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The struggle goes on

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Old governments have fallen like dominoes in Eastern Europe. From Warsaw to Prague, members of the old regimes have been forced to reassess their positions. But this is not the end of the process, argues *Chris Harman*, merely the opening battle in a much longer war.

THERE ARE moments in history when whole populations suddenly turn against corrupt and despotic regimes. Hope replaces despair. The streets are filled with ecstatic crowds, smiling, cheering,

embracing each other as an exultant solidarity breaks down old social barriers and dissolves old enmities.

The defenders of hierarchy and the apostles of order are thrown completely onto the defensive, unable to rely any longer even on the riot shields and machine guns of their hired thugs.

Such transformations are rarely restricted to one country alone. Static discontent, accumulated over decades suddenly discharges in the lightning of revolution and leaps national boundaries. So it was in 1793-94 and in 1848, in 1917-18 and 1936, in 1956 and 1968. So it has been in the summer and autumn of 1989 across Eastern Europe. But the first flush of revolution is not just a time of great hopes and great accomplishments. It is also a time of great illusions, which can threaten to throw the whole process into reverse.

People rejoice as governments fall and ruling parties fall apart, forgetting that those governments and those parties served the interests of exploiting classes that survive them.

“In no period do we find a more confused mixture of high flown phrases and actual uncertainty and clumsiness, of more enthusiastic striving for innovation and more thorough domination of the old routine, of more apparent harmony of the whole society and more profound estrangement of its elements.”

Those were Marx's words on the early months of 1848, after a wave of revolutions starting in Naples and finding its high point in Paris had caused upheavals in most of the great centres of Europe – Vienna, Budapest, Berlin, Frankfurt, Rome. In virtually every case the old rulers retreated before the storm, making it seem that the liberal middle classes had succeeded in making an easy revolution.

His words apply just as well today when what began in Warsaw has now toppled leaders in Budapest, Berlin, Sofia and Prague.

Marx's point was that the "nice" revolutions of February 1848 gave way to the nasty events of the summer and autumn of that year, when the victorious middle classes turned their guns on the workers in Paris and enabled the old rulers to regain their thrones everywhere else in Europe.

"Fraternité", he wrote, "the brotherhood of the antagonistic classes, one of which exploits the other finds its true, unadulterated and prosaic expression in civil war, civil war in its most terrible aspect, the war of labour against capital."

It is a truth that has echoed down the years. There was universal enthusiasm for the bloodless revolutions of November 1918 in Germany, of 1931 in Spain, of the Polish "spring in October" of 1956, of the Portuguese "revolution of the flowers" of April 1974.

In much of Eastern Europe things are still at the enthusiasm stage. Almost all the Western media are giving the impression that it is now a straight run to "freedom" based on parliamentary elections and unrestrained market forces.

But the old ruling bureaucracies have not been dismantled. At most they have retreated before the storm.

Their strategy is shown most clearly in Poland, where the eruption of the workers' movement that became Solidarnosc first set the dominos wobbling in 1980-81. Solidarnosc was crushed, temporarily, but not before the shock waves from Poland were making bureaucrats elsewhere begin to wonder if they could survive a great social crisis. It was to ward this off that the USSR's former secret police chief Andropov began replacing old Brezhnevites with a new generation of bureaucrats, the Gorbachevs and Ryzhkovs, and that these

new men went further in the direction of reform than they had ever contemplated.

But instead of pre-empting a general social crisis, their actions have served to bring it to a head, creating conditions in which they no longer feel able to intervene in Eastern Europe.

Once again it was Polish workers who moved first to take advantage of the new conditions. Two waves of strikes last year suddenly showed how rapidly workers' action, and with it a mass, democratic Solidarnosc based in the factories, could revive.

Two days after threatening to crush the workers' occupations with military force the minister of the interior, General Kiszczak, sought to head off this dreadful prospect through formal discussions with the national leadership of Solidarnosc, its intellectual advisors and the Catholic church.

Fifteen months later Kiszczak and Jaruzelski have conceded more than they intended. But in doing so, they have hit on a strategy which shows how the class of state capitalist bureaucrats can retreat in the face of rising popular unrest but preserve for itself key positions.

It has abandoned some of its governmental positions, while keeping intact its hierarchies of control in police, the armed forces, the enterprises and much of the media. But it retains the presidency (and the right to declare martial law!), the ministry of the interior and the ministry of defence.

It has been helped in this by the attitude of much of the former intellectual opposition – an opposition which succeeded in gaining ideological hegemony within the formal structures of Solidarnosc during the years of repression when they were isolated from shop floor activity.

They came to equate “democracy” with the market, and envisaged achieving both through an “anti-crisis pact” with the old ruling party.

The market in Eastern Europe today is a codeword for restructuring the economy. Those sections which are not competitive with the West are to be wiped out, workers in other sections will have to work harder for less.

Those who have now taken positions in the government are therefore committed to policies which inevitably entail sharp clashes with the majority of the people, especially the workers. The more astute members of the old party leadership see the advantages of this. The secretary to the Polish central committee, Leszek Miller recently gave an interview to **Moscow News**. He argued:

“The Solidarity government will have to close down some big enterprises where its own organisations are strong. This will produce sharp protests from the workers. We tried to do this several times ourselves, but put it aside every time fearing the response. [Prime minister] Masowiecki will have to cope with this problem.

“The situation in the economy may become worse, extremist elements will surface, riots will start, the country will become paralysed and violence will be the only way out ...”

He even went so far as to suggest:

“A situation is possible in which prime minister Mazowiecki would ask general Jaruzelski to introduce martial law.”

Another interview in the same paper reveals how participation in the government is already weakening the forces opposed to the old rulers. Tomasz Penkalski, of Warsaw Solidarity, tells how “Solidarity is losing popularity”. There is a “crisis concerning

leaders” because of “the gap between the top of Solidarity and its bottom”.

This is leading to a growth of groups opposed to collaboration like “Democratic Revolution, Solidarity of the Young, Union of Independent Students, Confederation of Independent Poland.”.

The old ruling party is no longer all powerful. But it has so far succeeded in maintaining itself where it really matters, among those who exercise the levers of power in the army, the police , and many of the enterprises.

Meanwhile many of the enterprise managers who achieved their present power and privilege through the old party’s *Nomenklatura* system are turning themselves into individual entrepreneurs.

The Polish changes have had a contradictory effect on the rest of Eastern Europe. They undermined the position of those party leaders elsewhere who refused to even consider giving ground to the movements from below.

In Hungary Karoly Grosz (still hailed as a great reformer by the Western media) lost control to those willing to grant some positions to the opposition.

The opening of Hungary’s borders suddenly revealed the weaknesses of the Honecker regime in East Germany and gave the previously small opposition the confidence to take to the streets.

The eruption of Leipzig and Berlin in turn inspired the upsurge in Prague.

The spread of the discontent has created situations less easy for the old ruling parties to control than the Polish example which set the process in motion.

In Hungary, the old ruling *party* has split, and its successor parties may not even succeed in hanging on to the

presidency. In East Germany and Czechoslovakia, the ruling parties have no idea how much they will have to concede. They get rid of old leaders like snakes casting off their skins, not knowing whether flesh and bone are being sacrificed too.

Yet the other side of the Polish example is also evident everywhere.

In Hungary the opposition, catapulted towards governmental office, is suddenly turning in on itself. Some seem simply interested in feathering their own nests. Others want more democratic change than there has been so far, but do not know what to do if they get it.

Hence the spectacle of an unseemly competition for power between opposition groups with no perceptible policy differences.

The Democratic Forum, with a strong national political organisation rooted in the rural bourgeoisie that has grown up over the last two decades of market reforms, does a deal to share governmental power with Poszgay, the old Stalinist leader who has jumped most firmly onto the bandwagon of reform. The Free Democrats, built by long time dissidents and strongest among the Budapest intelligentsia preempts this manoeuvre by forcing a referendum on the timing of elections.

Both parties are as committed as both fragments of the old ruling party to an extreme, almost Thatcherite, version of the market. Neither have anything to say to a population, more than a fifth of whom live below the poverty line.

In East Germany the ruling party is very much on the defensive. But it has some advantages over the Polish and Hungarian parties. Its economy is stronger than theirs, despite recent problems, and so is better able to keep the allegiance of its core membership, the upper and middle layers of management and the state machine. As the veteran

left wing dissident Stefan Heym told in a recent interview, “the structures of the police, security and army are still there, and in the middle ranks the same people are still in charge.”

In Czechoslovakia the ruling party is, as the left wing oppositionist Petr Uhl has put it, “neither a Communist Party, nor, strictly speaking, a political party at all. It is a structure that brings together 1.7 million people in a hierarchy of power and responsibilities. Most of its members join in order to get some small benefit in their daily lives”. (**International Viewpoint**, 13/11/89)

The two hour general strike on 27 November showed how weak its hold was once people had lost the fear of repression.

But again, the attitude of the most prominent oppositional figures can provide it with opportunities to retreat in reasonably good order. In the days before the strike people with a genuine record of resistance like Vaclav Havel were building up Alexander Dubcek, the former party leader from 1968-69, who has always preached a reformed version of party rule, and even the regime’s own temporary prime minister, Adamec. Hardly had the two hour strike finished, than they were calling for a moratorium on demonstrations while discussions took place with the regime.

It was as if they were afraid of the momentum of activity built up in the workplaces after a week of courageous work by young students. They want to sacrifice that work as they pursue a Polish style coalition government.

It is premature to predict exactly how political life will now develop anywhere in Eastern Europe. What can be said with certainty is that the old ruling class is nowhere finished as yet.

This is true even if, as seems possible in Hungary, the old ruling party collapse completely.

A ruling class and a ruling party are never quite the same thing.

A ruling party represents a ruling class, binding its members together in a common discipline which helps them achieve their common goals against the rest of society. But the class can preserve the real source of its power and privileges, its control over the means of production, even when the party falls apart. This was shown in Germany, Italy, Portugal and Spain after the fall of their fascisms.

The formal networks binding together police chiefs, army officers, government ministers and industrialists disintegrated. But informal networks remained, as did the drive to accumulate which gave them a common class goal against those below them. It was not long before they were able to build new ruling parties just as capable of defending their interests as the old ones had been.

In Eastern Europe, whether these networks stick to the old parties or switch to new ones, they will be preparing now for the next round in the fight, to make the mass of those currently rejoicing in the democratic euphoria bear the cost of restructuring.

Fortunately, there are already signs that a genuine left is beginning to emerge which will reject such manoeuvres – the New Socialist Committee and the independent union Sotsprof in the USSR, the Polish Socialist Party-Democratic Revolution, the United Left in East Germany.

This left has to be in the forefront of the struggle against the old ruling parties. This means it has to fight for the democratic demands put forward by all elements of the opposition – for free elections, a multi-party system, for freedom of the media. But it has to push these demands

forward in a way which challenges all aspects of the power of the ruling class while the rest of the former opposition seeks to conciliate with it.

This means demands which attack the informal as well as formal structure of ruling class power – demands for wholesale purges of those responsible for repression and censorship in the past, for the driving out of managers, police chiefs, army officers, judges and media editors involved in maintaining the old order, for the dissolution of the repressive units of the state, for the sacking of all informers and secret police agents.

It means extending the scope of the democracy preached by the old opposition, so that it includes demands like that for independent trade unions (a notable omission from the version of the Czechoslovak Civic Forum's demands as they appear in the Western press) and for rank and file organisations inside the armed forces.

It means fighting for these demands with working class methods of struggle – above all strikes and occupations – which build up democratic forms of working class self organisation in opposition to the old bureaucratic hierarchies in every factory, mine, office and barracks.

Finally, it means recognising that workers will not fight for such an extension of democracy without also raising demands about then: own living standards and working conditions in opposition to the reformers' talk of restructuring and the market.

In taking up the democratic demands raised and then half abandoned by the middle class opposition, workers can give them a new content and combine them with their own social demands. This combination raises the question of workers' control of society as a whole. What Marx and Engels wrote back in 1850 on those who raised the slogans of the great

bourgeois revolutions is still very applicable in Eastern Europe.

“The relation of the revolutionary workers’ party to the petty bourgeois democrats is this: it marches with them against the faction which it aims at overthrowing, it opposes them in everything by which they try to consolidate their position in their own interests.

“The mass of petty bourgeois will as long as possible remain hesitant, undecided and inactive, then, as soon as the issue has been decided, will seize the victory for themselves, will call upon the workers to maintain tranquility and return to work, will guard against so called excesses and bar the proletariat from the fruits of victory.

“While the democratic petty bourgeois wish to bring the revolution to a conclusion as quickly as possible ... it is in our interest and our task to make the revolution permanent, until all more or less possessing classes have been forced out of their position of dominance ...

“The workers’ battle cry must be: the Revolution in Permanence!”
