

1919-1922: The Workers' Opposition



A short history of a group within the Russian Communist Party that struggled against the increasing party bureaucracy and for trade union control over industry which, by 1922, had been forcibly disbanded by the party.

The Workers Opposition began to form in 1919, as a result of the policies of War Communism, which set a precedence for the domination of the Communist Party over local party branches and trade unions. During the civil war, the Workers Opposition began agitating against the lack of democracy in the Communist Party as a result of the centralising actions of the party's bureaucracy. The Workers Opposition, composed almost entirely of unionised workers (with particular strength amongst metal workers), argued for the restoration of power to local party branches and trade unions and was led by respected veteran Bolsheviks such as [Alexander Shliapnikov](#), [Alexandra Kollontai](#) and [Sergei Medvedev](#). At the Ninth All-Russia Conference of the Communist Party in September, 1920, discussions on the growth of party bureaucracy and the running of the Soviet economy led to great controversy. Where Lenin argued that it was the role of party bureaucrats to teach unionised workers how to administer the nation's economy, the Workers' Opposition took the opposite line; that it should be the trade unions themselves, not party bureaucrats, who should take on the task of building the communist economy. As Alexandra Kollontai wrote in her seminal Opposition pamphlet:

"There can be no self-activity without freedom of thought and opinion, for self-activity manifest itself not only in initiative, action and work, but in independent thought as well. We give no freedom to class activity, we are afraid of criticism, we have ceased to rely on the masses: hence we have bureaucracy with us. That is why the Workers' Opposition considers that bureaucracy is our enemy, our scourge, and the greatest danger to the future existence of the Communist Party itself.

[...]

The Workers' Opposition has said what has long ago been printed in the Communist Manifesto by Marx and Engels: the building of Communism can and must be the work of the toiling masses themselves. The building of Communism belongs to the workers." – Alexandra Kollontai, [The Workers' Opposition](#)

The group demanded that industrial administration be made the responsibility of unions and that unions would control the national economy as a whole. Though having substantial support amongst the Communist Party's grassroots, the party's leadership refused its platform wholesale. Lenin even went so far as to state that the party *"must combat the syndicalist deviation, which will kill the Party unless it is entirely cured of it."* (Lenin, The Party Crisis). The Opposition also argued that to combat

bureaucratisation all non-proletarians should be expelled from the Communist Party and administrative government positions. They also argued that such positions should be elected, not appointed. It should be pointed out, however, that the call of the Workers' Opposition for control of the national economy to be handed over to the unions was not as honourable as it first seems. The All-Russian Central Council of Trade Unions was entirely an arm of the Bolshevik state by this point, concerning itself primarily with disciplining workers rather than fighting for improved conditions. They were entirely different from the factory committees, which had been organised at the grassroots by the workers themselves. In 1918, Shliapnikov even went as far as to say that the factory committees were putting control "*in the hands of a crowd that, due to its ignorance and lack of interest in production, is literally putting a brake on all work*" (quoted in Carmen Sirianni's *Workers' Control and Socialist Democracy: The Soviet Experience*). Though the Workers' Opposition repeatedly argued that communism could only be built by the workers themselves and were in favour of total union control of the economy to achieve this, it was by no means the same as actual workers' control of the economy. To put it bluntly, they preferred that the bureaucrats running the economy be from the unions, rather than the Communist Party. Such internal ideological problems that the Workers' Opposition suffered from were related almost entirely to their inability to reject some of the central tenets of Bolshevism and break with the Russian Communist Party entirely. Generally, members of the Workers' Opposition were experienced grassroots Bolshevik organisers from working class backgrounds who had spent a lifetime agitating amongst their class. As such, they naturally had a loyalty to the organs of class power which had been thrown up in times of struggle.

However, their simultaneous loyalty to Bolshevism and the Party confused the issue of the revolutionary organisation's role and its relationship to the working class. So while they may have argued that the "*the building of Communism can and must be the work of the toiling masses themselves*", their inability to reject the vanguardism of authoritarian socialism meant that they also argued that "*The RKP [Russian Communist Party – libcom] is the sole responsible political leader of the revolutionary struggle in construction of the worker and peasant masses.*" (Shliapnikov, [On the relations between the Russian Communist Party, the soviets and production unions](#)).

Reading the texts of the Workers' Opposition, one glaring fact is that though they repeatedly argued for union control of the economy and greater democracy within the Communist Party, they did not challenge the political domination of the party itself. Though the Workers' Opposition wanted greater union control of the economy, actual positions of administrative power were to be elected through the party local branches. The basic problem which the Workers' Opposition had with the Russian Communist Party was that it was appointing bureaucrats into positions of power from the centre rather than electing them at a local level. They did not intend to challenge the Communist Party's monopoly of power itself.

[The events of Kronstadt](#), and their reaction to it, show most clearly these problems. As Kronstadt erupted in opposition to the Communist domination of Russia and demanded a return to the slogans of "All power to the soviets", the Workers' Opposition sided with their party and many even volunteered to help with the military assault on the uprising. Kronstadt marked a problem for the Workers' Opposition: why was their class attacking the Communist Party, the only "*responsible political leaders of the revolutionary struggle*"? Their inability to break with the vanguardist baggage of Leninism meant that they ultimately found fault with their class and not with the new state bureaucrats.

Even with such a dotting loyalty to Leninism, however, the Workers' Opposition was too great a deviation from the orthodox Leninism of the party. At the 10th Party Congress in March 1921, the positions of the Workers' Opposition were rejected, its ideas condemned, and they were ordered to disband.

Though the Opposition's members continued their agitation, they would still find themselves under attack by the Communist Party bureaucracy. Shliapnikov talked of how Workers' Opposition members were edged out of the party, sometimes systematically transferred to different districts, sometimes expelled from the party entirely. Similar actions were taken against unions which had a traditional loyalty to the

Workers' Opposition. For instance, the 1921 metalworkers' union conference voted down a list of recommended candidates for the union leadership from the Communist Party's Central Committee. This vote, however, was ignored and the party leaders appointed their own candidates into office, done to remind the metalworkers who was in charge as their union had been a hub of Workers' Opposition activity.

By 1922 the Workers' Opposition would finally be defeated. The 11th Party Congress would see the party leadership put forward a motion to expel the leaders of the Workers' Opposition from the party. Though the Opposition's close links with the grassroots of the party meant that the motion failed, the group was now almost entirely disbanded as a result of the concerted effort of party leaders. For instance, of the 37 Workers' Opposition delegates to the 10th Congress, only four managed to return as voting delegates to the next congress. Following such pressure, the Workers' Opposition collapsed.

In their [Appeal of the 22](#), distributed at the party congress in 1922, they pleaded with the delegates of the Comintern to recognise the *"repressive measures against the expression of [their] opinions within the party"* and help *"to end all these abnormalities"*. These cries for help, however, fell on deaf ears.

In 1926, the remaining members of the Opposition briefly joined the Left Opposition led by Trotsky, who, now finding himself out of favour with the party bureaucracy began struggling against the growing bureaucracy and lack democracy he helped to create. Indeed, the fate of Trotsky would resemble that of the Opposition. After abandoning the Russian working class in favour of political power and party loyalty, the Workers' Opposition was hounded out of the party and many of its leaders (including Shliapnikov and Medvedev) would later be tried and executed for their minor deviations from orthodox party ideology. Just like Trotsky, the Workers' Opposition would be destroyed by the authoritarian structures they helped create with their desertion of the Kronstadt rebels marking the final defeat of the only force in Russia which could have rescued them from their fate.