

## PREFACE FOR THE CHINESE EDITION OF “ALL POWER TO THE COUNCILS!”

Whether you believe that the German Revolution of 1918-1919 succeeded or failed depends on your political orientation. For adherents of the liberal state, social democrats included, the transition from the Kaiserreich to parliamentary democracy, which occurred in Germany with the end of World War I, brought the revolution to conclusion. For more radical leftist factions, parliamentary democracy, which came at the cost of workers' self-government, meant defeat to the bourgeoisie.

The developments in Germany after the November 1918 rebellion of sailors in Wilhelmshaven and Kiel, causing Kaiser Wilhelm I to abdicate, were of world-historical significance. Germany, the big, powerful, and highly industrialized nation at the heart of Europe, equipped with a strong workers' movement, was regarded crucial terrain for world revolution. At the Seventh Congress of the Russian Communist Party in March 1918, Lenin stated: “It is an absolute truth that without a German revolution we are doomed – perhaps not in Petrograd, not in Moscow, but in Vladivostok, in more remote places to which perhaps we shall have to retreat ... At all events, under all conceivable circumstances, if the German revolution does not come, we are doomed.”

The German Revolution, at least in the understanding of Lenin and other communists, did not come. The Soviet Union was established and lasted for 70 years nonetheless. Whether it was doomed to collapse, considering that it remained an isolated revolution at the time, is still up to debate. What remains clear is that the social conditions that socialism was to overcome, namely the injustices and the devastation implied in capitalism, are still haunting us. It is therefore equally clear that the need to work for socialism has not disappeared.

To equate the end of the Soviet Union with the end of socialism is both narrow-minded and ahistorical. The Soviet Union was not the only socialist model established in the twentieth century. Others, big and small, emerged alongside of it, some of them surviving to this day. In addition, socialism doesn't lose its promise just because one – if, without doubt, significant – attempt to realize it failed. We can trace the first signs of capitalism back to the Italian city states of the fifteenth century. It took 400 years before capitalism became the dominant mode of production across the world. Seismic political and economic changes don't happen overnight.

This means that if we are serious about a socialist future, we must study the struggles of the past in order to understand both the worker's movement's failures and achievements. To study the German Revolution of 1918-1919 is a critical part in this endeavor. How were the social democrats able to sabotage the workers' councils? Why could the working-class rank-and-file not prevent corrupt leadership in the workers' parties and trade unions? Why did the communist Spartacus Uprising of January 1919 fail? Why did it, during the following years, prove difficult to unite the communists? And why did a significant number of working-class Germans turn to the nationalist right?

Industrial production might have changed significantly in recent decades. Whole industries have been dislocated, new ones have appeared, communications and logistics play an ever more important role in global capitalism, and some countries have primarily become service-oriented consumer societies. Yet, what keeps the economic wheels turning are still the sweat and tears of billions of working-class people, spread out across the globe. The alleged disappearance of the working class is a myth. So is the idea that capitalism can be overcome without the self-organization of working-class in the pursuit of socialism. Any serious revolutionary movement must look at the relevant examples that history provides. The better prepared revolutionary workers are when push comes to shove, the higher the chances to crush the enemies of the class.

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