, since the regime deemed metal workers highly important and since they were in short supply, they were required to register with local officials within one week, Red Army membership notwithstanding.³⁵ So it was, when the metal workers emerged as a leading force in the Workers' Opposition, Lenin rightly feared the consequences of widespread dissatisfaction among them.

The question as to how many or what percentage of the metal-workers, and other groups of workers for that matter, belonged to the Workers' Opposition at any one time is impossible to answer. Since the Opposition was never a formal party with precise membership rosters, these figures may long remain a mystery. It is known, however, that it garnered as much as 21 per cent of the vote at a Moscow Guberniia Party Conference in November 1920 and 30 per cent at the II All-Russia Congress of Miners in early 1921.³⁶ In addition, it appears that the Opposition was stronger in Ukraine than elsewhere, though figures are not readily available on the percentages involved.³⁷ Some of this regional strength may be attributed to the anti-Sovietism in Ukraine, rather than to firm support of the Opposition's platform.³⁸ Based on the currently available data, it may be surmised (with caution and even trepidation) that the Workers' Opposition, at its zenith, could have involved as many as one of every five workers in those skilled trades with large unions and in urban areas. It seems likely that the percentage would be considerably lower in provincial areas where political consciousness was suppositionally lower, and perhaps slightly higher in Ukraine, where separatist tendencies and anti-Russianism may have swelled the ranks.

Although the numbers of adherents of the Workers' Opposition were admittedly small, it has been shown that the social profile of the membership made it an important minority. A look at the general demands of the Workers' Opposition will illustrate not only their basic goals but also why they felt the Bolsheviks had betrayed them.

IV.

It is safe to say that the major issue for the Workers' Opposition was control of the factories. As pointed out earlier, the idea of workers' control of production had gained a firm foothold among the trade unions by the time of the October Revolution. Rightly or wrongly, many workers had interpreted the Socialist revolution as their opportunity to exercise direct ownership and control of factories and industries. The Bolsheviks, in the chaotic period just prior to October, had done nothing to dispel this belief and in fact, as mentioned earlier, had encouraged it.

In the immediate aftermath of October, the workers' aspirations seemed to be realized. Not only the Decree on Labor, promulgated in the heat of the moment, but other edicts, issued as late as 1919, seemed to support the workers' demands. In December 1918, the government decreed that the establishment of production norms by the assessment committees of the trade unions was permitted.³⁹ Furthermore, internal works regulations were to be made by the unions "for nationalized, public, and private enterprises and institutions. . . ." ⁴⁰ — in other words, for everything. In November 1919, another decree permitted

the establishment of Workers' Disciplinary Courts to be controlled by the trade unions; these courts were empowered to punish workers up to and including sending them to concentration camps.⁴¹

These decrees, as well as others in this period, were issued when the outcome of the Civil War was still in grave doubt. As the tide of war turned in the Bolsheviks' favor, labor policies took on a new, and to many workers unsettling, aspect. In June 1920, the output quotas for factories became the responsibility of the Peoples' Commissariat of Labor and could only be *implemented* by the trade unions.⁴² The dream of workers' control was fading.

The primary cause for the loss of workers' control was Lenin's reintroduction of the concept of one-man management. Lenin saw strict one-man administration as vital to the recovery of the Soviet economy.⁴³ Quoting a speech he had written two years earlier, he told the IX Congress of the VKP(b) in 1920 that "We must learn to combine the 'public meeting' democracy of the working people . . . with *unquestioning obedience* to the will of a single person, the Soviet leader, while at work."⁴⁴ The only people qualified for management tasks were the former (that is to say, bourgeois) factory bosses.⁴⁵ Though labelled "specialists" to disguise their origins, these faces seemed all too familiar to the class-conscious workers.⁴⁶ Lenin defended his policy by pointing out that the use of specialists would be only for the "transitional" phase of the revolution and reminded his comrades that ". . . the art of administration does not descend from heaven, it is not inspired by the Holy Ghost."⁴⁷

Unimpressed, the Workers' Opposition called for a return to collective management and resisted Lenin's pressure to use specialists to run the factories.⁴⁸ Despite Lenin's stature and charisma, the Workers' Opposition held firm. The group's most articulate spokesman, Kollontai, wrote that the "crisis" in the Party was caused by three things: the "objective conditions" (the Civil War); the continued heterogeneity of Russian society (the survival of classes); and, the need for improvement of the workers' conditions (standard of living).⁴⁹ Only a gradual return to workers' control over production could overcome these difficulties.⁵⁰

At the IX Congress of the VKP(b) (1920), Shliapnikov insisted upon a three-way division of power among the Party, the government, and the trade unions.⁵¹ The fear of both Kollontai and Shliapnikov was the ever-increasing bureaucratism within the Party, and the Party's continued stranglehold over the government and the unions, was retarding the progress of the revolution.

It bears repeating that the Workers' Opposition did not attempt to break with the Bolsheviks. The Oppositionists wanted to work from within to change the direction of the Party, not to split it or leave it. But their program was so radical and their goals so far-reaching that it should have been clear to them that fulfillment of their aspirations would have inevitably meant the destruction of Bolshevik hegemony. The Opposition wanted nothing more or less than control over the entire economy to be exercised through the trade unions rather than

the Party.⁵² Since the trade unions were composed primarily of non-Party elements this would have, in effect, transferred the Dictatorship from the "vanguard" to the masses.⁵³

Lenin early realized the danger posed by the Workers' Opposition program and he correctly understood the importance of handling this break in the ranks as quickly as possible. Although in the end he suppressed the movement, the sensitivity of the issue led him to pursue tactics which were at once conciliatory, brutal, and contradictory. The strategy which he developed, though uneven and inconsistent, is important because in its final form it was used very successfully by Stalin to suppress other, later opposition movements.

V.

The story of Lenin's attempt to suppress the Workers' Opposition movement is a long and complex one. Long, because it took several years to quiet the unrest; and complex, because of the many tactical maneuvers tried and discarded and then retried in the effort to find a winning combination.

Just how much importance Lenin placed on the labor controversy was illustrated in his speech to the III All-Russian Trade Union Congress in April 1920. In this address, Lenin admitted that "The whole attention of the Communist Party and the Soviet government is centered on peaceful economic development, on problems of the dictatorship and of *one-man management*" [Italics added].⁵⁴ As early as 1919, Lenin had spoken of the transition to workers' management from workers' control as largely accomplished.⁵⁵ But he was being optimistic, as he confessed later that same year.⁵⁶

His sustained effort to remove the cancer of the Workers' Opposition from the Bolshevik polity may be divided into three periods: the IX Congress of the VKP(b) in March-April 1920; the period between the IX and X Congresses; and, the X Congress of the VKP(b) in 1921. Although the Workers' Opposition continued half-heartedly into 1922 and beyond, the X Congress marked the real demise of the group's potential as a viable force.

At the IX Congress, the issue of one-man management versus collective management (that is, workers' control) was keenly debated. Lenin's position was that, although corporate management had prevailed in the early period after the Revolution, the policy had proven to be erroneous and thus should be set aside.⁵⁷ Instead, the relationship between the trade unions and the Party must be redefined. N. I. Bukharin, the Bolshevik theorist, suggested that the unions be "governmentalized," that is, coopted into the Bolshevik hierarchy. V. Molotov, famous for his later service as Stalin's Foreign Minister, objected to this plan on the logical grounds that it would exclude the masses of workers from union membership.⁵⁸

Lenin launched a two-pronged assault. On the one hand, he castigated the

Opposition's platform as unrealistic and impractical,⁵⁹ while at the same time he tried to placate the trade unions with conciliatory words and gestures.⁶⁰ For Lenin, the key to control over the Opposition lay in the definition of the function of the trade unions in the new Soviet state. For this reason, the most important resolution to come out of the IX Congress, relevant to the Workers' Opposition, concerned the role of the trade unions. This resolution declared the unions to be communist training schools for workers.⁶¹ Although the unions were the "underlying foundation of the economic organizations which direct industry, . . . no trade union organization interferes directly in the functioning of enterprises."⁶² Although the unions could participate in management, they had to submit to the authority of the Supreme Council of the National Economy.⁶³ Moreover, to the unions fell the distasteful task of explaining to the workers why one-man management was necessary.⁶⁴ In short, union responsibilities were to be nearly the opposite of the demands of the Workers' Opposition. Through this resolution, the Bolsheviks tried to remove the trade unions from between the Party and the workers. The significance of this new policy for the later development of a total dictatorship is clear.

Naturally, members of the Workers' Opposition objected to this emasculation of the unions, but Lenin had prepared a multi-faceted strategy to combat such objections. First of all, he blamed much of the union unrest on the presence of Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries in the unions, thus allowing Bolshevik Oppositionists an opportunity to choose between graceful disassociation from the movement or identification with the Mensheviks.⁶⁵ Then, to show there were no hard feelings, he nominated Shliapnikov for membership in the Central Committee of the Party.⁶⁶ He even tried halfheartedly to identify one-man management with workers' control by the somewhat strange logic that "a given number of worker-administrators is spread . . . over a large number of factories. . . ."⁶⁷ Finally, Lenin conceded that the formation of "blocs," *per se*, was not grounds enough for disciplinary action. "A bloc is always needed between Party groups that are in the right."⁶⁸ By the time of the X Congress, such a luxury no longer would be tolerated.

If the IX Congress was a victory for Lenin and one-man management, it was certainly not a total victory. Free discussion was still the order of the day in Party circles and the vociferous and irrepressible Oppositionists would not be silenced. Between the end of the IX Congress and the start of the X Congress, the trade union issue resurfaced with vigor.

The essence of the renewed controversy seems to have been that, although the IX Congress had passed a resolution which supposedly terminated the trade union debate, no one was paying any attention to it. Instead, new platforms were put forth with astounding regularity, platforms designed to settle a trade union issue which in theory had already been settled.

To enumerate the plethora of platforms which came and went in late 1920 and early 1921 would be both tiresome and irrelevant. It is enough to say that

three major platforms on the trade union question emerged as the time for the X Congress grew nearer, and around these platforms delegate groups coalesced. A cursory examination of each platform will illustrate the varied points of view within the Party.

The so-called "Platform of the Ten," signed by Lenin, proved to be the most popular.⁶⁹ This platform only reiterated the resolution passed at the IX Congress. Lenin's platform emphasized the educational function of the unions, designating them a "school of communism."⁷⁰ In his arguments for this position prior to the Congress, Lenin analogized the unions as part of a great "transmission belt" which ran from the Party to the unions and thence to the masses.⁷¹

Lenin tactfully did not, however, take the credit for the Platform of the Ten. Instead, he pointed out that the theses of Y. E. Rudzutak, published in 1920, were the foundation upon which the platform was built.⁷² Rudzutak had called for workers to take an active role in production and planning, but not in the control of production.⁷³ This transference of authorship allowed Lenin a way out, if needed, and the theses sounded sufficiently vague to permit of tactical backing and filling should it become necessary.

A second major platform was that of L. D. Trotsky and his supporters. Trotsky's main argument was that the unions should be "militarized" much like his earlier attempts at creating labor armies.⁷⁴ Furthermore, he advocated stricter Central Committee control over appointments to union leadership positions.⁷⁵

Actually, the differences between Lenin's and Trotsky's positions on the trade unions were more apparent than real. Trotsky, with his usual blunt directness, merely said out loud that which Lenin had hidden under diplomacy; in neither case would the unions be allowed any control over economic affairs. Although the debate over the two positions was heated at the X Congress, it was no doubt more in the character of a personal struggle than an ideological debate.⁷⁶

Then there was the platform of the Worker's Opposition. The leading exponents of this platform were Shliapnikov, president of the Metal Workers' Union, and I. Kutuzov, president of the Textile Workers' Union. The platform was signed by 38 various union and government labor officials.⁷⁷ Cutting through the verbiage, the crux of the Opposition platform was, as may be expected, the renewed demand for implementation of workers' control over production and the restoration of virtual autonomy to the trade unions.⁷⁸

The resurgent debate over the trade unions evidently made Lenin more determined than ever to squelch the Opposition. At the X Congress of the VKP(b), held in March of 1921, he tried several tactics designed to do just that. He was firm but conciliatory, no longer willing to support factionalism and resolved to end the struggle once and for all.

It is interesting to note that although the Workers' Opposition, as an

informal movement, had existed since 1919, it was not until the X Congress that they appeared as a group.⁷⁹ Thanks to Lenin's shrewd manipulation of the election rules for the Congress, delegates were elected on the basis of their support for one "platform" or another. The result, of course, was ultimately to identify the strength of the enemy. It is difficult, if not beyond possibility, to determine precisely how many delegates were elected on the basis of this platform or that, but based on the voting patterns on various issues, it appears that the Workers' Opposition had anywhere from a minimum of 18 to perhaps as many as 50 votes.⁸⁰ There was also some question of vote fraud and ballot manipulation.⁸¹

Of course, the outcome of the Congress was a foregone conclusion; Lenin had more than enough support to carry the day. The Platform of the Ten easily passed when the decisive vote was taken.⁸² But more importantly, Lenin managed to push through two resolutions which had not been on the Congress agenda: one "On Party Unity" and another "On the Syndicalist and Anarchist Deviation in Our Party." These resolutions, passed on the last day of the Congress, had the effect of outlawing such groups as the Workers' Opposition and silencing their spokesman on threat of expulsion from the Party.⁸³

Lenin was not, however, so foolhardy as to alienate the Oppositionists completely. It is true that he labelled the Workers' Opposition as an anarchist-syndicalist deviation, but he also made it clear that he was willing to incorporate all the good points of the Opposition platform into his own.⁸⁴ Furthermore, he undertook to soften the blow by substituting "semi-deviation" for deviation in his speech on the trade unions⁸⁵ and later even went so far as to offer to change the wording if another, milder term that deviation could be found.⁸⁶ He reiterated his earlier position that much of the union trouble could be blamed on the Mensheviks and a petty-bourgeois element which had crept into the trade unions, an element which "inevitably engenders vacillation towards anarchism. . . ."⁸⁷ The Opposition need not be identified with these scoundrels, if it would only repent.

Despite this effort at fence-mending, Shliapnikov promptly tendered his resignation from the Central Committee. Lenin urged the Congress to reject this and any other such resignations and to insist on strict Party discipline.⁸⁸ The resignation was indeed rejected.⁸⁹ The Oppositionists must have felt as if they were trapped in some odd paradise: they could not escape from the Bolshevik garden, but its abundant fruit tasted strangely bitter.

The results of the X Congress were of historic import not only because they successfully stifled the Workers' Opposition movement, but also in that the suppression of all factionalism and free discussion set a precedent which would be cited time and again by Lenin's successors. After Lenin's death, Trotsky would discover just how wide-ranging an interpretation could be placed on "Party unity."⁹⁰

The Workers' Opposition faded rapidly after the decisions of the X Con-

gress, but not without one last fight. In May 1921, the Metal-Workers' Union voted to reject the slate of candidates proposed for the Central Control Commission. Brushing this affront aside, the Central Committee appointed its own handpicked candidates.⁹¹ More significantly, several members of the Opposition took their case to the international arena, petitioning the Third (Communist) International (Comintern) to take up their cause. Before signing the Opposition's death certificate, its last-ditch appeal to international communism should be examined to discover what success, if any, it achieved.

VI.

The Workers' Opposition had reason to believe it might find some sympathy on the global scene. A few communist and fellow-traveler groups in other countries also had become disillusioned with the progress of the Russian Revolution and sought a more radical program for the proletariat. The most sizeable, and therefore the most dangerous, communist faction of this nature was the Communist Workers' Party of Germany (KAPD). The KAPD had split off from the German Communist Party (KPD) in April 1920 in the midst of the KPD Congress in Heidelberg. Unlike most such factional splits, the KAPD managed to take with it about half of the total membership of the KPD (around 25,000 out of 50,000 KPD members).⁹² Because of its potential strength, the Comintern could ill-afford to alienate completely or expel the KAPD from its ranks. The KAPD was dedicated to a "leftist" approach to revolution and many of its views dovetailed with those of the Workers' Opposition.

Yet another large organization which tacitly supported the Workers' Opposition was the International Workers of the World (IWW) based in the United States.⁹³ Led by William ("Big Bill") Haywood, the IWW was closer to anarchism than Marxism. Nevertheless, the Comintern viewed the IWW as the best agent for promoting radical changes in the United States and they were courted assiduously for a time and cajoled to join the Comintern and subscribe to its theses.

It can be seen, therefore, that as the Workers' Opposition had been growing in Russia proper, leftist inclinations were making themselves felt in Germany, the United States and elsewhere.⁹⁴ But with the entreaty of the Oppositionists for support among the International's members, it would soon become clear who pulled the Comintern's strings. Or would it?

At first, the strings often seemed to be pulled in opposite directions. In those early years (1920-1922) the various parties belonging to the Comintern were still relatively independent, and although the Moscow line was adopted more often than not, certain concessions generally had to be made to opposing factions and groups. The results were sometimes seemingly Janus-like pronouncements of contradictory policies and programs depending on whether they were intended for Soviet or international consumption.

After all, at the II Congress of the Comintern, held in July 1920, that august body had adopted "Theses on the Role of the Party in the Proletarian Revolution" which called for, *inter alia*, the formation of *Producers' associations* in addition to Party cells and Soviets.⁹⁵ The term "producers' association," used by Kollontai in her pamphlet on the Workers' Opposition, had been ridiculed by Lenin and others as a vague and silly concept.⁹⁶ And yet, it was not Kollontai who had first employed the term, but the Comintern. Furthermore, that same Comintern Congress declared that workers' control over production should be one of the main objectives of the proletarian internationalist.⁹⁷ Small wonder, then, that the Workers' Opposition believed it might find a sympathetic audience.

The III Comintern Congress met from 22 June to 12 July 1921, not long after the X Congress of the VKP(b) had ended. Kollontai addressed the Comintern on behalf of the Opposition and criticized the decline of the faith of the masses in the Party.⁹⁸ As expected, the KAPD jumped in. At the X Party Congress, Lenin, had already equated the KAPD position with that of the Workers' Opposition,⁹⁹ and at the Comintern Congress KPD leader Ruth Fischer accused the KAPD of having "friendly relations" with the Workers' Opposition, as if such an association was some sort of a crime.¹⁰⁰ For its part the KAPD objected strenuously to the treatment of every opposition criticism as "counter-revolutionary."¹⁰¹ But despite the mutual name-calling and dead-cattling, the Comintern was not yet ready to reject outright the Opposition position, perhaps from fear of alienating the KAPD and IWW.

In fact, the left-wing feeling in the Comintern as a whole was still running very high and so it happened that the III Comintern Congress adopted theses on the Red International of Labor Unions (RILU)¹⁰² which contained this amazing declaration:

The entire industrial struggle of the working class in the immediate future should be concentrated around the party slogan: "workers' control of production," and this control must be established before the government and the ruling classes have created substitutes for control.¹⁰³

If ever the Workers' Opposition had received the green light from an official organization, this was it. The Opposition decided that petitioning of the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI) was in order.

In February 1922, the Workers' Opposition circulated an appeal to the Comintern which came to be known as the Declaration of the 22. The Declaration was signed by Shliapnikov, S. Medvedev, Kollontai, and others.¹⁰⁴ So well known were the authors of the Declaration, especially Kollontai, that the ECCI had little choice but to pay heed. Accordingly, an ECCI Commission was set up to investigate the charge that the Party was abandoning the workers and paying too much attention to the peasantry.

By this time, of course, Lenin and his supporters were no doubt highly incensed; no sooner had they suppressed the Opposition on one front, than it popped up on another. This time there must be no mistake. The ECCI investigatory commission was packed with loyal Leninist supporters: V. Kolarov, M. Cachin, C. Kreibich, and A. MacManus.¹⁰⁵ The commission's findings were never in doubt, as the entire petition of the Workers' Opposition was rejected out of hand. Then, the Central Committee of the VKP(b) used the condemnation to further suppress the Workers' Opposition within the USSR at the XI Party Congress.¹⁰⁶

The appeal to the Comintern was the final effort of a dying Workers' Opposition to gain a new lease on life. From that time forward the Opposition stuck primarily to low-key internal criticism, and its supporters grew fewer and fewer.

VII.

The Workers' Opposition declined in much the same manner as it had risen — piece by piece, bit by bit, a little at a time. Most of the former leaders of the Opposition eventually capitulated. At the XI Congress of the VKP(b), which met from 27 March to 2 April 1922, the Workers' Opposition was further suppressed, though there was little enough left to worry about. Lenin, unhappy over the "Declaration of the 22," tried to get both Shliapnikov and Kollontai expelled from the Party,¹⁰⁷ but he was unsuccessful in this effort, possibly because he was in ill health and could not attend the regular Congress sessions.¹⁰⁸ The Opposition leaders were, however, warned by the Congress that any further agitation would most assuredly result in their expulsion.¹⁰⁹ In November 1922, Section XV of the new Labor Code made it clear that all vestiges of workers' control were gone.¹¹⁰ The trade unions could no longer do anything without the consent of the Peoples' Commissariat of Labor.¹¹¹

As for the leaders of the Opposition, little was heard from them again on this issue. Kollontai recanted her views and declared that her pamphlet on the Workers' Opposition had anyway been published abroad without her consent.¹¹² When the Trotskyist opposition emerged after Lenin's death, Shliapnikov sided with the Party apparatus and accused Trotsky of opportunism and making a power play.¹¹³ S. Medvedev apparently changed his tune in 1924 when the publication of his "Baku Letter" called for foreign concessions in order to strengthen Soviet industry.¹¹⁴ The Workers' Opposition had ceased to be a threat.

But the question remains: Was the Workers' Opposition *ever* a real threat to the Bolshevik government? In terms of sheer numbers, the answer would seem to be no.¹¹⁵ The Opposition never rose above a tiny minority in the trade union movement. On the other hand, the job-profile of the Oppositionists puts their

importance in a somewhat different light; the Oppositionists were skilled workers, not easily replaceable. Lenin grasped the significance of this fact, else why would he have undertaken such vigorous yet tactful steps to quash the movement? As one scholar has pointed out, Lenin understood that the loss of Trotsky's personal support on the Trade Union question was less dangerous than a viable Workers' Opposition organization.¹¹⁶ As a result, Lenin did not hesitate to castigate bluntly Trotsky's platform while taking a conciliatory stand on the Opposition's complaints.

But it surely must have been the potential of the rank and file Opposition that Lenin feared most, rather than its leadership. None of the Opposition principals, save Kollontai, was well known; none were intellectual giants. The Opposition leaders all considered themselves good Bolsheviks, and had no desire to split the Party or threaten Bolshevik hegemony. No, the crucial problem for Lenin was getting the rank and file Oppositionist workers to accept the introduction of one-man management and the use of "bourgeois specialists" in industry. This need explains why Lenin usually addressed his appeals to the workers directly, rather than to the Opposition leadership. If the recalcitrant workers could be coopted and controlled, he reasoned, their weak leadership would disintegrate; and that is just what happened.

But the historical significance of the Workers' Opposition may be discerned in several areas. First of all, the very existence of the Workers' Opposition, given its working-class makeup, indicates that there was at least a semblance of a politically literate, radically active proletariat in Russia in 1917-1922. There has been much written about the small size of the working class in early twentieth century Russia and the difficulties which that fact presented for Marxist leaders. But clearly there were a considerable number of skilled workers who were conscious enough of the Bolshevik program to be able to protest vigorously when they believed that the program had been violated.

In the second place, the tactics adopted by Lenin to suppress the Workers' Opposition came, in the end, to set the precedent for the suppression of other opposition groups. By eventually stifling free discussion within the Party and by outlawing "factions" and the like, Lenin provided Stalin with the rationale which he used so well against his political enemies. Stalin did not invent the dictatorship; he merely refined it. All this is by way of partly refuting the facile generalizations of those writers who insist that had Lenin lived the Soviet Union would have evolved much differently and more liberally.

Thirdly, the manner in which Lenin and his cohorts handled the problem of the Workers' Opposition illustrates the importance attached to the trade union movement. Many erstwhile leaders of the Workers' Opposition, who had capitulated, were kept on in high places until the mid-1930s and the Great Purges. It seems clear that there was real fear of being too heavy-handed with union leaders; the Bolshevik hierarchy obviously remained apprehensive about the potential alienation of organized labor.

Finally, it must be admitted that the result that might have obtained had the Opposition been able to implement its plans is impossible to determine. What small amount of real workers' control exercised in post-revolutionary Russia was done during the Civil War and while the economic woes of the country were grave. After the war was won, the idea of workers' control of production had already been discarded by the government leadership.

The platform of the Workers' Opposition was so vague and utopian and its direction so weak that perhaps it never really had a chance for success. Nevertheless, the Workers' Opposition remains as a signal that at least some of the Russian proletariat took the idea of a workers' revolution seriously indeed.

APPENDIX I

PERCENTAGE OF WORKERS MOVING BACK AND FORTH BETWEEN FACTORY JOBS AND RURAL HOLDINGS EACH YEAR *

INDUSTRY	PERCENTAGE
Metal trades	11.1
Textiles	16.5
Lumber	30.3
Processing of minerals	35.4
Processing of animal produce	46.1
Food and beverages	65.4

*Data from A.V. Pogozhev, *Establishing the Magnitude and Distribution of Russia's Workers' Population* (St. Petersburg: Academy of Sciences, 1906), p. 100; reprinted in Solomon M. Schwartz, *Labor in the Soviet Union* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1952), p. 3.

APPENDIX II

WORKERS' OPPOSITION LEADERS BY TRADE AFFILIATION*

Mine Workers	15
Metal Workers and Related Trades	9
Ordnance and Military Material	5
All-Workers' Councils	2
Heavy Industry Board	1
Medium Industry Board	1
Textile Workers	1
Supply Workers	1
Control Commissions	1
Miscellaneous	2
TOTAL	38

* Data extracted from the 38 signatories of the Workers' Opposition Platform presented to the X Congress of the VKP[b](1921). Data-base used may be found in Institut Marksizma-Leninizma, *Desiaty s'zed RKP[b]: steno-graficheskii otchet* (Moscow, 1963), p. 691.

Notes

1. The name Workers' Opposition is said to have had various origins. Leonard Schapiro holds that Lenin himself invented the term in late 1920 or early 1921. The editors of Lenin's *Works*, on the other hand, declare that it appeared under its "demagogic" name at the IX Congress of the All-Russian Communist Party (bolshevik) (VKP[b]) in March-April 1920. See Schapiro, *The Origin of the Communist Autocracy: Political Opposition in the Soviet State, First Phase, 1917-1921* (London: The London School of Economics and Political Science, 1955), p. 224; and Vladimir I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, 45 vols. (London: Lawrence & Wishart; Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), 32:531, n. 12. In this essay, the terms Workers' Opposition and Opposition will be used interchangeably.

2. Schapiro, too, has reached this conclusion. See *Communist Autocracy*, p. 222.

3. William Henry Chamberlin, *The Russian Revolution, 1917-1921*, 2 vols. (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, Universal Library, 1965), 1:262.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 266. The idea of "workers' control" is actually closer to anarchist than Marxist thought, although it may be found in Marxism as well. Russian Marxism was permeated by the anarcho-syndicalist tradition with its fountainhead in Bakunin and its main tributary in men like Georges Sorel. When the powerful Spanish anarchists took over the factories at the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, their first act was to establish workers' control over production in much the same way the Workers' Opposition had wanted to do in Soviet Russia.

5. Margaret Dewar, *Labour Policy in the USSR, 1917-1928* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 7.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

8. All dates in this essay are reported in the then-current manner. The Bolsheviks switched from the old Julian to the newer Gregorian calendar in February 1918. All dates prior to February are in the old style, all after in the new.

9. The Appeal is reprinted in Chamberlin, *Russian Revolution*, 1:471.

10. Dewar, *Labour Policy*, Doc. No. 3, pp. 160-161. Also Chamberlin, *Russian Revolution*, 1:482-484.

11. Dewar, *Labour Policy*, Doc. No. 4, pp. 161-162.

12. *Ibid.*, Doc. No. 18, pp. 165-166.

13. See Robert V. Daniels, *The Conscience of the Revolution: Communist Opposition in Soviet Russia* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960), p. 120.

14. Dewar, *Labour Policy*, p. 28.

15. *Ibid.*, Doc. No. 71, p. 181.

16. *Ibid.*, Doc. No. 71, p. 181.

17. Schapiro, *Communist Autocracy*, p. 224.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 359.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 228.

20. Chamberlin, *Russian Revolution*, 1:484.

21. In fact, Shliapnikov had joined the Bolshevik Party in 1901 and had been an underground revolutionary worker inside Russia prior to the Revolution. See Institut Markszima-Leninizma, *Desiatyi s'ezd RKP(b): stenograficheskie otchet* (Moscow, 1963), p. 744.

22. Even as late as the X Party Congress in 1921, only 37.2% of the voting and 29.4% of the consultative delegates were classified as "workers." Although the Bolshevik Party has always claimed to be a workers' party, it has traditionally encountered difficulty enrolling enough workers to justify the boast. See *Desiatyi s'ezd*, p. 760.

23. Schapiro, *Communist Autocracy*, p. 290.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 291. Indeed, her famous advocacy of free love must have lent a certain spice to the Opposition thesis, and her close friendship with Shliapnikov may have given rise to a certain degree of libidinal speculation. Barbara Evans Clements contends that Kollontai was in love with Shliapnikov, at least during 1914-1916. See her *Bolshevik Feminist: The Life of Aleksandra Kollontai* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1979), p. 87.

25. *Desiatyi s'ezd*, p. 752.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 691.

27. Schapiro, *Communist Autocracy*, p. 306.

28. Alexandra M. Kollontai, *The Workers' Opposition* (Chicago: Industrial Workers of the World, 1921), p. 3.

29. See Appendix I.

30. Chamberlin, *Russian Revolution*, 1:262.

31. *Ibid.*, pp. 273-274.

32. See Appendix II

33. Dewar, *Labour Policy*, p. 5.

34. *Ibid.*, Doc. No. 15, p. 165.

35. *Ibid.*, Doc. No. 159, p. 198.

36. Lenin, *Works*, 32:531-532, n. 12.

37. Daniels, *Conscience of the Revolution*, p. 127.

38. Lenin seemed to understand this problem. See Lenin, *Works*, 30:478.

39. Dewar, *Labour Policy*, Doc. No. 52, p. 176.

40. *Ibid.*

41. *Ibid.*, Doc. No. 102, p. 186.

42. *Ibid.*, Doc. No. 149, p. 194.

43. Lenin, *Works*, 30:475.

44. *Ibid.*, pp. 475, 476.

45. *Ibid.*, pp. 458, 474.

46. Much in the same way that the "new" Red Army Officers must have looked familiar to the enlisted soldiers during the Civil War. Trotsky had remobilized a large number of former Tsarist officers to help the Bolsheviks retain their power and without them the Civil War might have been lost. If it worked well for the army, why not in the factories too?

47. Lenin, *Works*, 30:457.

48. Kollontai, *Workers' Opposition*, pp. 12-13.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

51. Institut Marksizma-Leninizma, *Deviaty s'ezd RKP(b): protokoly* (Moscow, 1960), p. 217.

52. Richard Gregor, ed., *Resolutions and Decisions of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union: Volume 2, The Early Soviet Period: 1917-1929* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), p. 122.

53. *Ibid.*

54. Lenin, *Works*, 30:504.

55. *Ibid.*, p. 109.

56. *Ibid.*, p. 130.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 459.

58. Daniels, *Conscience of the Revolution*, p. 123.

59. Lenin, *Works*, 30:465-466.

60. *Ibid.*, p. 471.

61. Gregor, *Resolutions*, p. 104.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 102.

63. *Ibid.*, p. 103.

64. *Ibid.*, p. 104.

65. Lenin, *Works*, 30:460.

66. Roy A. Medvedev, *Let History Judge: The Origins and Consequences of Stalinism*, trans. Coleen Taylor (New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1973), p. 32.

67. Gregor, *Resolutions*, p. 104.

68. Lenin, *Works*, 30:477.

69. The other signers included: G. Zinoviev, M. Tomsy, Ia. Rudzutak, M. Kalinin, L. Kamenev, A. Lozovskii, Artem-Sergeev, and I. Stalin. For the text of the platform, see *Desiatyi s'ezd*, pp. 663-674.

70. *Ibid.*, pp. 665-666.

71. Lenin, *Works*, 32:21.

72. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

73. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

74. The text of Trotsky's platform may be found in *Desiatyi s'ezd*, pp. 674-685.

75. *Ibid.*, p. 676.

76. Lenin and Trotsky had had a falling out over the question of the Transportation Union (Tsektran) and how it should be run. When Trotsky's suggestions were rebuffed, he refused to serve on the Tsektran Commission. His recalcitrance angered Lenin who declared that Party squabbles and Party work must be kept separate from one another. See Lenin, *Works*, 32:35, and for a fuller discussion, see Schapiro, *Communist Autocracy*, pp. 253-283.

77. *Desiatyi s'ezd*, p. 691. See also Appendix I.

78. The full text is in *ibid.*, pp. 685-691.

79. Schapiro, *Communist Autocracy*, pp. 315-316.

80. The reason for the wide discrepancy in the number of possible Opposition delegates may be discovered in the fact that many of the delegates left the X Congress when the famous Kronstadt Revolt broke out. Of 717 voting delegates, only 406 voted on the platforms. The percentage of Opposition delegates who left for Kronstadt was apparently quite large. See *Desiatyi s'ezd*, pp. 399, 745 and Gregor, *Resolutions*, p. 115.

81. Gregor, *Resolutions*, p. 115.
82. *Desiatyi s'ezd*, p. 399.
83. *Ibid.*, pp.571-576; Gregor, *Resolutions*, pp. 119-124; Schapiro, *Communist Autocracy*, p. 317.
84. Lenin, *Works*, 32:212.
85. One can only speculate as to what limits circumscribe a "semi-deviation." See *ibid.*, p. 213.
86. *Ibid.*, p. 259.
87. *Ibid.*, p. 245.
88. *Ibid.*, p. 260.
89. *Desiatyi s'ezd*, p. 577.
90. During the struggle for power after Lenin's death, between Trotsky and Stalin, Trotsky was accused time and again of "factionalism" based on this X Congress' decision. Trotsky had, however, supported Lenin on this issue in 1921 (which made his complaints about its effects in 1926-1928 difficult for him to justify).
91. Schapiro, *Communist Autocracy*, pp. 323-324.
92. Jane Degras, ed., *The Communist International, 1919-1943: Documents*, 3 vols. (London: Oxford University Press for the Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1956-1960), 1:66.
93. It had been, after all, the IWW which had published Kollontai's pamphlet in 1921.
94. Discussed in Daniels, *Conscience of the Revolution*, p. 162.
95. Degras, *Documents*, 1:132.
96. Lenin, *Works*, 32:212.
97. Degras, *Documents*, 1:149.
98. Schapiro, *Communist Autocracy*, p. 332.
99. Lenin, *Works*, 32:252.
100. Degras, *Documents*, 1:240.
101. *Ibid.*, p. 227.
102. The Red Internation of Trade unions (RILU or Profintern) was begun in late 1920 to split the European-based International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU). In July 1921, Zinoviev claimed that the RILU had acquired 18 million members since its inception the year before, but admitted that the figures might be a little high. The Soviet Union accounted for over one-third of the total RILU membership. See *ibid.*, pp. 185, 274.
103. *Ibid.*, p. 281.
104. Schapiro, *Communist Autocracy*, p. 332; *Izvestiia TsK* (Moscow) (March 1922), pp. 69-70.
105. At least the commission had an international flavor. Kolarov was from Bulgaria, Cachin from France, Kreibich from Czechoslovakia, and MacManus from Great Britain.
106. Schapiro, *Communist Autocracy*, p. 334.
107. *Ibid.*, p.336.
108. Gregor, *Resolutions*, p. 152.
109. *Ibid.*, p. 177.
110. Dewar, *Labour Policy*, Doc. No. 335, p. 232.
111. *Ibid.*, p. 230.
112. Schapiro, *Communist Autocracy*, p. 291, n. 41.
113. Daniels, *Conscience of the Revolution*, p. 228.
114. *Ibid.*, p.279.
115. Although there is some disagreement over this point. Adam B. Ulam contends that in 1920 the Workers' Opposition had behind it "the majority of the Party rank and file." While this assertion may be true, the various election results in 1920-21 certainly do not tend to bear it out. See Adam B. Ulam, *A History of Soviet Russia* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1976), p. 46. Cf. note 36 above.
116. Schapiro, *Communist Autocracy*, p. 283.