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A Review: Lenin, Election and Revolution

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***Lenin's Electoral Strategy from Marx and Engels Through the Revolution of 1905. The Ballot, the Streets — or Both.* By August H. Nimitz. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 244 pages, \$100 hardcover.**

***Lenin's Electoral Strategy from 1907 to the October Revolution of 1917. The Ballot, the Streets — or Both.* By August H. Nimitz.. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 296 pages, \$100 hardcover.**

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IN GREECE'S 2009 national elections, the political party Syriza — Coalition of the Radical Left — captured 4.6% of the vote. Three years later, in 2012, Syriza took 26.7% of the vote, elected 71 people to parliament, and became the second largest party in Greece. In a poll this year in the Attica region, where Athens sits, Syriza topped all parties, bigger than the traditional pro-big business party, New Democracy, and far ahead of the traditional labor party Pasok.

What accounts for this ascendancy? Why is it that a party that barely registered on the electoral radar in 2009, is now projected to be the largest party in the land? Simply stated, the Greek people have been subjected to one of the most barbaric austerity plans in recent European memory.

This cutting and gutting social welfare programs has been implemented by the pro-big business parties — New Democracy and Pasok — in league with the officials of the European Union. Syriza as an anti-austerity party, anti-cutback party has prompted Greek workers, small urban business owners, and farmers to declare their support as a way of fighting the attacks on their wages, incomes and pensions.

Since the financial crash of 2008, the industrial and banking titans of Europe, the United States, and elsewhere on the globe have sought to make working people pay for the crisis. The pro-big business governments follow a course of bailing out the banks and imposing joblessness and overall impoverishment of the laboring classes.

In response to this disaster, working people have mounted street demonstrations, strikes, and are beginning to support anti-austerity candidates and political parties in the electoral arena.

In national elections in 2011 the People Before Profit Alliance in the Irish Republic secured two seats, the Left Bloc in Portugal captured eight seats, and the United Left in Spain elected eleven deputies. In the fall of 2013 the Argentine Left and Workers Front (FIT) got over a million votes and

sent three people to parliament.

In the United States a leader of Socialist Alternative, Kshama Sawant, won a council seat in a citywide race in Seattle, winning significant community and union support on the issue of a living wage for workers at the bottom of the scale. In the United Kingdom, the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) is mounting an electoral challenge to government cuts in social welfare and health programs.

Historical Perspective

To aid this growing anti-austerity movement, helping give it some ideological and historical backbone, the Marxist scholar August Nimtz (professor of political science and African and African American Studies at the University of Minnesota) has authored a two-volume work: *Lenin's Electoral Strategy from Marx and Engels through the Revolution of 1905* (which I'll call LES 1905), and *Lenin's Electoral Strategy from 1907 to the Revolution of October 1917*.

The subtitle for each is *The Ballot, the Streets — or Both*. These are handbooks, appropriate for anti-austerity activists whether inside or outside legislative bodies.

Marx and Engels followed the dictum: "Even when there is no prospect whatever of their being elected, the workers must put up their own candidates in order to preserve their independence, to count their forces and to lay before the public their revolutionary attitude and party standpoint." (9, LES 1905) This remains applicable to today's anti-austerity movement and its political parties.

When the International Working Men's Association, or First International, was founded in 1864, Nimtz writes:

"The central message of the founding document he [Marx] wrote...was that while a reform such as the British Parliament's limiting (in law at least) the work day to ten hours was a victory for the working class, 'the lords of land and the lords of capital will always use their political privileges for the defense and perpetuation of their economic monopolies...they will continue to lay every possible impediment in the way of the emancipation of labour... To conquer political power has therefore become the duty of the working classes.'" (13)

In the development of the German workers' movement, Nimtz writes, "A successful breakthrough came in 1869 with the formation of an alternative that they [Marx and Engels] helped to nurture: the Social Democratic Workers Party. It was able to win two seats — held by August Bebel and Karl Liebknecht — in the Reichstag [German Parliament], the best example of independent working class political action." (16)

In a debate within the First International on the efficacy of electoral action after the 1871 Franco-Prussian war, Engels wrote a letter to some Spanish supporters: "'When during the [Franco-Prussian War] Bebel and Liebknecht embarked on the struggle against it, and to disclaim responsibility on behalf of the working class with regard to what was happening — the whole of Germany was shaken, and even Munich...was the scene of great demonstrations demanding an end to the war.'" (18)

Engels describes an excellent example of the fusion of the parliamentary and street arenas. After 1890, however, the separation and compartmentalization of these arenas was a sign of the political weakening of the German party, coupled with attraction of its parliamentary group to compromises with the representatives of big commercial and industrial capital.

The outcome was the political collapse of the party at the outbreak of the Great War in 1914. Rather than organize antiwar actions in both arenas, the leaders of the German Social Democrats led the workers into the slaughterhouse of the Kaiser's war. Nimitz's sketch of this rise and fall is appropriate reading for anti-austerity activists today.

The Case of Russia

Whereas Germany possessed a parliamentary regime at the beginning of the 20th century, that didn't exist in the Russian empire. The birth of modern commercial and industrial enterprises in Russia occurred in the context of big landlordism, which had fastened feudal-like conditions on the peasants, and the political rule of an absolute monarch, the Czar.

These were the cards dealt to Social Democrats operating in the empire. But this mix was highly combustible, and in January 1905 it exploded.

Czarist suppression of a workers' demonstration in St. Petersburg led to a year of worker insurgency and peasant unrest. The ferocious response of the Czarist autocracy knew no bounds.

In June in the southern port of Odessa, "mutinous sailors of the battleship Potemkin tried to unite with the city's rebellious masses, immortalized in Sergei Eisenstein's film by that name. And for their deeds, Odessians suffered the greatest concentrated repression by the regime during the revolution, with two thousand killed and three thousand wounded." (87)

The Czar, feeling the heat, eventually called for the convening of a national legislative-type body, the Duma, in 1906. It met in April and was dissolved in July. The Czar convened another session in February, 1907 but ended it in June.

The Russian Social Democratic Labor Party participated in the 1905 upheaval, and after it subsided, the RSDLP turned toward the Duma. The Duma was not exactly a powerful institution. Lenin summed up its position well:

"And don't try to tell me the Duma is impotent, helpless, and without the necessary powers. I know all that very well... The matter in hand is this — the Duma must clearly, definitely and, most important of all, correctly express the real interests of the people, must tell them the truth about the solution of the agrarian problem, and must open the eyes of the peasantry so that they recognize the snags lying in the way of a solution to the land problem. The will of the Duma, of course, is still not law, that I am well aware of! But let anybody who likes do the job of limiting the Duma's will or gagging it — except the Duma itself!" (157)

For Lenin, involvement was obligatory. But that involvement brought to the surface two different responses within Russian Social Democracy. One, grouped around the Bolshevik faction and led by Lenin, counseled the RSDLP deputies to reach out to the peasant deputies organized in the Trudovik Party.

The other grouping, centered on the Mensheviks, counseled social democratic deputies to orient towards the representatives of the Cadets, the Constitutional Democratic party. The Cadets had ties to the liberal wing of big commercial and industrial capital. They sought to convince the Czar to set up a constitutional monarchy, a monarchy without absolutism and standing on a constitution.

The Czar, Nicholas Romanov or Nicholas II, wasn't listening, and this is where Nimitz's first volume ends.

The Road to Revolution

The second volume (which I'll call LES 17), begins with the convening of the Third Duma at the end of 1907. It was not to be dissolved until the middle of 1912.

While the majority of the RSDLP was convinced of Duma participation, a minority tendency in the Bolshevik wing of the party called for a boycott. Later, a tendency emerged among the Mensheviks to liquidate the underground work of the party and rely solely on the work of Duma deputies.

The RSDLP was subjected to severe pressures in the Czarist state. The party was legal inside the Duma, but illegal outside it. The Third Duma proved to be weaker and more restricted than the first two, feeding the boycott argument.

The Russian Social Democrats published both legal and illegal newspapers. If the legal press couldn't get past the Czarist censors, a new one would surface a week later. Arrests of party personnel were constant. This environment, to say the least, was harsh.

Lenin wrote in 1910, as cited by Nimitz:

"From the very beginning of the existence of the Social-Democratic group in the Third Duma, the Bolshevik faction, through its representatives authorized by the Central Committee of the Party, has all the time assisted, aided, advised, and supervised the work of the Social-Democrats in the Duma. The same is done by the editorial board of the Central Organ of the Party, which consists of representatives of the factions."

Thus at the end of 1910 Lenin confirmed in print what the public record only suggested until then — that he was effectively the party's electoral and parliamentary director. No one else had taken on such a responsibility.... (41, 42 LES 17)

In preparation for elections to the Fourth Duma in 1912, Nimitz quotes a Lenin exhortation to the RSDLP:

"Very often it may be useful and sometimes even essential to give the election platform...a finishing touch by adding a brief general slogan, a watchword for the elections.... In our epoch only the following three points can make up this watchword, this general slogan: (1) a republic; (2) confiscation of all landed estates, and (3) the eight-hour day." (50, 51)

By the time of the Fourth Duma elections, the RSDLP was irrevocably split. The Bolsheviks supported the three points outlined by Lenin.

The Liquidators led the Mensheviks into seeking an alliance with the liberal wing of the landlords and industrialists. For the Mensheviks, these elements of big capital would lead the coming democratic revolution in Russia; for the Bolsheviks that revolution would be led by an alliance of the workers and peasants. So, two sets of deputies on two different platforms entered the Fourth Duma for the RSDLP.

At the outbreak of the Great War, World War I, both sets expressed shock at the pro-war vote of the German SPD deputies. Alexandra Kollontai, a Russian Social Democrat who was in the room with the German deputies when they voted, expressed the shock best. "I could not believe it," she wrote in her diary that evening: "I was convinced that either they had all gone mad, or else I had lost my mind.'" (98)

According to Nimitz, “The Serbian social democrats were the first to have opposed the war and voted against war credits” [authorizing the government to borrow money to finance the war — ed.] (101)

The antiwar stance of the Menshevik deputies did not last long. At the request of a Belgian Social Democrat who was now a member of that country’s war cabinet, the Mensheviks climbed aboard the war train. The Bolshevik deputies stood alone opposing the war, and for it they were tried, convicted and sentenced to hard labor in Siberia by a Czarist court.

When the slaughter and deprivations caused by the Great War prompted Lenin to declare “in a public lecture in Switzerland on January 9, 1917 (the twelfth anniversary of the beginning of the 1905 revolution), that ‘Europe is pregnant with revolution,’ he did not realize how soon the baby would arrive.” (113)

Less than two months later Czar Nicholas II abdicated, a provisional government was proclaimed, and councils or “soviets” of workers, soldiers and peasants sprouted all over the empire.

Revolutionary Representative Democracy

An instructive point for the anti-austerity movement is the concept of “representative democracy” (136) introduced by Nimitz. The parliamentary democracies, or parliamentary governments, that operated in Western Europe before and during the Great War constituted one form of representative democracy, one form of representative government. The Soviets that arose in the Russian empire in early 1917 asserted the possibility of a new form of representative democracy, a new form of representative government.

Nimitz draws on a quote from Engels in the first volume, that “‘universal suffrage is the gauge of the maturity of the working class. It cannot and never will be anything more in the present-day state; but that,’ he continued, ‘is sufficient. On the day the thermometer of universal suffrage registers boiling point among the workers, both they and the capitalists will know where they stand.’” (27, LES 1905)

That boiling point was reached in the Russian empire in October of 1917, when the Soviets displaced the provisional government and proceeded toward a new type of representative democracy.

Objectively, this is what the anti-austerity movement poses: the fight for the defense of our wages, income, and pensions is ultimately a fight for a new type of representative democracy. The exact form of this new type of representative government cannot be predicted. The new form, like the Soviets, will come out of struggle, a struggle much deeper and broader than what we see today.

But as the industrial and financial behemoths of the world, in the shape of the International Monetary Fund, the European Central Bank, and pro-big business governments the world over, continue to privatize and gut social welfare and health programs, continue to scapegoat immigrant workers, the response of the workers and farmers of the world will be to fight back in various ways — strikes, demonstrations, public meetings — and in a few cases they will go so far as to initiate and organize new democratic forms that will lay the basis for a new representative democracy.

This course will not be easy, entailing all types of twists and turns, ups and downs, but these two volumes from August Nimitz are an invaluable aid for the journey.

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P.S.

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<http://www.solidarity-us.org/site/node/4207>