

# THE LEFT IN RUSSIA

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## I. Introduction

The central problem facing the democratic left in Russia is its failure to date to win mass support, in particular among the working class, its natural social base. An analysis of this failure must, therefore, form the background for any discussion of left Russian political parties and movements. Accordingly, the first part of this article will deal with the social and political situation in the working class and the ('non-political') labour movement. The second part will present an historical overview and analysis of the left.

First some definitions are in order. By 'working class' we mean that part of the population that depends mainly on wages or salaries for its subsistence and does not hold managerial positions. This includes also the 'toiling intelligentsia' (that is, people in non-managerial positions normally requiring diplomas of higher education), although for some purposes in this essay we will refer to the latter as a separate group. The social structure of Russia is in rapid ~~flux~~, but the working class and their dependents (with or without the 'toiling intelligentsia') still make up the vast majority of the population.

A definition of the 'left' is somewhat more problematic. Strictly speaking, these are the democratic socialists (the word 'democratic' is, admittedly, redundant), that is, anti-capitalist political groups striving for the maximal extension of democracy (in the literal sense of popular power), not only in the narrowly defined political sphere but also – and perhaps especially – in economic and social life. This consistently democratic left objectively reflects the interests of the working class.

However, in this article we will also use an expanded definition of the 'left' that includes those anti-capitalist elements who refer to themselves as 'socialist' or 'communist' but whose practice and real programmes may have little to do with the extension of democracy. In Russia, these elements are mainly the various successor groups to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), outlawed by Yeltsin after August 1991. We will refer to these groups, for lack of a better term, as the 'nostalgic left'

(though in their social and economic programmes, most of them actually tend more toward social democracy; the parties that call themselves 'social democratic', in turn, tend more to economic liberalism).

## II. THE WORKING CLASS AND LABOUR MOVEMENT

### *1. The Working Class As It Emerged from Bureaucratic Rule*

Until the late 1980s, there was a widespread assumption among the democratic left, both inside and outside the Soviet Union, that the anti-bureaucratic revolution would be socialist in content, that is, would lead to a genuine socialization of the nationalized economy. This has so far obviously turned out to be illusory. But the illusion (which itself may yet be overturned) did have some basis in reality. Workers played leading and independent roles in all the anti-bureaucratic movements in Eastern Europe in the four decades following World War II. These movements almost always gave rise to workers' councils and to demands for self-management, their participants often displaying remarkable solidarity and organization. Even in the Soviet Union, the centre of bureaucratic power, disillusionment with de-Stalinization in the early 1960s provoked a significant protest movement among workers, which was severely repressed.

In general, it was difficult to conceive that workers in these nationalized economies would tolerate the substitution of a capitalist class for their former bureaucratic overlords. The basic thrust of the labour movement since the very origins of modern capitalism has been to subordinate the market to social needs, when it was not completely to replace the market with a planned economy based upon production for use. It seemed reasonable to assume that workers in the bureaucratic states would oppose attempts to restore market relations to dominance in their economies.

That capitalism is now being restored, albeit in a confused and still far from complete manner, is primarily the result of the weakness of the working class as it emerged from decades of bureaucratic dictatorship. However, the extent of this weakness was not immediately evident in the Soviet Union. In particular, Perestroika, initiated from above under the banner of a return to socialist principles (a banner that soon proved false), gave rise to a growing, if uneven, social and political mobilization in the working class. This took the form of strikes, the formation of independent trade unions, of self-management movements, as well as active participation in electoral politics in support of anti-bureaucratic forces.

This activity played an important role in the gradual expansion of political freedoms under Perestroika that finally led to the fall of the 'Communist' bureaucratic regime. But the fruits of this mobilization, which in Russia itself never embraced more than a minority of the working class, were harvested with relative ease by liberal forces (in and outside the bureaucracy) hostile to the workers' interests. Despite their promises of

democracy and Western-style living standards, the policies of the **new/old** elite have left workers much worse off both economically and even politically than under Brezhnev.

In retrospect, the weakness of the working class is not difficult to explain. The rapid collapse of bureaucratic rule left in its wake an atomized society. That regime had for over 60 years effectively prevented independent collective activity and organization (with the exception, under Brezhnev, of bureaucratic-mafiagroupings). The relative ease with which some workers were able to mount collective actions during Perestroika—in the miners' case, this occurred on a very large scale—was largely due to the fact that the state itself provided a ready organizational framework for mobilization: the party-state bureaucracy organized society in order to control and administer it. When repression was relaxed in the first years of Perestroika, these structures — especially the state enterprises and their centralized ministries — were still intact, and economic protests quickly became politicized. The centralized, authoritarian state presented itself as the natural target of discontent. The goal — popular control — was self-evident.

The high point of this popular mobilization was reached in 1990, with the election of many liberals, running under democratic, anti-bureaucratic banners, to local and republican soviets. After that, activism steadily declined. (There were some, admittedly weak, signs of a resurgence in the fall of 1993 before Yeltsin's tanks gutted the Supreme Soviet.) In August 1991, the liberal forces around Yeltsin were able to defeat the attempted putsch by conservative forces with minimal popular mobilization. This development opened the way for a time to the unlimited dominance of the liberals and the launching of 'shock therapy', a massive assault on popular living standards and social and political rights.

By then, much of its old state structure had already been dismantled, especially in the economic sphere, and so it could no longer serve as an organizing element for popular discontent. In particular, enterprises, though still state-owned, had 'won' their autonomy. The resultant atomization was well reflected in the union movement, where decentralization was carried to the extreme. The national branch unions and federations lost their former dictatorial powers and most of their budgets to the enterprise-level unions and saw their roles reduced to mere co-ordinators and political lobbyists. In most of industry, sectorial collective agreements became almost irrelevant; it was increasingly every plant for itself. There is some reaction against this today, but the absence of solidarity in the union movement remains very striking.

At the same time, once democracy had been won — or, at least, appeared to have been won — and once the grandiose promises associated with market reform (which had been sold to the populace as the opposite of bureaucratic centralization, and so the natural economic counterpart of

political democracy) had proved empty, it became much harder for workers to find positive common goals to unite their opposition to the policies of the **new/old liberal/bureaucratic** regime.

Another factor was the discrediting of socialism by the old regime, which made it difficult to conceive of a coherent, **working** class alternative. However, this problem played a more central role **really** in the final period of Perestroika, when people still took the promises of the market reformers seriously. Today, the majority of workers look back fondly at their economic security and living standards under the old system. Despite the government's continued **propaganda** efforts, the mention of **socialism**, at least as an idea, no longer provokes negative reactions in most people.

Today the basic factor preventing the emergence of a **working-class** alternative to capitalist restoration is the social and political demoralization of the **working** class against the background of an unprecedented peacetime economic crisis. According to one independent estimate, the gross domestic product at the end of **1993** was **38** per cent below the level at the end of **1990**. The volume of industrial production, according to official figures, fell by **16** per cent in **1993** and by **18** per cent in **1992**.<sup>1</sup> There is no sign of an end to the economic decline. Fear of mass protest has so far kept the government from allowing open mass unemployment. But shortened work weeks and forced extended leaves at a fraction of regular pay are very common. Without a major shift in policy, mass bankruptcies and dismissals cannot be far off.

The material and social distress experienced by the average Russian citizen is eloquently summed up in a few demographic figures. Infant mortality, already very high at the start of 'shock therapy' for an industrialized country, rose from **16.8** per thousand in **1991** to **19.1** in **1993**. Life expectancy for men dropped in **1993** from **62** (already ten to thirteen years below Western figures) to **59** years (for women: from **73** to **71**). Only one fifth of children upon graduation from high school are considered by medical authorities to be in full health. In **1993** alone, the population of Russia declined by over one million, with the gulf between births and deaths continuing to rise at a precipitous **rate**.<sup>2</sup> Government statistics put average real incomes at the end of **1993** at one third of the pre-'shock' level of the end of **1991**.<sup>3</sup> The old social guarantees – full employment and job security, free health care and education, free housing and heavily subsidized communal services, transportation, and basic food products – are being rapidly dismantled.

**In brief**, Russian workers today find themselves in an entirely new situation of economic insecurity that is fast coming to resemble that of workers in Third World countries. The reactions to this social earthquake among workers, the great majority of whom have no experience of collective action, has been to retreat into the private struggle for survival, while clinging to the hope that somehow management **and/or** the state will

defend them. This attitude comes naturally as a legacy of the past: though ultimately backed up by the threat of repression (made good whenever workers openly clashed with their masters), the relationship of management and the political authorities to workers for several decades was one of more-or-less benevolent paternalism. Today, in conditions of rapidly deepening crisis, few workers have any faith in their own collective ability to defend themselves.

Another crucial factor, one often overlooked, is the relative ease with which liberal forces hijacked the anti-bureaucratic revolution is because of the weakness of the labour movement on the international level. In a largely forgotten passage of the *Revolution Betrayed*, in the chapter significantly entitled 'The Inevitability of a New Revolution', **Trotsky** wrote in the mid 1930s that the fate of the October Revolution was inextricably tied to the fate of Europe and of the whole world and that if no revolution were victorious in the developed capitalist countries

then a bourgeois counterrevolution [in the USSR] rather than an uprising of workers against the bureaucracy will most likely be on the agenda. But if, despite the joint sabotage of the reformers and the 'communist' leaders, the proletariat of Western Europe finds the way to power, a new chapter will be opened in the history of the Soviet Union. The very first victory of the revolution in Europe will flow like an electric current through the Soviet masses, straighten them up, raise their spirit of independence, awaken in them the traditions of 1905 and 1917. . . . Only in that way can the first workers' state be saved for the socialist future.<sup>4</sup>

Not only has there been no successful revolution, but the collapse of the bureaucratic regimes occurred at a very low point in the fortunes of the world labour and socialist movements. Almost everywhere, these movements are on the defensive and retreating. Except perhaps for the Workers' Party in Brazil, there is today no mass party anywhere that sees socialism as its immediate task, let alone does something to achieve it. In these circumstances, it is little wonder that Russian workers fell easy prey to liberal ideology. They were constantly reminded that 'the whole world has embraced the market'. Ideological, economic and political pressure from abroad played a key role in directing the anti-bureaucratic revolution onto a capitalist path. There was practically no **countervailing** pressure from the international labour and socialist movements.

Now, more than two years into 'shock therapy', Russian workers have been immunized against the siren songs of the liberals, but they still cannot practically conceive of an alternative to capitalist restoration. It is on this background of demobilization and despair that fascism in Russia can become a real potential (as evidenced in the recent electoral showing of **Vladimir Zhirinovskiy**).

Indeed, if one considers the international context of the collapse of the bureaucratic regime (and it was more collapse than overthrow, the elite of the ruling caste itself having lost confidence in its system), the turn that events have taken no longer seems quite so predestined. If, for example,

the collapse had occurred in 1968 (it was in progress in Czechoslovakia before the Soviet tanks rolled in), it is not hard to imagine the ensuing transformation taking an entirely different direction. This is not to deny that the crisis of the labour and socialist movements in the capitalist world and the collapse of the bureaucratic regimes are linked. But that link is much less direct than the coincidence of the two crises might lead one to think.

## *2. The Russian Labour Movement and the Collapse of the Old Regime*

In this section we will look at the political responses of the main types of labour organizations to the collapse of the bureaucratic system and the process, still far from complete, of capitalist restoration. Perestroika gave rise to many workers' organizations, but most remained small and were short-lived. The three types of organization that displayed some staying power and significant memberships are the new trade unions, the **work-collective councils (STKs)** and their associations, and finally the old trade unions. We will deal with them in that order, since that is how they made themselves felt on the political scene.<sup>1</sup>

### a. The New or Alternative Trade Unions

With their general strike in the summer of 1989, the miners became the vanguard of the movement for renewal of the labour movement, which except for brief, localized explosions, had been stamped out back in the late 1920s. That strike eventually gave rise to the Independent Miners' Union (NPG), the rival to the old Union of Employees of the Coal Industry. The founders of the NPG reproached the old union, among other things, with being conciliationist and including management in its ranks. They set out to organize a union exclusively of underground coal workers, unlike the old union which also included thousands of surface employees in the varied enterprises of the coal ministry. (The NPG eventually yielded on that point, but it still excludes anyone above the rank of foreman.)

Overall, the new union movement has made rather limited progress outside of the coal sector. Although exact numbers are hard to come by (all the unions tend to inflate their membership figures), today probably more than 90 per cent of organized workers still belong to the old unions, which include around 90 per cent of all wage and salary earners. Even among coalminers, probably less than ten per cent belong to the NPG, though the latter's influence, now on the decline, has in the past gone well beyond its formal membership. Outside of **coal**, the new movement has met with some success mainly in the transport sector (aside from the relatively few individual new unions in scattered enterprises and shops elsewhere): among air-traffic controllers, pilots, locomotive drivers, port workers, city

transport drivers. These are strategic economic positions that give these relatively small groups of workers exceptional leverage.

In deciding to split off from the old unions, the organizers of the new ones argued that the old structures were unreformable. The obstacles to reform in 1990, when the NPG was founded, must indeed have seemed formidable. Even today, more than three years later, the main problems – the absence of democratic accountability of union leaders and their subordination to enterprise management – are still far from being resolved in the majority of enterprise-level unions, where the real power now lies.

Still, progress is being made, though at a very uneven and slow pace that may prove insufficient to save the organised labour movement, weak as it already is, from a definitive defeat by the forces of capitalist restoration. One example of reform at the national level is the old coal employees' union itself, which has no doubt benefitted from the competition provided by the rival NPG. Under a young president who rose from the ranks (rather than coming from the party apparatus, as was past tradition), this union has become increasingly militant in the defence of its members' interests, and its president's authority among miners today far surpasses that of the NPG's leaders. (In the recent national elections in a mining and heavy industrial region of Siberia, the Russian NPG's leader lost out to the director of a department store, generally one of the most hated economic figures in Russia.) Other unions that have undergone far-reaching reform at the national level are the Byelorussian Autoworkers' and Radio-electronic Workers' Unions.

These examples, unfortunately still quite rare, nevertheless demonstrate that reform of the old structures, however difficult, is possible. It is true that most of the old unions' new-found militancy has been directed at the state and not against enterprise management. Indeed, many of the collective actions organized by these unions have had the active or passive support of management, since their aim has been to force the state to live up to its commitments to pay subsidies, to provide credits, to lighten the tax burden on enterprises, and the like. These and similar issues, upon which the very survival of the enterprise hangs, represent interests still shared in common by workers and much of enterprise management. Privatization, at least in the large enterprises, has in most cases still not significantly affected worker-management relations, which retain much of their old paternalistic character.

Thus, if union reform has not gone very far at the level of the plant committees, it would be wrong to attribute this merely to corruption or to the allegedly unreformable nature of the old unions. There remains an objective basis for the close collaboration of management and the union. The problem is not the co-operation itself, but that the union rarely takes part in it as an equal and independent partner. But again, there are examples of old unions at the shop and plant levels that have become

accountable to the membership and independent of management. This has occurred when the rank-and-file union members themselves mobilized against management to elect democratic leaders prepared to adopt independent positions.

That this is still rare is certainly in part due to managerial repression against activists, often with the co-operation of old union leaders. But the main reason, as argued above, is undoubtedly the prevailing demoralization and demobilization among the rank and file. The strategy adopted by some labour activists to form new unions alongside the old ones is, at least in part, a way of avoiding the difficult task of mobilizing the majority of still inert workers for union reform by concentrating efforts on the minority, who for one reason or another, are prepared to support more independent and accountable union organizations.

But if in the early stages of the new union movement, its activists adopted more **solidary** positions and made some efforts to reach the broader strata of workers (for example, by founding the now defunct, quasi-political Confederation of Labour in 1990), this movement has increasingly taken on a narrow craft character, to the point where many parts of it have become a sort of labour aristocracy in their attitudes and practice.

The 'aristocratic' outlook of the leaders of the NPG came to the fore in the spring of 1992, when they refused to support the strike movement – some even condemned it – among the health and education workers, the lowest paid workers in Russia, whose wages remain well below the poverty line. (The old miners' union supported this movement, though its support rarely went much farther than declarations.) The NPG has also come out in support of such non-solidary forms of social benefits as individual social security and health insurance accounts.

The support for Yeltsin and his neo-liberal policies among almost all of the new unions is closely linked to this 'aristocratic' outlook. On the one hand, the strategic economic positions of their members (as one old union activist put it: 'They sit on the golden tap') have allowed them to fare better than other workers under the liberal reforms. On the other, these unions try to compensate for their political isolation from the broader mass of workers by developing a special relationship with the government: their political loyalty has won them a certain degree of favoured treatment. All the major new unions supported Yeltsin to the hilt in his bloody confrontation with parliament in September–October 1993, while virtually all the old unions, to one degree or another, supported the parliament (whose majority had been shifting to the left (or rather centre) against Yeltsin's 'shock therapy').

This explains the major paradox of the organized labour scene in Russia: the new unions generally adopt militant, independent positions toward enterprise management but display touching loyalty to the government;

the old unions tend to do the opposite. The upshot of this is that the most active elements of the working class, those in the new unions, have been detached from, and to some degree even turned against, the basic mass of workers.

This, of course, is not unrelated to the ties that the **AFL-CIO's U.S.-government-funded Russo-American Foundation** has managed to develop with these new unions. This foundation openly professes a liberal ideology and supports the pro-Yeltsin forces, while decisively refusing any contact with the 'former Communist' organizations belonging to the old union **federation.**<sup>6</sup>

Despite all this, one has to doubt whether these new unions (at least, those of them that **are** real unions and organize the workers in entire enterprises, trades **and/or** sectors) can long maintain their 'aristocratic' orientations. In Russian conditions, to say that the material situation of these workers is privileged is only to say that they **are** less poor than most. In addition, the special relationship with the government is anything but secure and is certainly no protection against periodic efforts on the part of state enterprise management to break these unions through strong-arm tactics.

#### b. The STKs and the Self Management Movement

The STKs (work-collective councils) were created by order from above on the basis of Gorbachev's 1987 Law on the State Enterprise, adopted when Perestroika still paraded under the banner of a return to socialist ideals. Largely because of these origins and because little else had yet changed in the economic relations, the great majority of STKs remained subordinate to the enterprise administration. The STK movement as such only began to take off after the first miners' strike in 1989, and especially when Perestroika began to shift to an openly restorationist course. The new 1990 Enterprise Law, which virtually abolished the STKs, provided the major impulse for the creation of national and regional STK unions, with the first national congress **taking** place in Moscow at the end of 1990. Even so, the activists of this movement came disproportionately from the enterprise intelligentsia.

At its high point, this current of the labour movement came closest in its demands to a socialist programme for reform of property relations, calling for the full transfer of management in the state enterprises to the work collectives. This meant that the enterprise would enjoy economic autonomy, with the plant employees collectively deciding its basic policy and hiring the management. At some later time, the collectives would themselves decide what form of property the enterprise should take. This could range from full collective ownership to full state ownership, but the key

point was that any change in property relations would be the voluntary decision of the collective.

The major weakness of this position was that it presented no macro-economic vision, that is, there was no attempt to deal with the nature of relations between the enterprises nor with the role of the state or of other political and collective institutions in the economy. That this critical issue was left open was no doubt due to a combination of a reaction against the old centralized, bureaucratic system of management as well as to the influence of liberal ideology, which painted any direct state role in the economy management as 'totalitarian' (whether that state was democratic or not was irrelevant to the liberals).

Nevertheless, the STKs' position was anathema to the reform-minded section of the nomenklatura, originally Gorbachev's main political base, which by this time was fast abandoning its attachment to 'socialism', hoping itself to appropriate privately the best parts of the nationalized economy. The STKs' demands were also strongly opposed by the liberal forces that dominated the elite intelligentsia and by their political allies abroad in the IMF and World Bank. They constantly cited the Yugoslav example as 'proof' that self-management does not work. But, in fact, they saw self-management and worker ownership as a major obstacle to rapid capitalist restoration.

This opposition to the STK movement was well-founded. It is true that the absence of an explicit macro-economic conception of reform, at least among the majority of activists, implied an essentially market-dominated view of the future economy. Nevertheless, worker self-management would have put a brake on rapid privatization (primitive accumulation), which (along with the creation of favourable conditions for foreign investment and trade – mostly, in practice, outright plundering) is the real main goal of 'shock therapy' (all the talk about restructuring and efficiency being mainly a smokescreen to hide the rapid formation of a bourgeoisie). Worker self-management would have left open the possibility that workers would be led by their practical experience to see that a genuinely democratic state and other accountable collective institutions have a positive and necessary role to play in economic organization, since a purely market system of self-managed enterprises would spell sure bankruptcy for many enterprises and entail mass unemployment. In the summer of 1993, for example, after getting a taste of privatization in practice, despite a massive propaganda campaign (largely financed by the U.S. government), 72 per cent of the respondents in a national survey opposed privatization of large-scale enterprises.'

The major weakness of the movement was probably less ideological than political: it failed to mobilize mass worker support behind it. The great majority of workers apparently did not see the practical relevance of the property question for themselves. Back in 1990 and even 1991, few

understood that privatization would eventually put an end to the prevailing paternalistic practices of management and the state, that it threatened workers with loss of key social benefits and especially with mass unemployment. Russian workers had no direct experience of capitalism and they typically reacted with disbelief when told that in capitalist economies productive, disciplined workers are regularly fired when their labour can no longer make a profit for the owners. On the contrary, many workers believed that a 'real owner' (the liberals insisted that under the old system 'no one' owned the enterprises) would introduce the latest technology and eliminate the semi-organized anarchy that characterized Soviet enterprises.

Worker indifference and even distrust toward the STKs were bolstered by their official origins and their widespread subordination to the plant administration. This problem was compounded by the tacit and often open hostility of most unions to the STKs. Union leaders tended to see them as rival organizations. Many believed that self-management and/or collective ownership would lead to the elimination of trade unions as unnecessary. Rather belatedly, toward the end of 1991, both the new and the old trade unions, at least formally, finally came around to supporting the original demands of the STK movement. Nevertheless, both union movements consistently refer to their main task as defending 'hired labour', a phrase that would seem to imply that they have, in fact, given up on defending the workers' claim as collective owners of the nationalized economy, built by their labour and that of previous generations.

But part of the responsibility for the failure of the movement lies with the movement's leadership itself, who did little to mobilize workers around its demands. Instead, they concentrated their efforts on political lobbying in the corridors of power. This choice of tactic was probably related, at least in part, to the predominance of the enterprise intelligentsia among the movement's activists. They tended to be less confrontational and more trusting of authorities than workers. In Russia, the national STK movement's leaders cast their lot with Yeltsin and his push for Russian sovereignty (this was at a time when the USSR still existed). No sooner had Yeltsin and his liberal supporters acquired the power they coveted than they openly turned against the self-management movement. (Kravchuk repeated the same trick on the Ukrainian movement.)

Under tremendous ideological and political pressure from above, and with little active support from below, the STK movement gradually retreated from its original demands and began to defend the workers' right to at least some share of the nationalized property. But the choices offered by Yeltsin's Law on Privatization included neither self-management nor collective worker ownership. Today, few STKs still exist. But despite the official self-congratulations on the progress of privatization, the issue of property is a long way from being resolved. As we have noted, **worker-**

management relations in most enterprises that have formally been privatized have yet to change fundamentally. In some enterprises where conflicts over property have become acute, in the absence of STKs, the trade unions and other ad hoc organizations have taken up the battle for the workers. In a number of cases, workers have tried to circumvent the law by pooling individually-held shares. In a few instances, workers have openly revolted and de facto annulled the privatization of their enterprise, once they had understood what it meant in practice.

The real change in property relations in Russia will be marked by mass dismissals. It is difficult to predict how workers will react to that. A major labour upsurge would surely spell the end to the neo-liberal reforms. So far, there are few signs of such mobilization, but the contradictions – and the anger – are mounting.

### 3. *The Old Unions.*

The miners' strike in 1989, which saw the old miners' union sitting beside the government and ministry representatives across the table from the strikers, provided the first real impetus for change, albeit slow and tortuous, in the old unions. But probably more decisive than the competition from new worker organizations was the shift in government attitude toward the old unions. With the change in state policy to a liberal course, the old unions lost their status as junior, subordinate partners and became the objects of open government hostility.

The onslaught caught the old unions quite by surprise, as was demonstrated by the central slogan of the FNPR's (Federation of Independent Trade Unions) 'fall campaign' (a tactic mechanically adopted from the Japanese labour movement): 'market wages for market prices', a campaign that failed miserably. The unions had done next to nothing in the enterprises themselves to win the confidence of their members and were unable (many plant chairpersons were unwilling) to mobilize them around this essentially political slogan.

Between 1989 and Yeltsin's state coup in September–October 1993, the old unions gradually shifted to a position of open opposition to the government. But this evolution was halting and contradictory. They continued – and continue today – to embrace the slogan of 'social partnership', even though the government consistently violates its signed agreements. At the same time, the old unions mounted, or tried to mount, political pressure campaigns to force the government to live up to its commitments and to change an economic policy ruinous for their members. One such campaign was building up, with somewhat more success than usual, in the weeks preceding Yeltsin's decree that abolished the constitution and shut down the parliament. (Most of the new unions also embrace the slogan of 'social partnership', which is being pushed vigorously by the ILO and the AFLCIO.)

In conditions of a collapsing economy, unions can achieve relatively little for their members through traditional 'trade-unionistic' actions. To be effective in Russia in today's situation, the main struggle has to be conducted on the political level. To a degree, this is understood in the old unions, since most of their militant actions have, as noted, been directed at the state. But the political action of the old unions suffers from two major and related weaknesses.

One of these is the failure of the plant unions clearly to demarcate themselves from enterprise management. This, of course, does not rule out co-operation when it is in the workers' interests, but it must be from independent, union positions. Unless unions can demonstrate to their members that they are something more than the tail of the administration, unless they clearly take up the defence of the workers' interests in the enterprise itself and win them at least some small, but real, victories, they have little hope of leading them into political action against the state. Today most workers do not even understand why they need a union (and most plant union chairpersons do not understand why they need an active, conscious rank and file).

The other major weakness of the old unions' political action has been its inconsistency. This, too, is related to the unions' refusal to assert their independence from management. The FNPR and its affiliated unions support a 'centrist' position on economic reform in a tacit alliance with the so-called 'directors' corps', those enterprise directors who have remained more-or-less 'red', that is, who have not totally given up on saving their enterprise and its work force. This position (which also characterized the majority of the old parliament in its latter days) accepts the 'inevitability' of capitalist restoration, but calls for a 'socially-oriented market' – a regulated transition to a capitalism oriented to national needs, with a strong state sector and social-welfare safety net: in other words – capitalism with a human face. But one has seriously to doubt the realism of such a programme, given the current crisis and restructuring of world capitalism and the subordinate place the Russian economy would inevitably occupy in it.

In this sense, the liberals' criticism of the 'centrist' programme as inconsistent has some merit. In effect, the old unions want it both ways: they accept capitalist restoration but reject its consequences. They are not opposed to privatization but it should be carried out 'in the interests of the work collectives', a vague and meaningless phrase. If they are serious about defending their members' interests, they have to opt for a clean break with the government and the 'directors' corps' (that is, abandon 'social partnership') and come out with a clear workers' alternative to capitalist restoration. In private conversations, many union leaders appear to understand that the defence of workers' interest in current conditions has to assume an anti-capitalist character, but most refuse to adopt that position in practice.

In the past, the old unions have toyed with the idea of forming their own labour party but have never decided to do it. (In Byelorussia, the **Auto-workers'** and **Radio-electronics Workers'** Unions created such a party at the end of 1993.) The idea is still in the air, but the new leadership that was elected to the FNPR after the October 1993 crisis has so far shown itself even more timid than the old.

This is partly a response to government repression: the unions lost their control of the social security administration at the end of September 1993 (a few days after the FNPR executive condemned Yeltsin's state coup), and the government made clear that if they are disloyal, they stand to lose their automatic dues check-off and their property, if not worse. At the same time, since the defeat of pro-'shock' forces in the December 1993 elections, there seems to have been some shift in government economic policy toward a more 'centrist' position. This has created an expectant mood among some of the union leaders.

But probably as important is the old union leaders' sense of isolation from their millions of members, who are not ready to support them in a confrontation with the government. This is really a magic circle that can only be broken by a labour upsurge from below or by the adoption by the union leadership of an independent, far-sighted, and consistent strategy that their members can come to believe in. Ideally, it would be a combination of both. Whether any of these eventualities will happen and when is anyone's guess. The only thing that is sure at this point is that the immediate future is not bright for workers and the labour movement.

### III. THE LEFT

A basic knowledge of the history of the left in Russia from the time of Perestroika is indispensable to understanding its present state. The real impact of the left on state policy has been small, but, at the same time, the left's manifestations and evolution have been extremely varied and complex. This poses real problems for an adequate treatment of the topic in so limited a space. We have tried to deal with this by combining an historical survey with elements of analysis that focus primarily on the obstacles (besides those 'objective' factors already treated in the first section) to the democratic left's acquiring a mass social base.

It would, of course, not be entirely correct to claim that the labour movement and the various left organizations and groups that emerged during and after Perestroika developed along totally separate paths. In fact, over the years, various attempts on the left have been made to forge links with the workers' movement. Following the miners' strike of 1989, these efforts met with some temporary success. In particular, there was considerable left influence at the founding of the Confederation of Labour in May 1990. But the Confederation itself never really got off the ground.

Since then, aside from a few regional political groupings consistently oriented toward workers (such as Rabochii, a socialist association of workers' clubs in the Volga and Urals regions), and some groups of socialist intellectuals (such as the Moscow-based KAS-KOR Bulletin on the Labour Movement and the Committee to Support the Labour Movement), most **leftwing** organizations gradually gave up systematic efforts directed toward workers.

In the first section, we tried to understand the isolation of the left by focusing on the politics of workers and their ('non-political') labour organizations. In this part, we will approach the problem from inside the left itself.

### *1. Before August 1991<sup>9</sup>*

#### a. The 'Informal' **Left**<sup>10</sup>

For the sake of clarity, we will treat separately the early stages of the development of the 'informal' left from that of the left within the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. However, it should be kept in mind that these currents interacted to a large extent, both in their political dynamics as well as in a direct organizational sense, since the CPSU or Komsomol structures often gave tacit support (political and even material) to many of the 'informal' groups, whose members were themselves frequently recruited from these structures. Nevertheless, until 1991 open and **direct** collaboration between the 'informal' and the 'formal' structures was very limited, as the former feared manipulation and discrediting, while the latter were wary of encouraging potential competitors.

Many of the 'informal' left groups had their roots in the pre-Perestroika era, when discontent with the regime was growing in intellectual circles." When Perestroika was put on the official political agenda in 1986/1987, many of these small groupings already had several years of discussion and even samizdat publication behind them. But for obvious reasons, their practical experience with political intervention and campaigning was next to nonexistent, and when liberalization made possible open political struggle, this lack of experience, especially in contest with the shrewd tacticians of the party apparatus, was very telling. (The average age in the 'informal' socialist clubs in 1986–1987 was probably less than 25 years.)

The multitude of clubs and currents that emerged in this period was the manifestation of a genuine, if limited in scope, anti-bureaucratic movement that posed vital social and political issues hitherto exclusively restricted to the jurisdiction of the bureaucratic authorities or else completely outside the bounds of legitimate political consideration.

The formation in August 1987 of the Federation of Socialist Clubs was a major breakthrough for the 'informal' democratic socialists. A key player

in this was the Moscow Social Initiative Club, led, among others, by Boris Kagarlitsky, who had been arrested in 1982 as a leader of the Young Socialists, and Gleb Pavlovsky, a former samizdat **journalist**.<sup>12</sup> The Federation was founded under the formal banner of 'consolidating the left wing of Perestroika', a phrase obviously designed to calm the fears of the authorities, but which also reflected the political outlook of many of the 'informal' political activists of the 'first wave'. The declaration of the founding conference was carefully worded to avoid any head-on confrontation, but it nevertheless signalled the two concerns that would come to dominate the political struggles on the left in the following years: the struggle for democratic rights and the introduction of the market mechanism as a regulator in economic relations.

But if the Federation of Socialist Clubs was a step forward, both in terms of its own organizational ambitions and its winning of somewhat broader public recognition for the left, it soon became obsolete, due to its ideological and structural amorphousness in a period of extremely rapid political evolution and differentiation. Within less than a year, it had vanished from the political scene.

As the 'democratic movement' gained momentum, Popular Fronts, uniting very heterogeneous groups and organizations that professed a democratic orientation, were created, first in provincial centres (where the political scene was less factionalized) and then finally in Moscow in the spring of 1988, where socialists played an important leadership role. These Popular Fronts typically had broad democratic, social and environmental programmes, uniting substantial layers of activists. But they were unable to transcend their own nature as coalitions in the defence of a radical version of Perestroika. Consequently, when official Perestroika entered its terminal phase in the winter of 1989/190 against the background of the failure of Gorbachev's economic reform, and a series of alternative, mainly liberal, options, came to dominate the political debate, the underlying basis of the Popular Fronts disappeared.

Although the experiences of the Popular Fronts varied from region to region, some general statements can be made about the problems faced by the left in that period inside this type of broad coalition. The forces involved in these movements were of such a heterogeneous, sometimes even mutually contradictory, nature, that they could not possibly develop anything even resembling a clear political platform or ideology. This tended to restrict them to their 'lowest common denominator', which, in practice, was the goal of winning concessions from the more progressive elements of the party apparatus. As Kagarlitsky, then a prominent leader of the Moscow Popular Front, stated: '**We are realistic and don't demand the impossible. We make radical, but realizable demands.**'<sup>14</sup> However, the movement did show some radicalism, and was undoubtedly successful in several cases in setting the political agenda, especially in its campaigns

around single issues, for example, on the environment or for the truthful treatment of Soviet history.

The political incoherence of the Popular Fronts also helps to explain their inability to develop lasting organizational structures. And despite the significant level – especially in the Soviet historical context – of rank-and-file activity involved in these movements, there was never any effective control by the members of the leadership. As a result, when the ideological and political winds shifted in favour of liberalism, many of the 'informal' leaders aligned themselves with the liberal forces that were coming to dominate the state apparatus and took with them sizeable parts of their organizations.

The rapid succession of events, the constant internal struggles within the Popular Fronts and their permanent organizational flux left little political space, time or energy for the socialist currents inside them to organize themselves in an efficient way. Thus, for example, even though the Confederation of Anarcho-Syndicalists counted perhaps one thousand activists and the New Socialists several hundreds, neither of them could even begin to pose a real alternative to the liberals once the Popular Fronts fell apart, as they had neither the structure nor a regular press.

Despite attempts to link up with the emerging, new workers' organizations, the 'informal' movement remained largely **confined** to student and intellectual circles in the major urban centres. The links made with the miners after the 1989 strike soon disappeared, and the quite serious attempt to give the 'informal' movement a working class wing by creating Sotsprof, 'an association of socialist trade unions', ended with the left's ejection from Sotsprof and its national leadership aligning itself fully with the liberals.

#### b. The Left Within the CPSU

Contrary to the simplistic, latter-day liberal myth of a prolonged show-down, from 1987 onwards, between 'communists' and 'democrats', the real political process was far more complex and the relationship between the members of the party-state apparatus and the democratic movement was to a degree even symbiotic. Indeed, it was to a large extent initiatives originating in the party-state leadership that opened the political space for the rise of the 'informal' movement.

As the independent democratic organizations declined or became incorporated into the pro-Yeltsin Democratic Russia organization, the discussions of a socialist alternative continued mainly among the oppositional currents within the CPSU, although these discussions often remained within the framework set down by the apparatus, that was still paying lip service to a 'renewed socialism'.

The conservative wing of the apparatus, which itself was a very heterogeneous entity, rallied around the so-called 'Leningrad Initiative' for a 'Russian Communist Party within the CPSU'.<sup>15</sup> This movement, whose key orientation (for a Russian CP) already gave a foretaste of the nationalist tendencies that would later come to dominate it, was to a large degree a movement from within the apparatus, with its stronghold in Leningrad as well as in some provincial centres. But it also attempted to organize its own 'independent' popular base, especially the United Front of Toilers, a conservative front organization that borrowed its methods from the 'informal' ~ organizing rallies, drafting petitions, distributing leaflets, etc.

But despite the real support the conservative opposition to Gorbachev enjoyed within the party apparatus and even among part of the rank and file, it failed to put forth a clear political programme. It tried to make up for this with nostalgia for the past and the promotion of traditional values of 'statehood' and 'recentralization of the economy'. (This conservative orientation within the CPSU was bequeathed after its dissolution to its successor parties in what we have termed the 'nostalgic left'.) The lack of a concrete programme greatly facilitated the humiliation of this opposition, first by the Gorbachev leadership at the 28th Party Congress in the summer of 1990, despite the opposition's strong showing among the delegates there, and later by the liberal reformers who succeeded Gorbachev.

In the months leading up to that 28th Congress, two other opposition currents were formed within the party: the Democratic and the Marxist Platforms. The former united a broad range of supporters of a 'radical Perestroika', from Yeltsinites through social democrats to socialists. The latter was founded by Marxist social scientists from the Moscow University but soon came to be dominated by more conservative forces.<sup>16</sup>

Although the Democratic Platform had the support of tens of thousands of party members, it suffered from many of the same problems that had made the democratic 'informal' movement a dead-end for its **leftwing** participants. Its platform was formulated in very broad terms in order to reconcile the diverse tendencies that coexisted within it. In its programme, the perspective of a 'transition to democratic socialism' stood alongside the obviously utopian call to transform the thoroughly bureaucratized, ossified CPSU 'into a modern democratic party'.<sup>17</sup> Such contradictions really ruled out the Democratic Platform's becoming much more than a discussion club that loosely united oppositional delegates to the upcoming 28th Party Congress. Once the major liberal figures in the Platform left the party in July 1990, its influence quickly declined.

The Marxist Platform clearly distanced itself from the liberals who tended to dominate the Democratic Platform (at that time, still parading as 'social democrats') and the party conservatives. It proposed a return to 'classical Marxism'. Most of the academic leftists in this group had actually joined the party only in the late 1980s. Before becoming active in the

movement of Moscow party clubs, they had been organizing educational and research activity in the framework of the non-party Club of Marxist Researchers.

But soon after the publication of its manifesto, the Marxist Platform received a strong influx of activists with a very different background: rank-and-file party members as well as lower-level functionaries who saw the Platform as an avenue for voicing their more conservative opposition to Gorbachev's leadership of the party. While these new members strengthened the Platform numerically, they also rendered it useless as an instrument for crystallizing a principled Marxist current within the party. This was fully confirmed in August 1991, when a significant minority of the Platform endorsed the abortive, conservative putsch. Needless to say, the Platform subsequently split.

All the organizations that arose after the dissolution of the CPSU that openly profess a 'communist' orientation draw their membership overwhelmingly from the former conservative opposition within the CPSU. They identify, to one degree or other, with the bureaucratic past as essentially a socialist one, even if they admit that the system suffered from deformations. On the other hand, the democratic socialists inside the CPSU failed to rally any significant forces after its demise.

There are several reasons for this, the main one being that the CPSU was in many respects a microcosm of Soviet society, some of whose main traits we have discussed in the first section. The CPSU almost six decades before had ceased to be a living party. Until Gorbachev's Perestroika, it had been devoid of even the suspicion of democracy, with any independent rank-and-file activity totally out of the question. Even after Gorbachev relaxed the leadership's hold on the party, the rank and file, in its vast majority, remained passive. According to estimates made at the time, of the 4783 delegates to the 28th Party Congress, the Democratic Platform counted little more than a hundred, and the Marxist platform had only a handful of delegates.

The supporters of the two opposition platforms were by and large concentrated in Moscow, Leningrad and a few other major cities. Moreover, their social composition made it difficult for them to enter into a dialogue with the millions of mostly politically inert working class members of the party. By 1990, the CPSU had some nineteen million members, of whom approximately twenty per cent were manual workers, fifteen per cent peasants, and 40 per cent white-collar employees. The rest were pensioners and employees of the so-called 'power ministries' (the repressive apparatuses). At a joint conference of the Democratic and Marxist Platforms after the 28th Congress, 30 per cent of the delegates were university or institute teachers, twenty per cent were party functionaries, and only three per cent were **workers**.<sup>19</sup>

## 2. *After August 1991*

With the elimination of article six of the Soviet **constitution**<sup>20</sup> in the winter of 1990, the CPSU's claim to political monopoly officially ended. Dozens of new 'parties' were subsequently created, typically groups of a few hundred followers around a recognized leader. Almost all of them soon disappeared without a trace. The serious political players, after the decline of the popular democratic movement, remained the old nomenklatura cliques and their allied 'democratic' luminaries. It was to a large extent the emergence within the leading bureaucratic circles of a liberal consensus that really profoundly altered the framework and tone of the public debate.

For reasons mentioned earlier, the democratic left was ill-prepared for this quite rapid turn of events, which found its members isolated in small, more-or-less ideologically defined but badly organized groups. This was true both of those democratic left currents that came out of the 'informals', as well as of the opposition in the CPSU. None of these groups numbered more than a few hundred members and none had any organic links with the workers' movement.

Several attempts were made to establish a broader framework for **leftwing** co-operation but they did not get beyond common declarations. For example, a Moscow initiative group 'For People's Self Management' brought together in the fall of 1990 representatives of all major left groups – social democrats, socialists, anarchists, the CPSU **opposition**.<sup>21</sup> However, this meeting failed to take any decisions on united campaigns nor did it create an organizational framework for future discussions, and the initiative petered out within a few months.

Meanwhile, the political scene was polarizing between the liberals, on the one side, who were increasingly gaining the upper hand in the central party-state apparatus (though their mass popularity had already peaked and their Democratic Russia movement was on the decline), and, on the other, the conservative bureaucratic tendency that retained strongholds in various regions and levels of the apparatus and was trying to organize a mass movement.

The failure of the August 1991 'operetta putsch' gave a further impetus to this polarization: the 'centrists' of the apparatus of the Soviet Union (Gorbachev, Lukyanov, Pavlov) were rapidly outflanked by the liberals, led by Yeltsin. Yeltsin's suspension (later followed by formal outlawing) of the CPSU in Russia following the putsch left the party's Central Committee apparatus in a state of total paralysis. Not one prominent party leader came out with a call to create a new organization that could rally those party members who wanted to continue their political activity under the changed conditions. It was not until mid September that the Central Committee secretariat met anew, but according to one report, 'the only problems being discussed are those linked to the creation of jobs for former party officials.'

It would be another eighteen months before any group originating from the former Central Committee leadership took an initiative toward recreating a Communist Party within the Russian Federation. By that time, a majority of the former party high officials had already migrated to the Russian state administration or to business (often to both) and they had little use for a party that still identified itself, at least in words, with 'communism'.

This breakdown of the old party leadership opened the way for the rise to prominence of formerly marginal forces and personalities. But only two structures managed to acquire a broad following: the Russian Communist Workers' Party (RKRП) and the Socialist Workers' Party (SPT). The former's supporters were recruited primarily from the conservative wing of the CPSU, while the latter attracted many former middle-level party functionaries around what could be termed a 'left-Perestroika' platform.

The RKRП, formally founded in November 1991, soon became the organizational expression of a narrow, but real enough mobilization of activists and former low-level party functionaries with neo-Stalinist and often strongly nationalist inclinations. This nationalism, which was to come subsequently to dominate all of the political groups that came out of the CPSU, draws on widespread values of 'statehood' (*derzhanvnost'*), (which traces its roots far back into pre-revolutionary times and was resurrected with a vengeance by the bureaucratic counterrevolution in the 1920s and 1930s) as well as on the reaction to the obviously comprador nature of the new Russian ruling circles, whose policies have led to the rapid decline of the country's economic and cultural wealth, not to mention its military might.

At its founding, the party had 5,000 registered members; by the spring of 1992, their numbers had reached 50,000, making the RKRП the most important of the post-CPSU formations. It was the driving force behind the creation of Toiling Russia, with affiliates in major cities. This front organization united the **neo-Stalinist** 'communist' organizations with the growing 'patriotic' movement. Although it lacked any positive political programme – except for the resurrection of the USSR, possibly in the form of a Greater Russia – Toiling Russia was able to bring tens of thousands of people into the streets in the aftermath of the dissolution of the USSR at the end of 1991 and the launching of 'shock therapy' in January 1992. With access to broad-circulation dailies like *Sovetskaya Rossiya*, as well as their own press (with a circulation of tens of thousands copies), it could reach broad layers of frustrated and embittered former party members.

In 1992, the RKRП claimed that 30 per cent of its members were workers. Its leaders put much effort into the creation of its own workers' organizations, like the Union of Workers of Moscow. But while the mass demonstrations of the winter and spring of 1992 undoubtedly had a certain working-class element (though the majority were pauperized white-collar

employees and pensioners), the attempts to organize separate working-class structures were largely a failure. These organizations still exist in many places, but in any one place they count no more than a few hundred, albeit highly politicized, activists and command no real authority among the broad masses of workers, who have ignored their frequent calls for strike action.

Indeed, the virtual hegemony of the RKRП in the political protest movement against 'shock therapy' in 1991–92 probably played a role in dissuading the mass of workers from participating in such activity. The RKRП's predilection for abstract, patriotic slogans and the evident lack of seriousness on the part of its leaders (for example, the flamboyant **Viktor Anpilov** – former Pravda correspondent in Cuba – calling to overthrow the 'fascist' Yeltsin regime through a spontaneous uprising) did much to discredit the idea of a serious socialist alternative to 'shock therapy'. The RKRП's more concrete campaigns, such as the collection of a million signatures for a new 'Soviet Constitution', pointed to no way forward for the movement and left the mass of workers cold.

The SPT (Socialist Workers' Party) was also founded in the fall of 1991, but it had quite a different political and organizational profile. The Brezhnev-eradissident Roy Medvedev (who was semi-tolerated by the old regime) was among its founders, but the party was dominated by former middle-level party officials of the younger (35–50) generation who shared an orientation toward a regulated mixed economy, market reforms without 'shock therapy', and moderate nationalism. The new party adopted the last draft of the CPSU programme (which had been endorsed by Gorbachev and the Central Committee a month before the CPSU's demise).

The SPT had an official membership of 50,000–70,000, thirty deputies in the now dissolved Supreme Soviet of Russia (though they belonged to five or six different fractions!), regular access to Pravda, and its own bi-monthly with a circulation of about 15,000. Nevertheless, it could not count on any significant active support from its membership, which, in any case, it did not really try to mobilize, preferring to lobby in the corridors of power. Indeed, there was really little in this party to give its members a sense of identification with it, and so when the project for recreating a Communist Party of the Russian Federation was launched at the start of 1993 (by Valentin Kuptsov, former chairman of the Russian CP, created in 1990 and dissolved by Yeltsin after August 1991), over 80 per cent of the SPT's members (as well as most of the members of the smaller 'communist' organizations) left to join the new party.

This resurrected Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF) immediately became the largest party in the country with half a million members and a network of regional organizations. This **new/old** party was from the outset a compromise between moderate reformist forces from the

old Central Committee apparatus (led by Kuptsov, a Gorbachevite) and an increasingly assertive nationalist current that also originated in the old party apparatus but had close links with the entire spectrum of 'patriotic' organizations, as well as with 'nationally-oriented' businesses. In a clear sign of the shifting mood among the party's supporters, Gennady Zyuganov, a former Central Committee apparatchik who had become co-chairman of the ultra-nationalist Russian National Assembly and leader of the broad 'patriotic' alliance, the National Salvation Front, beat out Kuptsov in the elections to the leadership of the party's Central Committee.

Under Zyuganov's leadership, the KPRF actually adopted a rather **conciliationalist** policy toward the liberal regime. It presented itself as a reform-oriented, but socially conscious opponent of 'shock therapy'. The party's leaders now claim to be 'left social democrats'. But it is much more around the issues of Russian 'statehood' that the party has kept a high profile. If one judges by Zyuganov's statements (and in the Russian context today, the leader generally is the party), it is hard to qualify the KPRF as socialist in any traditional sense of the term. For Zyuganov, the key concepts **are** not 'social justice' or 'popular democracy' but 'statehood' and (Russian) 'spirituality' (*dukhovnost*). His historical reference points are more Peter the Great and Stolypin than Marx or Lenin. This shift to the 'patriotic' wing of Russian politics has obviously not hurt the party's popularity: together with the closely allied Agrarian Party, the KPRF took about 25 per cent of the vote (in voting according to party slates) in the December 1993 elections to the Duma (the new parliament created by Yeltsin's constitution). (In assessing the electoral returns, it is important to keep in mind that, according to official figures, 48 per cent of the electorate did not participate in these elections. The real figure is probably even higher.)

While the KPRF and what was left of the **SPT** (after the mass defections to the KPRF) participated in these elections, most of the smaller 'communist' groups called for a boycott, arguing that participation would legitimate Yeltsin's state coup. This is one of the signs of a rapidly growing split between, on the one hand, those 'communist' groups oriented to parliamentary activity and reform, and, on the other, those who pose more radical goals and advocate more militant tactics. Moreover, although the 'patriotic' current clearly dominates in the 'communist' camp, there are today some signs that certain elements of its more radical wing **are** reconsidering the wisdom of their tactic of blocking with the nationalists.

### 3. *The Crisis of the Democratic Left*

While the organizations that came out of the CPSU could draw on inherited structures and networks, had access to a mass press ready to

publicize their activities and positions and could rely on a pool of thousands of former party activists, the democratic socialists had no such resources. Faced with an official ideological climate that was completely hostile to any talk of democratic socialism or a 'third way' between an increasingly authoritarian liberalism and a potentially even more authoritarian nationalism (in official discourse, you are either 'for reform', i.e. the liberals, or 'against reform'), the small groups of the anti-Stalinist left reacted in various ways.

One tactic was to attempt to regroup their scattered forces within broader left-democratic coalitions. This tactic, which had already been tried in 1990-91 by anarchists when they founded the radical Green Party (which has no discernible presence today on the political scene), was chosen by socialists, anarchists as well as Marxist activists from the dissolved CPSU, who formed the Party of Labour (PT) in the aftermath of the August 1991 putsch. It was tried again in the fall of 1992 when a broad range of moderate and more radical leftists (from the SPT to small Trotskyist groups) assembled at the first Congress of Democratic Left Forces.

But although the Congress itself was a remarkable success in gathering more than a thousand participants, it failed subsequently to develop any real activity. At present, elements in the PT are attempting to form a Union of Labour, including parts of the old trade-union apparatus, as a moderate coalition of left forces. Its immediate function would be to run candidates in the upcoming regional and local elections.

To date, none of these attempts at a broad democratic left coalition have succeeded in their goals, that is, to win new adherents to their movement, to establish lasting structures, or to extend their influence beyond the essentially Moscow-based left-democratic intelligentsia. Their main contribution has been somewhat to raise the public profile of this current, which is still little known in the larger population.

A second tactic was to create small, ideologically well-defined propaganda groups. But it has hardly fared any better. Various anarchist and Marxist groups have been attempting to create their own small 'parties', complete with national leaderships, programmes and miniscule presses. But none have been able to reach out much beyond their original circle of founders. Most are actually on the decline, and none are a national factor even in Russian left politics, though some have relative strongholds in one or two regions.

A third tactic has been, in face of the failure to win a popular base, to try to win the support of more progressive elements in the old trade-union apparatus for what is termed a 'British-style labourist party'. At different times, there were hopeful signs of a favourable response to such overtures made by the PT, especially from the Moscow and Leningrad regional trade-union federations, but they came to nought, as the dominant circles

in the union apparatus preferred more substantial, and less radical, partners, such as the Civic Union, or even different factions inside the ruling liberal elite. Thus, the head of the Moscow Federation of Trade Unions (and presently also of the FNPR), Mikhail **Shmakov**, was long seen as favouring a labour party but he has apparently now given this up in favour of developing a sort of working relationship with the **Yeltsin** regime, as he had done earlier with the Moscow government.

## CONCLUSION

In reviewing the fate of the Russian left over the past seven or eight years, it is tempting to try to assign respective responsibilities to 'objective' factors (the 'masses', for reasons outlined in the first section, simply not being ready to respond to a left alternative) and to 'subjective' ones (the weaknesses and errors of the political left, some of which were mentioned in the second section). But while it may be **useful** to separate these types of factors for analytical purposes, in reality they are all part of the same totality and ultimately merge into one another. The Russian left could not easily transcend the nature of the society from which it emerged.

Despite the upsurge of popular activism in the 1987–90 period, almost no permanent, really popular democratic structures emerged. The impression, held at the time by many Western and Soviet observers, that the Glasnost era was fast creating an independent civil society, with genuine social movements and organizations and a lasting space for public, democratic debate, proved deceptive. As we noted earlier, sixty-odd years of Stalinism had bequeathed an atomized society, lacking any experience of self-organization and with deeply ingrained tendencies among the population to look to patrons and 'leaders' to act on their behalf. The quite sudden collapse of the old official ideology and almost as rapid loss of the old social guarantees left people deeply insecure and disoriented.

In these conditions, a socialist programme based upon self-organization and genuine popular democracy was unlikely to find many ready takers. Once liberalism had disappointed, nationalist appeals proved much more accessible to broad strata of the impoverished population. The bulk of the remaining active elements of the former CPSU readily embraced this nationalism, always a central feature of Stalinism, helping to further discredit socialism among workers as a real alternative and leaving the democratic socialists to explain in their isolation what socialism was really about. (In one bizarre, but very telling twist, the leadership of the **SPT** opted out of a joint **leftwing** slate with democratic socialist groups in the December 1993 Duma elections in favour of a moderate nationalist bloc that included, among others, the Cossack Union and managers in the oil industry! But this list failed to collect the required number of signatures to present candidates.)

The weakness of the democratic left was to a large degree a product of these external developments and pressures. **But most** activists of the democratic left, on their part, failed to appreciate fully these factors and to draw appropriate conclusions for a successful strategy, that in the circumstances, could only be a long-term one. The momentous developments of the Perestroika period stimulated a certain 'spontaneist' tendency in the thinking of the democratic left, the expectation that increasingly broad layers of the population would, following their objective interests and in the wake of the loosening grip of the old structures, come to embrace their cause. With a few exceptions, most of the democratic left suffered from a related 'vanguardism' that had its roots not only in its social and political isolation but also in inherited Soviet traditions.

This led to a very distorted view of the real correlation of forces and to a failure sufficiently to appreciate the need for a long-term strategy involving organic organizational and propaganda work among the general population, and particularly among workers. Such a strategy, of course, could not be very attractive to socialist activists in the **rapidly** evolving situation, since it could not hope to bear much fruit in the short term, for reasons we outlined in the first section.

Russia is in what will undoubtedly be a lengthy period of major social and economic upheaval, with no point of stabilization yet in sight. These processes are constantly deepening the contradictions in Russian society. But the latter have yet to find their adequate expression in the political sphere. As bleak as the picture now seems for the democratic left, many ordinary people have gained, and are gaining, valuable political experience, gradually shedding long-held illusions about the paternalism of state authorities and the role of political patrons and leaders. They are learning to distinguish between the promises of politicians and their actual practice.

The pent-up forces of popular discontent will eventually break through the present political demobilization. When this happens, new, broader possibilities should open for Russian socialism. But the struggle will necessarily be a long-term one.

#### NOTES

1. *Segodnya*, January 12, 1993, p. 2.
2. Moscow Radio broadcast in Russian, February 3, 1994; *Nezavisimayagazeta*, February 6, 1994.
3. *Rabochaya tribuna*, January 18, 1994. This figure apparently refers to cash incomes only. In 1993, the decline of real incomes slowed down somewhat: while the price index rose by 1,000 per cent and the average wage rose by 800 per cent.
4. L. Trotskii, *Chto takoe SSSR i kuda on idet?*, Slovo, Paris, n.d., pp. 292-93.
5. For more detail on these organizations, see David Mandel: *Perestroika and Soviet Society*, Montreal, Black Rose Press, 1992, and *Rabotyagi: Perestroika and After, the View from Below*, New York, Monthly Review Press, 1994.
6. For example, the editors of the foundation's journal, who, incidentally, falsely claim that the foundation was created on the funds of American unions, state that they 'support a

policy directed at the consolidation in Russian democracy and a market economy'. (*Novoe rabochee i profsoyuznoe dvizhenie*, Moscow, no. 1, 1993, p. 3.) When these two goals are in conflict, the foundation opts for the second, for example, when it supported Yeltsin in his tearing up of the constitution in September 1993. For more on the **AFL-CIO** in Russia, see P. **Bracegirdle** and D. Seppo, 'The AFGCIO in the Community of Independent States', *Socialist Alternatives* (Montreal), vol. **II**, no. 2, 1993.

7. *Financial Times*, October 6–7, 1993.
8. For one leader who is more explicit on this, see I. Yurgens, 'Listen, Worker!' *Socialist Alternatives*, vol. **II**, no. 2, 1993.
9. This date of the abortive conservative putsch marks the **definitive** ascendancy of Yeltsin and the liberals to power in Russia.
10. That is what the left outside the Communist Party called itself.
11. Among the left 'informal' groups tracing their **roots** back to the pre-Perestroika or early Gorbachev **period**, one can mention the Socialist Party (now inside the Party of Labour), the **Confederation of Anarcho-Syndicalists** (KAS), the Marxist **Workers' Party**, and **Rabochii**.
12. One of the **major** public activities of the Social Initiative **Club** in the winter of 1987/88 was a petition campaign in favour of Boris Yeltsin, who at the time was seen as a progressive, left Communist leader, fighting against bureaucratic privilege and arbitrary power. Yeltsin had just been ousted as Moscow party boss.
13. This is how the movement referred to itself. In retrospect, many elements of this movement turned out to be merely economic liberals but far from democrats.
14. Interview with B. **Kagarlitsky**, *International Viewpoints* (Paris), no. 152, 1988, p. 26.
15. The Russian republic, unlike the other republics in the USSR, did not have its own party structures separate from the CPSU until 1990.
16. Roughly analogous currents emerged within the **Komsomol**.
17. *Pravda*, March 3, 1990.
18. *Pravda*, April 16, 1990. The story of the Marxist Platform has been told by one of its founders, **Aleksander Buzgalin**, in his *Belaya vorona* (White Raven), Moscow, 1993.
19. *Moskovskie novosti*, July 8 and 15, 1990; 'Report of the Mandate Commission to the Conference of Supporters of Democratic Movements within the CPSU, November 17–18, 1990'.
20. Consecrating the 'leading role' of the party.
21. For its platform, see *International Viewpoints*, November 12, 1990.
22. *Kommersant*, September 16, 1991.