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COMMENTARY

THE RUSSIAN LABOUR MOVEMENT IN DAYS OF DIFFICULT REFORMS: TO SUPPRESS OR TO SUPPORT?

Leonid A. Gordon*

The transfer of power in the former Soviet Union in the autumn of 1991 makes one think again of the role of workers' movement. Before the defeat of the August coup and the decisive turn of Russia towards reform, the working class movement was established as a newly independent branch of society and as one of the most powerful forces of democracy in the country. The strikes in March-April, 1991 beat back the first counter-attack of the reactionary forces being pushed from power, paving the way for Boris Yeltsin's election as President of Russia. In August of 1991, labour organizations supported democrats and helped to crush the coup plot.

Now, however, some other problems are breaking to the surface. The most important task will be finding a way out of the economic crisis and implementing market reforms. Following right behind are a series of questions on the future of the labour movement: What is the role of the labour movement under these crisis conditions? May the movement itself become an opposing force to change? And would it perhaps be preferable for society to restrict the labour movement during the transitional period?

I think that weakening the workers' movement, or perhaps even stopping its growth, will be harmful for the country and its movement towards a free market economy and democracy. Our labour

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movement is an organized activity of workers and employees brought together by their role as hired labour. In this sense, not only miners’ strikes but recent actions of teachers and junior medical personnel may be considered labour movement activities. It would be more appropriate perhaps to speak about the movement of worker’s collectives, rather than the labour movement, but the language we use does not ask sociologists for advice on labels.

The employee makes up over 80% of the working people in Russia, and probably half of them are part of big collectives where many thousands are employed. Today, the majority of people in Russia are blue and white collar workers, not peasants as it once was 100 and or even 50 years ago.

Nowadays, the nucleus of working people, its “heart,” is in the urban area, which includes all types of workers, engineers, teachers, etc. Taking all of this into account, the prime significance of the workers’ movement is its potential to develop into an organized movement of the majority.

Let me stress the word “organized”. We have been involved in a series of revolutionary developments in which the usual way of life has been destroyed, with the state being weakened and spontaneous forces of extraordinary public activity appearing more and more vividly. One can be pleased or terrified by this. But one can not restore a normal course of things instantly. A revolution should be lived through; it can not be stopped. We have every reason to believe that in the long run, the revolutionary transformations will result in the establishment of a legal state, democracy and a market economy. Harmony, and a much better economic and political system will exist than that found under state socialism. But in any case, it will take time, and not in terms of days or weeks — which are not the periods in which big revolutions may be completed.

We are in for months if not years of life in a society with abnormally weakened state power as the old system is destroyed and new administration and management systems are developed. Even under optimal conditions, attempts to deal with the economic and political crises will still be accompanied by a drop in the standard of living, increased unemployment, and unusual contrasts between the poor and the rich. It would have been worse without reforms, but it will not be easy with them. There is simply no easy way out for us.

The upsurge of mass activity, mass actions and people’s riots are inevitable under such circumstances. They are part and parcel of any revolution. However, the question of what particular forms this mass activity will take is of utmost importance. Will protests be or-
ganized actions subjected at least to internal discipline and chosen leadership, or will the activities instead take the form of absolutely unmanageable, spontaneous demonstrations with the potential to grow into dangerous, violent riots?

Here the labour movement is particularly important, since it has the capacity to impart more orderly and socially acceptable behavior onto the unavoidable explosion of mass activity. For example, there was no violence or destruction during the strikes of miners and workers in Byelorussia, not to mention the strikes of teachers and physicians. These groups imposed a ban on alcohol immediately, and there was neither bloodshed nor broken glass at any of their demonstrations. But things are far less peaceful wherever unorganized, uncontrolled, spontaneous forces are storming.

Let us leave aside Sumgait, Ferghana, and Osh — Senseless cruelty and unbridled madness are outrageous at anytime, even against a background of mass violence. Let us instead recall the not as terrifying events from a riot of drunkards in Chelyabinsk in 1990. Crowds of people, half of them teenagers, looted shops. An intoxicated boy yelled in the darkness: “I’ll be killing cops when I grow up!” Imagine what will result in the future if the increase in mass dissatisfaction is not organized, disciplined and civilized by the labour movement.

Those who are now afraid of labour movement, who think that during this time of crisis it would be preferable to suppress it, simply lack social imagination. Orderly reforms entirely manageable by the current administration are simply impossible under present economic and political conditions, as impossible as reliance on a snow-less winter or childbirth by the most affectionate wife in three months’ term instead of nine months. The practical choice today is between social activity and social protest in its more or less organized forms (and most importantly under the direction of the labour movement), and disorganized, spontaneous riot. The responsible and reasonable policy (especially for the supporters of free market and democratic changes) is, therefore, not the hopeless attempts to suppress workers but, on the contrary, support for healthy civilized forms of the labour movement.

In this regard, one must understand what main trends exist in the labour movement today in Russia and make distinctions between them.

It is clear that all labour organizations have much in common with each other in their actions, if they are living structures and not cadaverous remains of former “transmission belts”. Any labour
movement should defend the vital social and economic interests of employed workers. The most fundamental part of the labour movement consists of trade unions striving for better working conditions. At all times during the creation of open markets, this economic struggle is of the utmost importance. Otherwise, unacceptably heavy, excessive and unjustified hardships will burden the shoulders of the working people. The necessity of such struggle is obvious. New labour movements — miner's trade unions, strike committees, pilot's trade unions, "Sotsprof," etc. — have been born in and grown from the struggles for immediate improvement in working conditions. And the transformative tendencies in "old" official trade unions are also closely related to it.

Abstaining from the economic struggle would be harmful not only for the workers but for society as a whole. Without the resistance of organized workers, wages will always be fixed at the lowest possible level. It is not without reason that only one-third of our current GNP is spent on wages, while in the West, where the labour movement is strong, the corresponding figure is about one-half. But cheap labour makes technical progress unprofitable, and makes problem solving at the expense of workers too tempting.

As history proves, the best results are achieved not by a single dominating force irrespective of whether it be the state, employers, management or workers, but by the interaction of all these forces — their struggle, compromises, and cooperation. In short, all labour movements are advocates for vital economic interests. And so it should be, for it is good for the workers themselves and for all of society.

But besides their common interests, there are important distinctions between different labour organizations. During this period of revolutionary changes, the labour movement should not only defend the vital interests of the working people but also play a role in the decision-making in relation to the fundamental changes going on throughout the country.

Theoretically, there are three possible ideological directions in which labour organizations and movements will go as a result of the present situation.

The first is a combination of the ongoing fight for the improvement of labour conditions and wages while also supporting market and democratic reforms. This option involves the destruction of state socialism and the establishment of an economic and political system similar to that in the West. The second option involves the combination of fighting for the protection of immediate economic interests
with a struggle against democratic reforms aimed at restoring state socialism. The third position involves solely the advocacy of labour protection without supporting any position with respect to reforms.

In fact, all three conceptions exist in real labour movements in the nation. Naturally, ideological lines are not absolutely distinct in the labour movement as in society as a whole. One can find individuals agreeable to any of the three options every where in labour movement. Nevertheless, various labor organizations adopt and advocate a definite position, and it is precisely this fact that explains the social role of a labour movement branch.

The most active new labour movements — labour committees of Kuzbass, Sotsprof, the majority of Byelorussian strike committees — combine advocacy of current economic demands with the support of the transition to a free market and democracy. It is significant that more and more often they demand an increasing say in the operations of their enterprises, for the benefit of the entire collective. While this may be a crazy position under normal conditions, during the months of crisis ahead this demand for a role in management will allow a more peaceful transition to the market system which is being created, free of strikes and marked by cooperation.

Along with these newly powerful trade unions, the leadership of the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia really began tilting towards reforms as well. The official slogans of the Federation during the post-coup events of the Fall of 1991 have illustrated the combination of demands for increasing wages with support of the reform movement.

On the contrary, the labour organizations under the influence of the Stalinists and nationalists — such as the United Front of the Working People, and regional workers’ unions founded by the Communist Party not long before the attempted August coup, and which actively supported that coup — have declared that the protection of labour interests is inseparable from the restoration of state socialism or its national-socialist and national-Bolshevist variations. In fact, neo-Stalinist positions are the driving philosophy of these organizations, which consider it impossible to achieve improvement in the situation of the working people without the restoration of state socialism.

Finally, there are some groups within the labour movement which adhere to the belief that workers’ organizations should only support the growth of wages in proportion to the growth of the economy, and simply not allow any decrease in their members’ living standards no matter the economic consequences. They hold no active
position with regard to political or economic reforms. This is actually
the belief of numerous old trade unions and of a considerable num-
ber of their leaders. In the context of the times, this policy actually
threatens to appear hostile towards the reform process rather than
neutral toward it.

The slogan demanding “market wages to market process” is
truly progressive if it advocates establishing an expanded market
economy and fair distribution of incomes generated by independent
enterprises in that market. But if it truly stands not for increasing
wages based upon the success of market enterprises, but instead
stands for an increase in all wages by the state irrespective of the
individual successes of each enterprise in the market, then it is
purely demagogic. And it may result only in a further deepening of
the economic crisis and a growing rate of inflation.

Until now, popular activists, including the labour movement,
have on the whole supported a democratic position in which the
struggle for the prevention of excessive hardships to the population
during the transition to a market economy is combined with support
for market and democratic changes. However, it is often true that
the activists in a society represent only a minority of the people. But
here the popular majority was not against this position, but tacitly
supported it. And it was exactly the combination of open support on
the part of an active minority of the population and the well-dis-
posed neutrality of the majority that determined the victory of de-
mocracy in August 1991 coup attempt. However, during these days
of crisis as a result of reforms it is better not to rely on the past. If
the burden placed upon the people while efforts to overcome the eco-
nomic crisis is unbearable, the majority’s patience may run out.

It is also very important to remember that the transition to re-
forms makes regrouping among the activists, and above all within
the labour movement, inevitable. While the democratic development
of Russia was itself under the question “to be or not to be,” all de-
mocracy supporters were unified in their actions rather easily. Now,
with the question instead whether the country commences a serious
movement towards reforms, it is vitally important to know if there
will again be such unity.

Two approaches manifested themselves in the workers’ move-
ment, as was most clearly seen in the recent congresses of the Min-
ers’ Union (the Russian in November and the inter-republican in
December). The first is oriented towards a consistent movement to-
wards social-economic solutions similar to those found in the West,
whatever name they may have — democratic capitalism, mixed eco-
nomics, or anything else. To cite one of the miners’ leaders who explained this option, “We need to struggle for real businessmen to appear in our economy. And then or rather simultaneously, to fight with these businessmen for real wages and worthy labour conditions.”

The second approach is related to the goal of finding a special way and preserve the foundations of socialism even after the transition to a market economy. As this approach exists today, when old socialism has been discredited, the priority will be to adopt the conception of transferring the ownership and management of labour collectives to their workers.

The supporters of this option point out (and they are right here) that this facilitates democratic control over the break-up of state economic power. However, these views ignore the practical social lessons we have learned from experience (in particular, Yugoslavian ones, not to mention our own here in Russia).

These lessons indicate that a “kolkhoz” (collective farm) organization in industry as well as in agriculture is far less efficient than private ownership. Besides, collective ownership is usually linked to the concentration of real power in the hands of a limited group of administrators rather than even distribution among all members of the labour collective. In general, judging by world experience, only a small proportion of workers strive to become real masters of the means of production. The majority prefers to work honestly, getting well paid for their work and instead concentrating their energies on their family, leisure time, hobbies, and the like. And as seen from history, the establishment of collective economic organizations economics may not formally, but in fact does create management by small groups and threatens to transform the labour movement itself into a force far removed from true democracy. In the final analysis, intensification of the role of labour collectives during the privatization period would be somewhat favorable, but the total transfer of enterprises to labour collectives is unlikely to help in the establishment of a market economy or democracy.

So now as in earlier eras, the labour movement carries within itself the enormous potential for democratic organization of the people and strong possibilities for the improvement of labour and living conditions in general. However, as occurred in the past, there is a real danger that the labour movement could become a major force working against democratic reforms. Therefore, it is critically important that the democratic branches of the labour movement work closely with, support, and in turn receive support from a democratic
government and democratic society, if all are truly supporters of democratic reform.