

‘WHY IS THERE NO REVOLT? THE RUSSIAN WORKING CLASS AND LABOUR MOVEMENT

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‘Why is there no revolt?’ People sympathetic to Russian workers naturally pose this question when faced with accounts of impoverishment, mass unemployment, unpaid wages, wholesale dismantling of social programmes, the pillaging of national wealth and destruction of the country’s human and economic potential, and an illegitimate government that has made contempt for the law the centrepiece of its policy. Russian workers have suffered tremendously over the past years of capitalist restoration, even if their situation was far from ideal to begin with. While they have resisted, the resistance has obviously been ineffective. This was unexpected by most observers, given that the working class formed the vast majority of the Soviet population, was relatively well-educated, socially quite homogeneous, concentrated in giant enterprises, massively organized in trade unions, thoroughly exposed to socialist ideas (if not reality), and enjoyed a standard of living well above Third World levels.

This essay offers elements of an answer to the question ‘Why don’t they revolt?’ It presents them under three headings: the legacy of the Soviet past; the current economic and political situation; and, finally, the strategy and practice of the unions, the main organized form of the labour movement today. The argument, briefly, is that the Soviet system, both because of its repressive nature and the contradictory nature of its social relations—neither capitalist nor socialist but an incoherent amalgam of both—prevented the emergence of an independent working class practice and consciousness. This began to develop under Perestroika, as the system collapsed. But the form that collapse

assumed—a ‘revolution from above’ in which the popular movement played a subordinate role—and the unprecedentedly deep economic crisis that immediately followed, have held back and, to some extent, reversed this process, giving a new lease on life to the old corporatist practice. A final section discusses the independent, minority current in the labour movement and its prospects. By way of illustration, the essay focuses on unions in the auto and agricultural machine-building sectors (ASM in the Russian acronym), which are in most ways typical but have also often been on the cutting edge of labour movements in Russia as elsewhere.

THE LEGACY

The Soviet economy formally ‘belonged’ to the people, whose legal title was consecrated in the constitution. In practice, the people’s ownership rights—the rights to decide collectively what and how to produce and how to use the surplus—were usurped by the managers, the *nomenklatura*. Soviet workers did not face a class of owners, who could buy and sell the means of production and distribution. To the very end, the bureaucracy exercised its power as usurpation and enjoyed its material privileges—exclusively privileges of consumption—as corruption. The ruling elite was forced to hide behind a socialist facade of democracy and egalitarianism that was in sharp contradiction with real social relations.

This system could obviously not tolerate independent social organization, especially of workers, the state’s official social base. The totalitarian character of the state was necessary to compensate for the fragile social and ideological foundations of the ruling bureaucracy, a power élite without property or legitimacy. The bureaucracy had reason to fear the working class. Labour revolts in Eastern Europe and in the Soviet Union (Novocherkassk 1981, the miners’ strikes in 1989 and 1991, the Belarussian general strike in April 1991) demonstrated the relative ease with which workers under this system could mobilize spontaneously on a large scale and translate initially economic grievances into demands for democracy, once the fear of repression had been overcome. Several factors favoured this: the state as unique employer, centralized economic management, the relatively homogeneous character of the working class, its concentration in giant enterprises, and, above all, the regime’s fragile legitimacy.

On paper, unions had considerable power in the enterprises. Though they did not negotiate wages, they monitored the application of wage policy and of the Labour Code, participated in periodic revision of output norms (often vigorously resisted by workers), negotiated and monitored local agreements covering health and safety, housing construction and standards, catering, etc. They also ran the Health-and-Safety Inspectorate, with powers to investigate, issue binding orders, fine and even shut down facilities. They took part in administering social benefits such as sick leave, pregnancy and maternity leave, pensions, health care, vacation subsidies, child care, leisure activities. They

formally had considerable power in resolving grievances, and could even remove managers for violating collective agreements or the Labour Code.

Yet Soviet trade unions were undemocratic and notoriously subservient to management and political authorities. After Stalin's death, they were cut a somewhat longer leash, but the bias in favour of meeting production targets, hence in favour of management, remained very strong. Basic decisions affecting wages, social benefits, and labour rights were made by central party-state authorities, unions playing at most a consultative role. The national union apparatus had little political clout within the bureaucracy. Its meetings followed closely on those of the party Central Committee so that they could take the appropriate decisions. The union bureaucracy was widely known as a 'graveyard' for 'non-perspective' party and state cadres.

There were some courageous, dedicated—and unambitious—union leaders who tried to assert workers' rights against management or political authorities. But the norm was subservience. The union chairperson was one corner in the enterprise 'triangle' along with the director and party chairperson. When the coal miners negotiated during their strike of July 1989, the union leaders quite naturally sat facing them alongside government officials and managers.

It would be wrong to say that unions did not defend workers' interests, but they did so only to the extent this did not bring them into conflict with management or political authorities. It could not have been otherwise. Except sometimes at the lowest levels, union leaders were appointed and removed from above. To mobilize workers against management would have violated a basic tenet of the system. The merciless repression of the general strike in Novocherkassk in 1962 was not simply a nervous overreaction. Strikes did occur from time to time in individual shops, but any union leader who dared to lead them would lose his or her job and party card and have to deal with the KGB. During one of the state's periodic campaigns to inject life into the unions, *Trud*, the national union newspaper, accurately characterized them as "semi-defenders" of the workers'.¹ Not surprisingly, these campaigns always failed.

But the repressive political framework is not the whole explanation of union subservience. While Soviet workers had a sense of 'us', the powerless and unprivileged, against 'them', the bosses, other aspects of the system muted this antagonism and confused the lines of opposition. For one thing, the ruling group was not a class of owners, but a group of administrators organized in a hierarchy of power and privilege, each one under the thumb of his or her superiors. Workers could see themselves as merely the lower rungs of a continuous ladder of power and privilege. Moreover, even towards the end, the bureaucracy was still a relatively open group in terms of its members' social origins.

More important were the paternalistic social relations that bound workers to the bureaucracy. While workers were indeed powerless, they did enjoy important social rights, notably job security, a guaranteed job, and a 'social wage' that included free health care and education at all levels, pensions, subsidized

housing, communal services, leisure and cultural activities, public transport, basic foodstuffs, etc. In 1984 this was equal to two-thirds of the money wage and gave workers a solid level of economic security.² Official propaganda aside, there was a material basis for workers to view this state as a protective father, albeit an authoritarian and corrupt one. The father-state also defended them against a hostile capitalist world.

Paternalism, or 'corporatism', was especially pronounced at the enterprise level, where the director played a dual role as representative of the state as well as lobbyist for and defender of his or her 'work collective' (a Soviet term including management). Profit maximization and reducing labour costs were not goals of Soviet managers. What mattered was meeting production targets. Doing this in the inherently uncertain conditions of the 'planned' economy required a relatively large and flexible work force. To secure this when labour was chronically in short supply, management tried to keep wages relatively high and was flexible with work schedules and discipline during slack periods. Moreover, to the degree that bonuses and social benefits depended on enterprise performance, workers did share an interest in meeting plan targets. When management, seconded by the union, appealed to workers to 'consider the situation of the enterprise', that is, to agree to periodic massive overtime and sub-standard conditions, they generally responded positively. Fear was part of it, but there was also a sense that their interests were linked to those of 'their' enterprise.

Gorbachev's liberalization, the political tangent of his market reform, opened space for an independent labour movement. Strikes over wages and work time became more frequent, at times embracing whole enterprises and lasting several days. But until the coal miners' strike of July 1989, there were no mobilizations involving several enterprises. During the strike movement of the spring of 1991 (at first, mainly miners, but with scattered support from other branches; then a general strike in Belarus) protest again went beyond the isolated enterprise. The movement was thus gradually expanding, but at the time of the collapse of the old regime, the majority of workers had not yet been drawn into collective actions.

Gorbachev rebuked the unions for dancing in step with management, but they did not become independent, despite the radical decentralization of power within their organizations after 1990. There were some exceptions, mainly where there had been spontaneous rank-and-file mobilizations, but these were rare. After their 1989 strike, many of the miners' strike leaders were elected to union posts, but most soon left in frustration. The Independent Miners' Union (NPG) was formed in 1990 on a platform of union independence and was followed by other 'alternative' or 'free' unions, the most successful being in the transport sector (stevedores, locomotive engineers, pilots, etc.). Elsewhere, notably in auto, where alternative unions existed, they represented (and continue to represent) small minorities in conflict with the large 'traditional' unions.

As part of his reform, Gorbachev created self-management bodies (STKs), granting them limited, ambiguous powers. Most STKs were easily dominated by management. A genuine movement arose, however, in 1990 when Gorbachev's attempted to get rid of the STKs as part of his conversion to capitalism. This movement advocated enterprise autonomy and a shift in power to the 'work collective'. But it never won much active rank-and-file support; nor did its leaders seriously try to mobilize it. Moreover, although the STK movement opposed the bureaucratic system it lacked its own economic vision, apart from enterprise autonomy. As such, and because it looked more for support from above than below, it was easy prey for liberal forces. Its leaders in Russia gave their support to Yeltsin, who promised great things, but then privatized in a way that in practice excluded workers from power and ownership. As for the unions, they saw the STKs as rivals and accepted privatization as inevitable.

Despite certain openings to real progress by the labour movement that appeared under Gorbachev, Russian workers on the whole failed to develop independent organizations and their own programme of social transformation. There were several reasons for this. The most obvious is that they needed time to overcome the legacy of totalitarian rule: fear, cynicism, atomization, subservience to and complicity with arbitrary authority, and, not least, a weak sense of rights and dignity. The capacity for self-organization and solidarity develop through struggle, but most workers had not been drawn into the movement. Change would have proceeded faster had the political opening been the result of struggle from below rather than a gift from above. While the workers' movement did help to push things well beyond what Gorbachev had intended, it also let itself be used by liberal forces hostile to workers' interests. To some extent, the inability to develop an independent labour programme was a legacy of the 'Communist' past, which had discredited not so much socialist values—workers remained attached to its ideals of democracy, equality, and social justice³—but the institutional arrangements necessary to realize them. After sixty years of bureaucratic 'socialism', workers had a hard time believing that central planning of any kind could be democratic and efficient. This allergy to centralism played into the hands of the liberal forces, who presented the market as freedom.

But labour's inability to develop its own vision was also a reflection of the international situation. The bureaucratic regime broke down in a period when labour and socialist movements around the world were in retreat. Soviet workers saw no attractive socialist models: the other 'Communist' systems were restoring capitalism or stagnating. With the notable, but distant, exceptions of Brazil and South Africa, there were no labour movements fighting for socialism as a real, immediate goal. Even victorious defensive struggles against the neoliberal onslaught were rare. To Russian workers, who had little understanding of capitalism, it seemed—as the liberals constantly reminded them—that capitalism alone was 'normal'. Moreover, liberal forces inside Russia enjoyed the political and financial backing of international capital in the

form of the G-7 and their financial institutions. Without this support at major crisis points, 'shock therapy' could not have been pursued so single-mindedly and for so long. In contrast, the little aid foreign unions offered their Russian counterparts was aimed at helping them adapt to capitalism not to fight for a workers' alternative. The AFL-CIO, which had the biggest foreign labour presence, actively fostered business-unionism and helped draw the most militant elements into the Yeltsin camp.

THE PRESENT SITUATION

Two aspects of the present situation in particular weaken workers' capacity to resist: acute economic insecurity and, for lack of a better term, the growing social decomposition of the working class. Both are the consequence of prolonged economic depression, itself largely the result of state policy. Russia's GNP is today between 50 and 60 percent of its 1990 level; industrial output is around 45 percent.⁴ In the ASM sector, production of agricultural machines, buses, trolleys, and trucks has dropped by about 90 percent. Car production, the one outstanding exception in the vast machine-building sector, is at 80 percent of predepression levels. The main factors behind the decline are the contraction of internal demand—presently about a third of the 1990 level⁵—and the critical financial situation of enterprises, which lost their operating capital in the 1992 price liberalization, have no access to affordable credit and are burdened with high taxes and costs of raw materials and energy. Investment has fallen every year since 1990; in 1998 it was at less than a sixth of its 1990 level.⁶ Net investment is negative: Russia's capital stock is shrinking.

The government's transition strategy involved rapid privatization and exposure of enterprises to market discipline, forcing them to sink or swim. After six decades of a centrally administered economy, prices were freed overnight, government subsidies and social spending slashed, the economy opened to the world, the money supply severely restricted. The reformers apparently intended to restructure through destruction of a large part of existing industry, since the enterprises were given no chance to adapt. Amidst the chaos of such lightning changes from above, Russian capitalism at its present stage displays a number of particular traits. Property rights are quite fragile, and owners cannot count on the state to defend them. (The big owners have private armed forces.) Most of the population does not consider the private owners of enterprises as legitimate. Legal title itself is often in dispute and does not guarantee the owners control. Where workers are united and determined and have taken over their enterprise or imposed control over management, neither owners nor the state have been able to dislodge them by force, though, in the end, workers' control in isolated enterprises has little hope of success. In most cases, it is the director who wields absolute power, unrestricted by law, owners, or workers. The distinction between legitimate and illegitimate business can be made only in theory.⁷ When criminal elements do not directly control enterprises (according to the government, the mafia controls 50 percent of the non-state and 60

percent of the state sectors),⁸ management is paying tribute to them or to corrupt state officials, or stealing on its own. It is usually a combination of all these things.

Another feature is demonetization of the economy: at the end of 1998, an average of 52 percent of transactions of industrial enterprises were in kind.⁹ Of most concern to workers are wage arrears: in the auto and truck sectors in March 1999 they averaged 4.2 months; in the agricultural machine-sector—7.4.¹⁰ These are, in fact, forced loans to management at negative interest since wage arrears are not indexed. But probably the most striking feature is the system's cannibalism: it is consuming the country's accumulated wealth, destroying its very capacity to produce wealth. Depreciation allowances exceed 30 percent of GDP.¹¹ An estimated US\$136 billion poured out of Russia between 1993 and 1998, far exceeding capital inflows from foreign investors and international loans.¹² Research and development spending has fallen 15-fold; spending on science—50-fold. Many scientists have emigrated or abandoned their professions. The most skilled workers and engineers were among the first to leave dying enterprises for the new private sector, where their skills are rarely used.¹³

But not only skills: the labour force itself is being destroyed as a result of declining living standards, cuts in health care, stress caused by the depression and social dislocation. Births have fallen dramatically, and male death rates are at levels of the end of the nineteenth century.¹⁴ According to a prominent demographer, the most probable scenario over the next half-century is a population decline of 45 percent. (US population is expected to grow by 45 percent over the same period.)¹⁵

There is no consensus in the labour movement on the nature of management's interests, but one thing is clear: almost all directors are much better off today than they were under the old regime, while almost all workers are much worse off. As the perspective of change in economic policy and a recovery receded, managers came to view their enterprises as sources of rent or simply objects to be pillaged. While they do not necessarily want to destroy them outright, as they are sources of personal enrichment, there is little incentive to make the effort—probably futile anyway—to restore them to health. As noted, managers enjoy broad freedom from control—from owners and the state, as well as the unions. They are also relatively free of market forces too, since the bankruptcy law is 'soft'. Management can also count on free loans in the form of unpaid wages. Pro-management unions and parties, like the Communist Party, cite overstaffing as evidence that many directors are still 'red' and want to 'preserve the work collective'. But it is the workers alone who bear the cost of this 'excess' labour in the form of abysmally low wages.

The restoration of capitalism has had a big impact on the structure and composition of the working class, the majority of whom now work in the private sector or in enterprises where state ownership is mainly formal. Commercialization and privatization have led to strong differentiation in the situation of enterprises and workers, among and within sectors and regions. For

example, in the ASM sector, the VAZ auto plant, which has kept most of its labour force, pays an average wage six times higher than Rostsel'mash (agricultural machinery), which has lost three-quarters of its workers.¹⁶ Wages also vary widely within enterprises, even sometimes for the same work and skill level. Labour itself is 'free', but movement into big cities, where jobs are more plentiful, is restricted by local (unconstitutional) regulations and by the absence of affordable rental housing.

In 1998, 38.6 percent of the employed labour force was in industry, construction and transport; 45.6 percent in trade and services; and 13 percent in agriculture. The proportion of women was unchanged at 48.5 percent since 1992. There are no reliable figures on union membership, but in 1998 the 'traditional' Federation of Independent Trade Unions (FNPR) claimed 40 million members. (The employed labour force was 63.6 million.) Although this figure is probably inflated, union density is high. Probably over 90 percent of employees of large and medium enterprises, as well as almost all public service workers, belong to an FNPR affiliate.¹⁷ The ASM Union claimed about 800,000 workers or 88.6 percent of the sector's work force in 1998. The rest are not union members or belong to an alternative union.¹⁸ There are virtually no unions in the newly created private sector (mainly small enterprises in services and trade), where arbitrary managerial power has full sway.

Industrial employment declined from 29.6 percent of the work force in 1992 to 22.2 in 1998, but in absolute numbers the drop was 42 percent.¹⁹ The ASM sector itself has lost 70 percent of its jobs since 1992.²⁰ Mostly this took the form of workers leaving 'of their own volition' to seek a living wage. The first to leave were younger workers as well as the more skilled, bolder and more adaptable. These categories of workers had been at the forefront of the labour upsurge under Gorbachev. The average age of those who remain in industry is close to 50. They tend to be more subservient, fearing for their jobs and pensions. In addition, periodic 'administrative leaves', the irregular work cadence, the uncertainty of the wage and its small size not only undermine discipline but also demoralize. Garden plots and second jobs drain energy and commitment away from struggles in the enterprise. Laid-off workers are hard to assemble. The stress and demoralization caused by the economic crisis has affected men especially strongly; alcoholism is pandemic.

Unemployment has climbed from zero under the Soviet system to a real rate of close to 30 percent (including the involuntarily partially employed and those earning less than minimum subsistence). The state puts the rate at around 12 percent.²¹ The very weak social safety net does nothing to allay fear of unemployment. But employment does not provide even temporary security, since at the start of 2000, wages of two-fifths of Russia's workers were below the very low official subsistence minimum for one person (US\$41 a month), while the average wage was equal to only 1.7 subsistence minima.²² Average pensions are also below the subsistence minimum, and savings were wiped out by hyperinflation in 1992.

Some workers supplement their wages with second jobs in the 'grey economy', but such opportunities are quite limited in the smaller towns, and they require good health and usually special skills or a car. Garden plots (usually 600 square metres) play a significant role, especially in smaller towns. There is also considerable mutual aid within families. A more important cushion to low wages and pensions is the still relatively modest, though rapidly rising, cost of housing (workers inherited their apartments from the Soviet period) and of utilities and municipal transport. Basic medical care is generally free, but scheduled hospital stays, operations and drugs can entail serious outlays. Lower levels of education are free, though parents are constantly being asked to contribute. Finally, pilfering from enterprises, when there is something of value, is quite widespread.

For most workers, the chief positive aspect of the transition has been the maintenance of freedoms of association and speech, no small matters when viewed from a Russian perspective. Unions are relatively unrestricted by the state. So far at least, the state has rarely resorted to coercion, even when faced with acts of civil disobedience, like blocking railway lines. Although the government is bent on weakening the labour code, legislation still compares favourably on several counts with Western codes, thanks to hold overs from the Soviet period. But the practical value of these rights is very limited. The new constitution, introduced in 1993 through a rigged referendum, gave virtually absolute power to the President. The bloody suppression of the Supreme Soviet a few months earlier was a warning to all oppositional forces to respect the bounds of the new pseudo-democracy, something that parties and unions have done. The Russian government in practice has declared a moratorium on legality. Anyone with sufficient power or money can ignore the law, unless, of course, he or she attracts the ire of someone with more power or money. The government has set the tone. Official corruption is endemic at all levels. Fiscal policy is itself based on theft: public sector wages and pensions are withheld for months and without indexation; money for budgeted expenses is 'sequestered'; enterprise orders placed by the state go unpaid. Privatization was probably the most massive theft in history. Finally, underfinanced and often politicized courts offer little recourse to unions, except in the case of individual grievances, such as wrong dismissal. But decisions can take years.

UNION STRATEGY: FROM 'TRANSMISSION BELT' TO 'SOCIAL PARTNER'²³

Both the legacy of the Soviet past and the current economic and political situation strongly condition and limit the options of unions. Nevertheless, unions have choices, and the predominant choice is 'social partnership', a strategy based on subordination of union strategy to the aims of management at the enterprise and political levels. Other key aspects of union practice, especially the absence of democracy and of solidarity, are closely bound up with that

strategic choice. Union strategy and practice are the third part of the answer to 'Why Don't They Revolt?'

Partnership

The basic premise of 'social partnership' is that workers and management share a fundamental interest in the health of 'their' enterprise that creates a solid basis for co-operation. By implication, shared interests with other workers—and so solidarity—are secondary. So is the need for an active committed membership based on broad democracy, since the strategy is one of co-operation, not confrontation. Some lip service is paid to the need to be strong in order to be accepted as a partner, but in practice 'partnership' is treated as a magic formula that eliminates social contradictions and frees unions of any concern with the correlation of forces.

With the transition to capitalism, the Russian government, seconded by the International Labour Organization, as well as some foreign unions, forcefully began to promote the ideology and trappings of 'social partnership'. Union leaders did not need much persuading, since the new formula served to legitimate their traditional practice, dressing it up in phraseology appropriate to a market economy. It makes little difference that the material bases of the old corporatism—the repressive state, guaranteed employment, job and wage security, and the social wage—are gone or seriously undermined. Nor has evidence of widespread managerial corruption affected union strategy significantly.

To some extent, the depression, the threat to jobs and the very survival of the enterprises has replaced socialist ideology, job security and the social wage as the main argument for union subservience. As one union leader put it, 'If there is no plant, there is no union'. Any union must consider the threat of job cuts and even closure when formulating its demands or its response to management's concession demands. However, when union leaders typically argue that the alternative to 'partnership' is permanent class war, destructive to all sides, this presents a false choice, since even the most militant worker recognizes that a factory cannot function without minimal co-operation between union and management. The real choice is not between social peace and permanent all-out war but between union independence and subservience to management's goals, between the union acting as 'salesperson' for management goals and adopting an independent strategy based upon analysis of the membership's interests.

Today, as in Soviet times, when management asks workers to 'consider the situation of the enterprise', the union generally takes management's side, whether the issue is unpaid wages, unsafe conditions, temporary layoffs or reduced hours (which by law require the worker's agreement), job cuts, or dropping indexation. Union subordination to management goals has reached the point that, with the blessing of the national leadership, many local ASM unions are restoring 'labour competition' (formerly 'socialist competition'), including the awarding of bonuses and certificates to the most productive shops.

'Some perhaps would like to see the union on one side and the administration on the other', said a department union president at the Gorky Auto Plant. 'But, thank God, that isn't the case here. We all live as one family; we all depend on each other. Simply put, the plant is doing well, and that means that its union is also doing well: it can send more people on subsidized vacations, give them material help, etc. ... We are all together, a collective, and that includes the administration, the union leaders and the workers.'²⁴

The traditional unions have not broken with the Soviet practice of including managerial personnel (often even the general director) in their ranks, despite the message this sends to workers. The typically strong presence of administrators at union conferences gives them a determining influence on the discussion and voting, especially in this period of heightened insecurity. Asked how unions can defend workers when they count management among their members, an FNPR secretary admitted that it was perhaps undesirable but he justified the practice by the transitional nature of the period: 'First of all, certain traditions exist. Secondly, there is no clearly defined stratum of entrepreneurs (employers), conscious of their interests. Many directors have worked for decades at the enterprise and feel themselves part of the work collective.'²⁵

'Is there a class of employers to whom I can make demands?' wondered the union president at a Yaroslavl truck parts factory. 'Our director-general is a union member. We don't have a workers' movement because we don't have a class of employers, real bosses with clear interests and powers opposed to ours.' This typical complaint is based upon the idea that unions in 'normal' capitalist countries can make demands and win them through economic pressure because they face 'real employers'. However, the problem of Russian unions is not the absence of 'real employers'. It is the economic crisis that undermines the effectiveness of withholding labour. But it does not logically follow that 'partnership' is the answer.

Effective action in the economic crisis calls for co-ordination of local union struggles thereby raising them up to the national level, where economic policy is made. But here too the strategy is 'social partnership'. In June 1997, ASM and two other machine-construction unions organized a big conference with directors to develop joint actions for resolving the crisis. The meeting subjected government policy to withering criticism and adopted a list of emergency measures, but there was no discussion of strategy to force the government to adopt the measures, which would have meant the abandonment of shock therapy. Indeed, at the request of management, the very word struggle was dropped from the resolution. The resolution further stated that 'In resolving social-labour conflicts, the participants of this conference appeal against extreme methods of struggle—strikes and acts of civil disobedience.'²⁶

Most of the unions' political actions, in fact, have the tacit agreement, sometimes even the open support, of management. At the October 1998 FNPR protest, the Kirov Factory workers were treated to the spectacle of their director-general and the city governor marching alongside the presidents of

their union and the Leningrad Federation of Trade Unions. It is said that Yeltsin himself expressed sympathy for the protesters, though they were demanding his ouster. As usual, the demonstrators' demands were ignored, and the unions soon forgot them too. Apart from such spotty participation in FNPR protests and picketing government buildings, the political action of the ASM Union has consisted principally of lobbying and supporting 'centrist' political parties, whose electoral lists are heavily weighted with directors and entrepreneurs, with a few union leaders for good measure.

Early attempts to create a democratic socialist party based on the unions failed to win the active support of union leaders. In the December 1999 parliamentary elections, most FNPR unions, including ASM, supported the 'centrist' Moscow boss Luzhkov's party. As always, the 'centrists' did poorly. A union member asked the leader of the FNPR's political wing: 'Unions are workers' organizations. Luzhkov is a representative of the recently formed bourgeoisie. What can these opposites have in common?' He received this answer:

If you insist on discussing in classical Marxist terms, let me remind you that there are periods when the classics themselves told workers and representatives of the bourgeoisie to act together, for example, during bourgeois-democratic revolutions. The essence of our present situation is that the labour movement and nationally-oriented capital have powerful common enemies: the financial-bureaucratic oligarchy, living exclusively from the sale of resources, and the forces in the West that are interested in transforming Russia into a semi-colony for the extraction of raw materials. We also have common goals: to restore the real economy of the country, raise popular living standards, defend the political and economic independence of Russia. These goals create the possibility of a firm and, I believe, long-lasting union of the labour movement and entrepreneurs engaged in the real economy of Russia. And the natural leader of that union, in my view, is Yurii Luzhkov.²⁷

Putin has now inherited the mantle of 'natural leader' and the FNPR supported him in his successful presidential bid.

Why this the stubborn attachment to a failed strategy? On one level, 'partnership' is a response to weakness. Union leaders reject strategies based on independence because they do not believe they can shift the balance of forces by mobilizing their members, who are passive, fearful, and lack confidence in their ability to change things. Demoralization is a fact, but this argument skirts the role that 'partnership' plays in reinforcing it. It is very rare for union leaders to make a serious effort to build a rank-and-file base for independent action (which as we shall see, is possible, even if difficult, in present conditions).

'Partnership' is attractive to union leaders because it is a less risky, and certainly less onerous, strategy from the vantage point of their own personal interests. From the vantage point of their own personal interests, 'partnership' *does* work. In conditions of generalized poverty, unemployment and lawless-

ness, confronting management promises little personal reward but presents much risk. Managers have many ways of forcing union leaders out of their elected position and out of the plant. Most of them are engineers who have become deskilled after years in union office and would have trouble finding equivalent work elsewhere. On the other hand, a co-operative relationship with management offers considerable rewards. Except for the unlikely case of a spontaneous rank-and-file mobilization, management's support ensures the union leader's re-election. It is also not uncommon for union leaders eventually to cross over into top management posts. The former national president of the ASM Union is now an assistant plant director. Career prospects aside, management can offer material perks, and outright corruption of union leaders is not unheard of.

In present conditions, for a union leader to break with 'partnership', he or she has to be exceptionally bold, committed and principled, and preferably also have marketable skills. Or else he or she has to have been elected on the wave of a more-or-less spontaneous rank-and-file revolt. Of course, it also helps if the enterprise in question is working and making money. These conditions are rare today.

Weak Solidarity

Workers form unions because collectively they are in a stronger bargaining position. Solidarity is not simply an ideal but the key resource of labour. 'Partnership', which teaches that workers' basic interests are linked to the well-being of 'their enterprise' (as defined by management), tends to undermine solidarity. For the same reason, national unions have a hard time developing an effective strategy, since the pursuit of common goals usually requires some sacrifice of short-term, local interests. In a society that promotes individualism in a myriad of ways, most workers learn the importance of solidarity only through participation in struggle, when solidarity becomes their fundamental resource. However, Russian unions avoid confrontation, even at the price of making important concessions. They strive to resolve problems without involving the membership, through concertation with management behind closed doors. Not only do they not need members' active involvement; from their point of view, it is an encumbrance and threat. Most union leaders describe their function as 'buffers', muting protest and directing it into less threatening channels. This is one of the reasons union density remains high—neither management nor the state are interested in dismantling the unions. Something more threatening might take their place.

The absence of solidarity is a particularly serious handicap in present economic conditions, when isolated action cannot be effective. Over the past decade, though much less in the past two or three years, various local ASM unions have engaged in bitter, prolonged strikes, usually provoked by wage arrears accumulated over many months. These strikes sometimes brought partial relief and even resulted in the director's ouster, but they could not fundamen-

tally change the situation. Even the limited victories often owed more to civil disobedience aimed at political authorities than to economic pressure on management.

The radical decentralization of power in a union like the ASM was probably inevitable, and would have been healthy, if the local unions were prepared to delegate a minimal amount of power and resources to the national union. But discipline in the ASM Union is very weak, and the national union is starved for resources. Its real share of dues is less than two percent, an indication of the low level of solidarity.²⁸ Instead, local unions spend a good part of their dues on 'material support' for individual members to help pay for medicine, operations, funerals, weddings, etc. and on socio-cultural and sports activities. Even when money is not involved, local unions often ignore the national office, failing to send reports and copies of collective agreements or to comment on proposals.²⁹ The result is a magic circle: the national office cannot provide services, while local unions say that it must prove itself before they will give more resources.

Of course, the national leadership is weak, even relative to its limited resources. The president of the Yaroslavl region, which has moved a considerable distance from 'partnership', complains that the Central Committee 'has no economic programme; there is no discussion of the future of our sector ... [The President] could do a lot more to unify the union. Each plant is stewing in its own juices. There is no critical analysis of the FNPR's strategy. The problem is that they are conciliators.' But a weak national union obviously suits most local leaders. As a result, unlike its Belarussian and Ukrainian counterparts, the Russian ASM makes no serious attempt to enforce the sectoral agreement that sets minimum standards or to mobilize local unions for participation in political protests. It is therefore somewhat of an exaggeration to speak of a national union. It is little more than a meeting place for local leaders and an office for relaying and collecting information. It does represent the member unions in international forums and in the FNPR and lobbies the government on their behalf, but without a national strategy or co-ordinated action to back it up.

Solidarity, however, is not much stronger at the plant level, where one shop might strike over wage arrears or threatened job cuts and not receive even symbolic support from the others or from the plant committee. Conversely, one shop might pull out of a strike over wage arrears after getting paid, while the others are left waiting. In large factories, workers have only the vaguest idea about the plant committee and no direct contact with it. Shop committees often ignore the plant committee's requests for input into drafting the collective agreement. Wages for the same work can vary sharply from shop to shop.

Obviously, one cannot blame weak solidarity entirely on the leaders. As we have shown, the leaders' penchant for 'partnership' has objective causes. Workers' poverty and insecurity induce them to seek individual survival strategies. The point, however, is that the union leadership has adopted a policy that reinforces this tendency rather than fighting it.

Alienated Membership

The main beneficiaries of the ending of state control of unions and their decentralization are not the members but the local presidents at the plant level. Regional and central union officers are now accountable to them. But they themselves are not really accountable to the membership, whose level of participation in decision-making is minimal. Union leaders complain about the indifference and passivity of the rank-and-file, their 'consumerist' attitude toward the union. At one seminar, a plant president reputed for her militancy composed a poem comparing the membership to neglected pigs who abandon the thought of revolt the minute the farmer tosses them some slop.

Such contempt may be shocking and undeserved, but rank-and-file passivity is a real obstacle to union democracy, which requires at least a significant minority of active members. It is a fact that workers often continue working for months without being paid before they take action; they acquiesce to work in unheated shops in winter; they tolerate the petty tyranny of administrators who could be ousted at seemingly little risk. Ineffective, subservient union leaders usually have little trouble getting re-elected, because 'there's no alternative', no credible alternative leader prepared to present him or herself.

Poverty, insecurity and an ageing work force mean workers have less time, energy, and inclination to fight for collective goals. People are reluctant to run for unpaid union office, and unions cannot compensate most officers. More important are the psychological consequences of the depression and the accumulated defeats. Cynicism and a profound sense of powerlessness are widespread. The sense of dignity, always critical in mobilizing workers, is weak.

But this is only one side of the picture. The following are typical remarks of ordinary members: 'I don't know anything about what the plant committee is doing. There are annual meetings. The chairman doesn't talk to ordinary workers. Maybe he feels it's below his dignity. Or else he's afraid.' 'The leaders keep to themselves. In practice, they've got their own organization, separate from ours. The two cross paths only when it comes to dues.'

Leaders justify 'partnership' by citing the workers' passivity: any leader who confronts management will end up alone and be crushed. It is better, therefore, to keep on the director's good side, so that he or she will 'show understanding'. But 'partnership' actually moves leaders to actively discourage rank-and-file activism, since the union's main bargaining chip is its value as a 'buffer' to keep the work force under control. 'Thank God', said the union president of Moscow's ZIL truck factory, 'that we avoided a social explosion!' He had only praise for the workers' patience in the face of massive jobs cuts and months of unpaid wages. And the president who compared her members to pigs had spent the previous morning persuading them to abandon a wildcat (but legal) strike over unpaid wages. Even when these leaders mobilize their members, their goal is not to force management's hand but to 'attract its attention' and to allow workers to let off steam.

This is also how the FNPR views its protests. In the lead-up to its

November 1997 protest, its paper came out with an editorial entitled 'A Letter to Our Evil-Wishers'. It conceded the ritual character of the protests, when workers demonstrate, the government makes promises, and nothing changes. Call us naïve, it went on, but would you rather have desperate workers blocking roads and stopping trains? We, at least, are doing our duty, trying 'to save the fragile social peace in our half-ruined country'.³⁰ What is surprising is not that most workers do not participate in these protests but that hundreds of thousands nevertheless do! This indicates a real potential for mobilization.

Even when there is no outright corruption, 'partnership' puts union leaders in an ambiguous position *vis-à-vis* their members. At one plant, a dissident group was planning to run an alternative slate in coming elections. The incumbent president was unperturbed: 'With the general director sitting up front [at the conference], they won't so much as squeak.' Of course, in her view, these were irresponsible, self-seeking troublemakers, who would ruin the co-operative relations she had established with management. She was not in the least embarrassed to make this statement to an outsider. This is a leader who bases her power on management's power, not the membership's. She has no interest in rank-and-file activism; it is threatening.

Information is the life-blood of democracy, but little is done to facilitate its flow. There are almost no rank-and-file activists or even shop-level officers at national congresses or in the Central Committee. Of the 80 delegates at the Third Congress of the ASM Union in 1997, 52 were plant presidents or vice-presidents; 21 were regional presidents. There were only 16 women, though they are half of the membership. Seventy-one delegates had higher education, indicating few workers.³¹

Democracy does not fare better at lower levels. Most unions do not even produce a newsletter or occasional bulletin. And there is little person-to-person contact. A worker at the Kirov Tractor Factory said of his president: 'From his office to his car; from his car to his office. He never appears in the shops.' Local unions have cut drastically the number of full-time shop presidents—a crucial link to the rank and file, and many have done away altogether with group leaders. As a result, shop presidents tend to be recruited from office staff whose jobs leave them time for minimal union duties. But these people are distant from workers' concerns, dependent on management, and have little commitment to the union. This is a question of union priorities more than poverty, since significant sums are spent on individual 'material aid' and socio-cultural activities. Union officials spend most of their time on routine administration and devote little time to education and mobilization, to discussing strategies with the membership. A shop president explained: 'There are a lot of tasks. We deal with workers' problems from birth to death. We take care of the person up to and including the funeral. One of the main tasks is to find money for all that. On the whole, it is the resolution of 'small' problems that you can't entrust to the employer, who is busy organizing production. This everyday work takes up most of my time.'³²

Leaders rarely consult the membership on the major issues of low and unpaid wages, layoffs, deteriorating health and safety conditions. Their approach is routinely administrative, and they accept as gospel management's references to 'objective conditions'. When job cuts are ordered, leaders limit themselves to checking that no one in a protected category (e.g., pregnant women) is on the list and that the required payments are made. The issue is not put before the membership. The possibility of resisting is not even entertained, though resistance has been known to limit the damage. Membership participation in negotiating collective agreements is also minimal. As one plant president explained: 'We met with the director. He issued an order to set up a joint commission with the union. We took last year's agreement as the basis. We sent it around to the shops for suggestions. They were supposed to hold meetings, but there weren't many suggestions. People are passive. Then we held a conference. All the managers and specialists were present. It was adopted unanimously.'³³ It did not occur to him that the managers' presence and membership's passivity are linked.

BUILDING AN INDEPENDENT MOVEMENT

Some unions have moved beyond 'partnership' in an effort to overcome the weakness that characterizes 'traditional' unions. While they are too few and dispersed to fundamentally change things, they give an idea of the possibilities as well as limits of union action in present conditions.

The Kirov Tractor-Assembly Shop

This shop has been the militant core of the giant metallurgical and metal-working factory since Perestroika. Assembly lines, which bring together large numbers of people working at similar tasks and situate them strategically to paralyze the entire production process, were the main breeding grounds of militancy in the machine-building sector before the depression. Aleksandr, an assembler, was the shop's informal leader and co-founder of the factory's workers' committee in 1990. This committee, which acted outside the framework of the bureaucratized union, led a number of successful campaigns, including a reform of the wage system which, in typical Soviet fashion, made workers bear the cost of management's failings. The committee scored a coup in bringing Yeltsin to the factory at a time when he was a political pariah and viewed by workers as a fighter for democracy and social justice. In 1992, when public opinion was still behind Yeltsin and the labour movement was dazed by the sudden profound change brought on by shock therapy, the shop struck for wage indexation and sent a collective letter to the Supreme Soviet demanding it stop the government's policy of 'economic genocide'. It also appealed to other plants to join it in a regional strike committee.³⁴ This was just one of the shop's numerous attempts to organize a broader opposition movement, all of which failed.

As activism declined, Aleksandr decided to give the union a try and was easily

elected shop president. But the market for tractors collapsed, and the work force shrunk rapidly. Having found little support outside the shop, exhausted and disappointed, Aleksandr announced he would not run for re-election, but waited to see if the plant president would persuade him to stay. After all, he was the leader of the active core of the whole union. But the president was happy to be rid of this 'white raven'. The only candidate willing to run for shop president was an office worker. Things were all set to return to 'normal', but at the election meeting the workers balked and proposed Svetlana instead, a 47-year-old assembler. She resisted mightily ('I have kids, I have to work. When will I find time for the union?' [The position is unpaid]). But years of struggle had created militant tradition, and she gave in. Svetlana set to work developing a core of activists, 'all who are not completely dead'—as it turned out, mainly women. She adopted a policy of total transparency, with committee meetings open to all, held directly in the shop. All key decisions are made by the general assembly. Each morning before work she and her activists visit each work place.

In most ways, the practice of the shop committee is the opposite of the plant committee. And it clashes with the plant committee almost as much as with management. Svetlana considers union independence so important that she will refuse a drink offered by management because of how it might be viewed. Management has more than once threatened to get rid of her. The shop committee is constantly raising new issues with management. This is not activism for its own sake. The union has won real victories over work conditions, wages and jobs, where other unions are passive, citing 'difficult objective conditions'. The victories are necessarily small and precarious, but they have cemented the workers around the shop union, which instils fear and respect in management well beyond its numerical and economic weight in the factory.

One such conflict arose over the temperature, which in most Russian production facilities hovers around freezing in winter. This is justified as a cost-saving measure, and workers accept it as a fact of life. In this shop, the workers burned wood in steel drums to warm their hands from time to time. But management ordered the drums removed as a hazard and because workers destroyed factory property for firewood. The workers seemed prepared to submit, but Svetlana countered by demanding that heat and lighting conform to health-and-safety norms, that the leaky roof be repaired and that management distribute clean work clothes, all provided by law or the collective agreement. The shop superintendent refused even to read the demands and threatened to fine the workers. The plant president berated Svetlana for once again acting independently of him, though he himself did nothing. In the end, management finally backed down in the face of the workers' refusal to obey. It also fixed the roof and improved the lighting.

The assembly shop was the main force in the 'tractor war' of 1999, pitting the union against the government which was preparing to sign a multi-billion-dollar deal with US farm-machinery companies that would have completely finished off the Russian industry.³⁵ With the assembly shop breathing down its

neck, the plant committee drew up a plan of action that included lobbying, media exposure, demonstrations and civil disobedience. It tried, but failed, to draw other factories into the struggle. It did, however, finally wake up the director, who exerted a definitely moderating influence on the campaign. As the struggle was gathering force, mass picketing was planned, along with giant tractors, around the governor's office to coincide with the Prime Minister's visit to St Petersburg. Alarmed, the regional government agreed to send the Minister of Agriculture to the plant. The director asked the union to call off the action which had been set for the next day, and the plant president acceded. When Svetlana refused to call off her members, the plant committee telephoned them at their homes. 'We needed the action,' she explained, 'regardless of the minister's promises. The workers had never been so united—people even came in from their vacations; they were ready to fight. They wanted to speak for themselves, to feel that they are people, that they count for something. And the union stifled them, used them as a bogey.' The minister, who claimed to have been unaware that the plant made cheaper but fully equivalent tractors to those to be imported, promised to exclude Kirov tractors from the deal and to finance a leasing programme for farms to purchase them. Production has since picked up, but sentiment in the shop is that they were thrown a sop to shut them up while the deal went through, and that nothing has been resolved.

Keenly aware of the limits of isolated struggles, the shop committee has been active beyond the factory. It regularly brings out a remarkable 80 percent of its workers to political protests and it was one of the city's rare unions actively to support 1998 the miners' protest camp in Moscow. Svetlana has made the rounds of the various left parties to see what they have to offer workers. But her shop union remains quite isolated, even within its own factory.

Edinstvo

This union at the VAZ auto plant in Togliatti (120,000 employees) is the most successful of the alternative (non-FNPR) unions outside of the transport and coal mining sectors. Its success has been facilitated by the relatively strong market for its compact cars. Employment levels have not fallen, and wages are relatively high. VAZ played an important role in the self-management (STK) movement of Perestroika, but no visible trace of that remains. (The leader left in 1992 to join a mystical sect.)

Edinstvo was founded at the end of the period of heightened labour activism unleashed by Perestroika. It soon attracted 2,000 members, aided by a series of partial, mostly spontaneous strikes, whose leadership it assumed. The last one occurred on the main assembly line in 1994 over delayed wages, and was met with unusual severity, including a disguised general lockout, dismissals and the stationing of riot police in the shop. Management's show of force and the deepening depression halted Edinstvo's growth, but over the past year and a half it has grown to 3,500.

Edinstvo is subject to severe harassment and discrimination by management,

which refuses to negotiate with it, ignoring a court decision. Workers who join Edinstvo tend, therefore, to be more active and committed than the members of the traditional union. The latter too has some good activists and even a few militant shop committees, but their work is constantly undermined by the plant committee, whose leaders generally end up in management jobs. Corruption is rampant in the administration, which has been the object of several criminal investigations (that typically yielded no results). The factory has incurred huge losses through dealings with intermediary firms, many of which were set up by management personnel or their relatives. Edinstvo's president was twice wounded in armed attacks, which remain unsolved.

Edinstvo's practice stresses independence from management, who cannot be members of the union. In 1998–99, it actively opposed management's concession demand to eliminate indexation, which Edinstvo had won for all the workers in a 1992 strike. Already in 1996, the traditional union had agreed to limit indexation to 72 percent of inflation, citing the plant's serious financial situation. Predictably, in 1998 management returned to demand the complete end of indexation and its replacement with a bonus dependent upon profits. Although rejected at a first union conference, the demand was finally accepted on the second try after much arm-twisting in which the traditional union leadership itself participated, brandishing the threat of job losses. Edinstvo's president was not even allowed to speak at the conference. Edinstvo's position was that workers have no say in running the plant and so should not be made to pay for its poor performance. To drop indexation would, in fact, only reduce management's incentive to run the plant efficiently. The market for cars is strong, management's salaries are huge, and corruption is a major source of losses.

Edinstvo functions openly and democratically. As a matter of principle, it has only one full-timer, its vice-president, a worker fired for participation in the 1994 strike. Any officer can be recalled by a 10 percent vote of the relevant constituency. The proceedings of the executive's meetings are posted and distributed in leaflets. Decisions to send members to seminars and meetings in other cities or abroad are taken by vote and explained in order to avoid an appearance of favouritism, the rule in the traditional union. Detailed reports on these trips are made at meetings and are published. In contrast to the traditional unions, Edinstvo has a strike fund (20 percent of dues) and spends relatively little on material aid and cultural-recreational activities.

Edinstvo leaders devote a lot of time to face-to-face education, agitation, recruitment, grievance handling, and defending members against harassment. Much effort is devoted to informing workers of their rights—a concept weakly developed in Russia—and to showing that arbitrary authority can successfully be challenged. For example, after an Edinstvo member, a woman, refused to undergo a physical search at the gates, the union began a campaign to end this illegal and degrading practice. 'Why go to the trouble of installing electronic controls at the exits,' asked a leaflet, 'why think about the rights and dignity of

the rabble, when it is so much easier to degrade a thousand honest workers to catch one thief.' This concern for dignity is rare in Russia, but of critical importance in building an effective labour movement.

Like most alternative unions, Edinstvo also spends a lot of time on legal action (the former president earned a law degree), although that tends to exclude ordinary members and is not very effective. It can, however, have an educational function, which Edinstvo fully exploits. The emphasis on courts is a response to the general decline of rank-and-file activism, which affects Edinstvo too. Although VAZ is doing relatively well, management is at pains to remind workers of the disastrous situation that surrounds them.

Edinstvo's membership is not politically homogeneous, but most of its leaders supported Yeltsin, at least until his last few years. Subsequently, they shifted to ex-general Lebed, who, according to the union president, could deliver a badly needed strong state. Clearly, support for union independence does not always mean support for working class independence. However, in the 1999 parliamentary elections, Edinstvo ran its president as an independent labour candidate, rejecting invitations to join party lists. With almost no money, he won, a mark of the standing of the union in this factory riding. At the same time, however, he joined Putin's local campaign committee.³⁶ Unlike the traditional union, whose horizon stops at the factory gate (it did partially finance Togliatti's first church in the 1990s), Edinstvo has given active support to numerous outside labour struggles.

Yaroslavl Motor Builders

Yaroslavl has four diesel plants employing about 40,000 workers—down from 55,000, though production has fallen by 70 percent. The largest plant, the Yaroslavl Motor Factory, was the scene of the first major worker protest of Perestroika—a week-long strike against Saturday work.³⁷ However, activism dropped quickly thereafter. The unions stood by passively as shock therapy slashed real earnings. Even the start of wage arrears in 1994 did not provoke an immediate response, despite the efforts of individual activists.

The shift came in 1995 with the strike movement at the Tutaev Motor Factory, about an hour outside of Yaroslavl. Of Tutaev's 49,000 inhabitants, 8,400 work at the plant and cannot leave it because there is no other employment in town and no buyers for their apartments for them to move away. In 1995, a few activists were finally able to mobilize the workers over wages arrears (six months' worth) and managerial corruption. A strike committee was elected, which over the next two years led three strikes, one lasting five weeks and which included blocking highways. The old union committee was replaced with people from the strike committee, and a new director acceptable to the workers was appointed. Temporary relief was obtained on wages, though the problem soon returned.

The mood gradually shifted in the other factories too. In 1995, rank-and-file activists formed alternative unions at the Motor and Fuel-Apparatus

Factories. In 1996, the other plants also finally struck briefly and blocked roads over wage arrears. The strike committees, which have become quasi-permanent, act as mobilizing committees for the unions but also as an organized opposition to prod the union leadership. The Yaroslavl factories have the lowest union density in the ASM sector (50–70 percent), and so the strike committees are the only elected bodies that represent all workers.

The failure of isolated protests to bring more than fleeting relief led to the creation in the fall of 1996 of a joint council of strike committees, an initiative supported by the regional president. The council developed a strategy of escalating actions that went beyond the usual demand to ‘pay us our wages’: the workers demanded a joint development plan for the four plants and state investments to upgrade the motors to meet export standards. A campaign of civil disobedience spurred the regional governor to press Moscow, which acceded, at least on paper, to the workers’ demands. Although the federal government reneged on its signed commitment, it gave some relief by allotting credits to the Minsk Truck Factory, the main buyer of Yaroslavl’s motors.

In 1998, the four plants initiated the creation of a region-wide co-ordinating committee for collective actions. Inspired by the coal miners’ example in Moscow, it set up a workers’ camp alongside the railway tracks, presenting a permanent threat to rail communications between Moscow and the north-east.³⁸ In September 1998, hundreds of autoworkers brought rail traffic to a stop for three hours. The regional co-ordinating committee, with the support of the regional union federation, organized a conference of representatives of enterprises and popular organizations from across Russia’s central regions to prepare a general political strike. (The FNPR and the Communist Party had called a one-day strike for October 7 separately, but both had since given their support to Primakov’s new ‘leftist’ government, formed in the wake of the August financial collapse.) The committee’s demands were Yeltsin’s resignation, a new economic policy, and constitutional reform to subject the government to democratic control.

The ultimate goal of the Yaroslavl workers was to create a ‘ring of anger’ in the central regions surrounding Moscow on the day following the general strike in order to block rail traffic to the capital and press home the demands of the strike. But though participation across Russia in the October 7 protest was the largest ever, only Yaroslavl’s workers blocked the rails on October 8. Even so, they forced their governor and regional legislature to endorse their demands, to admit on a permanent basis three representatives of their co-ordinating committee into the regional government with a consultative voice, and to give the unions television time. The governor also established a commission with union participation to develop an anti-crisis programme and eliminate wage arrears. The labour movement became the predominant political force in the region.

PERSPECTIVES

But Russia has many regions. These examples are exceptional, and in each case one can point to special conditions that favour them: a 'culture of struggle', a relatively good economic situation, an unusual concentration of plants in the same subsector in a relatively small town where 'there is nowhere else to go'. The main problem that they all face is isolation. All these organizations realize that alone they cannot affect the basic causes of their members' condition and they have made serious efforts to reach out.

The acutely felt need for the 'live elements' of the labour movement to break out of their isolation explains the remarkable resonance that the miners' 'picket', a tent camp pitched in front the 'White House' in Moscow in the summer of 1998, had in the working class. On the face of it a modest and somewhat bizarre initiative—about 200 coal miners baking in the summer sun for weeks on end with no response from the government—became a powerful magnet for worker activists from all over Russia, a rallying point and meeting place for the exchange of experience, for mutual support, and potentially for practical co-ordination. Such a place they could not find in the official union structures, which are, in practice, obstacles to solidarity and co-ordination. The FNPR, and most of its affiliated unions, essentially ignored the 'picket'.

But conditions in 1998 were not yet ripe. And they were made worse by the financial crash and devaluation of July, which dealt a further blow to real wages and employment. While the October 7 protest was the biggest ever, it entailed little risk for its participants. However, even in Yaroslavl, the much more dangerous rail blockade of October 8 brought out only a few hundred workers, mainly Tutaev women (who faced down over a thousand armed troops), this after 25,000 workers on the previous day had voted unanimously for the blockade. Another complicating factor was the formation in August of a 'left' government, including Communists, under Primakov. This did, in fact, mark a temporary retreat of the Yeltsinite forces, utterly discredited by the financial collapse. But Primakov had no intention of breaking with international capital, which would have required a radical democratization of power and policy. Under Primakov, the workers continued to bear the full brunt of the crisis and of Russia's debt payments. And so, once the government had stabilized the situation, Primakov and the Communists were easily removed to make way again for the Yeltsinite forces, and eventually Putin.

The 'picket' itself ended in betrayal by the leaders of the alternative miners' union (NPG), who had solemnly pledged that this time they were fighting for the interests of the entire working class and would not abandon their political demands for economic concessions. But that is exactly what they did, without bothering to consult the 'picketers', only a few days before the October 7 national protest. But the point is not so much the leaders' betrayal as that it provoked no serious reaction among miners or other workers.

All the same, the experience was widely viewed as positive among activists.

There has been growth, though painstakingly slow, of solidarity and a willingness to confront enterprise and state authority. A recent military-style assault on a worker-occupied-and-managed pulp-and-paper mill near the town of Vyborg evoked an unprecedented outpouring of support from unions and individual workers all over Russia. But in the end, the mill workers were defeated, though not by violence. This was one of a number of conflicts in Russia over workers' control and property rights. But workers have even less chance of winning these than traditional union struggles, so long as their actions are uncoordinated and state power is in hostile hands.

There is thus still a long way to go. In the meanwhile, many workers will be tempted by strong men 'saviours' like Putin, who appeal to misplaced national pride and the hunger for security of a people stripped of all dignity by the forces the strong man really represents. Decisive change that could lead to an independent, militant, and effective labour movement will probably have to await at least the first stages of an economic recovery, which would help to allay the widespread insecurity and bolster workers' readiness to take risks. There are signs that the depression has bottomed out and that recovery is beginning, though it is tenuous, since investment has not increased.

Another factor that would provide a powerful boost to the Russian labour movement is a clear turn away from neoliberalism in North America and Western Europe, and labour's passing to the offensive in these heartlands of capitalism. Such an offensive would have a contagious effect, raising morale among Russian workers. It would undermine the positions of Russia's new ruling class and its international backers as well as those of the 'patriotic left' that supports a mythical 'patriotic bourgeoisie', and thus open political space for democratic alternatives.

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37. Mandel, *Perestroika and the Soviet People*, pp. 26-29.
38. Some published information can be found in *Sovetskaya Rossiya*, 30 July, 3, 9, 19, 22, 24 September 1999, and *Rabochaya politika*, 4, 1999.