The Class Struggle in Post-Soviet Russia

written by Boris Kagarlitsky | June 12, 2009

TRANSLATED BY MICHEL VALE THE RESTORATION OF CAPITALISM on the territory of the former Soviet Union was accompanied not only by unprecedented attacks on the social rights of the population. (Not only rights characteristic of the Soviet system, e.g., the right to housing, were rescinded, but also many of those that in the West are considered a normal attribute of a civilized attitude toward the wage laborer). No less impressive was the ease with which the new bourgeoisie imposed its conditions on the workers. By the late eighties the topic of free trade unions had become extremely popular. Soviet society was still digesting its impression of the mass workers' demonstrations in Poland, where a massive democratic movement had arisen under the banner of creating free trade unions.The miners' strike in 1989 gave rise to the Independent Union of Miners, and by early 1990 the "traditional" Soviet trade unions that had managed to outlive both the USSR and the CPSU (Communist Party of the Soviet Union) had learned how to strike and put forth demands. However, by the end of the decade the trade union movement was in deep decline. The last wave of workers' demonstrations swelled in spring and early summer of 1998 — the famous "war of the rails" where the workers (most of whom were the same miners) blocked the railoads, demanding payment of their wages in arrears. Before that, wages had not been paid for several months. But in most cases these demonstrations had nothing in common with any trade unions, old or new. After the default in 1998, the number of strikes and workers' demonstrations in Russia declined sharply, diminishing many times over. The first years of economic recovery were a model of "social peace" in Russian factories and plants. In some regions some quite bitter conflicts flared, involving even seizures of firms — at the Vyborg Paper Pulp Complex there was even shooting — but once again the trade union organizations were utterly ineffectual. However, once economic growth resumed in the early 2000s, the topic of trade unions as organizations, and repression against them, began to gain public notice. The first event that attracted the attention of the press was the formation of a trade union at the Ford Factory in the Leningrad region. After several months of struggle, the trade union had radically increased its membership, and after organizing a series of protest actions, it succeeded in raising workers' wages considerably. This epidemic of trade union building quickly spread to the new firms created by transnational companies to operate on the Russian internal market. In the summer of 2007, the Inter-regional Trade Union of Automobile Factories of Russia (MPRA) was formed and became part of the All-Union Confederation of Labor (VKT). By the end of the same summer of 2007, unrest hit the petroleum industry as well. Protest actions took place in companies of the Surgutvieftevgaz group. Workers in the Megionneftigaz Company also began to pro-test.The demands were the standard ones: wage raises, narrowing of the gap between workers' and managers' wages, indexing of the wages fund to keep pace with the rise in prices. The wave of protests and strikes organized by free trade unions forced many companies to take "preventive measures": they fired activists and set the police onto them. A similar conflict flared up at Togliatti after the workers of GM-AvtoVAZ began to form a free trade union. Andrei Liapin, the chairman of the trade union committee, discovered that his computer had been blocked and he himself became the subject of thorough body searches at the gate. Then disciplinary penalties began to be imposed on members of the newly created trade union — such practices had been the norm for some time in Russian companies. As in other countries of the world, the industrial recovery in Russia brought about a growth in the workers' movement as well. A new generation with much better ideas of how capitalism worked and of how to defend workers' rights under the new conditions had emerged. It is today no longer a rare thing to meet an activist from the new free trade unions capable of discussing dispassionately and in detail how his comrades in France or Brazil are working, an activist who splendidly understands a company's structure and its weak and strong points, and moreover is thoroughly informed about contemporary labor legislation. IT ALSO

SHOULD COME AS NO SURPRISE that the transnational firms and the petroleum industry have become the principal focal points of growth of the workers' movement. Transnational companies not only brought their technology and labor relations to Russia, they have also willy-nilly created the conditions for the spread of the international experience of social struggle. The transnational companies astutely opted for the creation of young workforces not blighted by the Soviet workers' culture and capable of quickly assimilating the new technology. Their calculations were borne out: the productivity of labor experienced a qualitative leap compared to the old factories — suffice it to compare the Ford factory with AvftoVAZ — but along with the growth in productivity, the self-awareness of workers grew as well. This was expressed at the economic level quite simply: new trade unions emerged demanding higher wages. A new disciplined workforce, that had become used to clear and well-defined work was capable also of organizing efficient and disciplined strike actions. But the "virus of class struggle," finding itself in a favorable environment in the new firms, gradually began to "infect" the old ones as well. Along with the first successful demonstrations, information was spread, experience was exchanged, and most importantly a sense of self-confidence emerged. The business press complained that Western capital had brought to Russia the ideas of radical trade unionism. In August of 2008 a strike situation crystallized in the former flagship of Soviet industry, AvtoVAZ, but in the end the strike failed. The first "surprise effect" had waned and under the changed conditions management was much better prepared to confront the workers. In a typical Soviet corporate city, in which life was organized around one gigantic factory, any labor dispute would grow into a political confrontation, and vice-versa. Urban problems, public transport issues, welfare conditions, and conditions of social life generally had an immediate and direct impact on production. When the drivers of public microbuses struck, the workers of AvftoVAZ were unable to get to the factory. In such situations management behaved aggressively and uncompromisingly, relying on the open support of the authorities. The achievements of comrades working in transnational companies encouraged those working in the privatized sector of industry to up their demands as well, but these successes could not always be repeated. Against this background, the new strike in the Petersburg Ford Factory, begun on November 7, 2007 [MV: old calendar] , on the anniversary of the October Revolution, took on symbolic significance. The strike lasted less than a day and was curtailed by a court decision, but the trade union had been prepared for this. Not even two weeks had passed when on November 20 a new strike started, but this time it was open-ended.The events in the Ford factory were but a part of a general surge in the workers' movement which had by that time embraced Petersburg and Leningrad. Conflicts that had broken out before summer had ended in the Heineken brewery and the Coca Cola plants, which were followed by a conflict in the local section of the Russian Postal Service. In all of these cases the workers' resistance was accompanied by the creation of new free trade unions that endeavored to demonstrate their ability to improve the workers' situation. Often a trade union formed simply because a conflict in a factory had reached the bursting point or because the working conditions were perceived by the majority of the workforce as unsatisfactory. The successes of the Ford workers demonstrated that a change could be achieved through energetic, organized joint action. By the beginning of autumn 2007 it seemed that workers' demonstrations were declining, and many trade union leaders found themselves in a dilemma, not knowing precisely what to do next, while public opinion was distracted by the Duma electoral campaign which had then begun, and by debates among the political class about who would become Putin's successor. HOWEVER THE EVENTS OF NOVEMBER changed the situation again. Even as the vacuous and languid electoral campaign produced fatigue and befuddlement amongst the general public, news of new workers' protest actions began to come from Petersburg. After the Ford warning strike, the dockers' strike began on November 13. By the end of the month the dockers in some factories decided against attempts to stop work completely, and instead adopted the Italian strike, i.e., "working to rule" which under Russian conditions might well have a greater impact on the port owners. The conflict in the Petersburg Post Office once again made the news, embellished by court cases and actions of solidarity in defense of the fired trade union members. The locomotive brigades declared a strike for

November 28. The conflict in the Ford factory occurred in consonance with the general swell of workers' protests, and the strike coincided in time with elections to the State Duma. Neither the pro-government party, "One Russia," nor the official opposition, earned the sympathies of the strikers, and the trade union put forth the slogan, "Don't vote, strike!" Russian legislation in fact prohibits strikes — although technically a one-day strike is possible before a court decision can be handed down. The Ford strike was a challenge to both management and the state. It lasted three weeks and became a symbol of the workers' resistance. It ended in a compromise, which essentially brought victory to the trade union. Wages were raised, and the workers were given a guarantee of employment to offset the company's endeavors to expand outsourcing. However the victory at the Ford factory was the last significant success of the free trade unions. The economic crisis loomed, finally made its appearance, and by the end of 2008 had resulted in a massive cutback in production. Although the bulk of dismissals were of white collar workers, the situation of the industrial workers also deteriorated. The official Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia (FNPR) declared struggle through strikes to be its most important priority under the crisis conditions. The leaders of the workers' organization began to be attacked — in particular Aleksei Etmanov was assaulted twice, and on the second occasion the attacker, arrested at the scene of the crime by workers' activists, was released by the police. The congress of the VKT held in November 2008 declared that "actions of solidarity must become the standard of activities in the free trade unions," and called on people to respond to violence against worker activists with "a powerful protest campaign" organized by "the forces of the left." Solidarity actions remained a weak aspect of the new workers' movement, which has almost no such experience. So far each organization has protected itself, receiving only basic moral support from colleagues and comrades in other trade unions. Aleksei Etmanov, the leader of the MPRA and the Ford workers, declared that the trade union struggle was no longer adequate, and that a workers' party was needed. Nonetheless there is not full unity on this issue even in the ranks of the MPRA, not to speak of other trade unionists. The majority of left-wing organizations are sects of little significance, and the official Dumas opposition expresses the interests of management with no less decisiveness than those holding power. This applies not in the last instance to the Communist Party (KPRF) which supports management against workers every time a strike occurs. The KPRF leaders are right-wing conservatives in their ideology and for them the most interesting topic is the struggle against the Jewish conspiracy and defense of Russian Orthodox values. In January 2009 the MPRA council addressed a petition to the government of Russia in which it offered its view of "anti-crisis measures": establishment of trade union control of the financial resources allocated to companies by the state; access of the trade unions to information on the financial and economic position of a firm; full information concerning a company's profits; welfare subsidies to dismissed workers. Workers who have lost their jobs should be exempted from paying off loans for the duration of their unemployment and the state should establish a system for monitoring compliance with labor legislation. Companies that take unjust advantage of the crisis to erode the working conditions of their workers and who misuse state subsidies systematically violate the labor code and the trade union law, should be nationalized. Anti-crisis committees should be created to include representatives of a company's management, representatives of trade unions operating in the firm, and representatives of the state-authorities. A nationwide anti-crisis plan coordinated with the Russian tripartite commission must be drafted, taking into account the solutions proffered by the factory committees. But even these quite moderate demands were ignored by the government, which gave not so much as a hint of willingness on its part to carry on negotiations with the trade unions. For their part workers' organizations are themselves not ready for decisive actions in factories or on the street. Given such a situation, one should not expect a new upsurge of the workers' movement in Russia. But just as little can one imagine that workers will silently endure the crisis, the decline in the standard of living, dismissals and inflation. Social tension will grow ineluctably, and the protest movement will just as ineluctably move into the streets, as was already the case at the end of 2008 in the Far East. These protests will hardly be purely worker and class protests in composition, but the activists and leaders of the new free trade

unions will undoubtedly be playing a not inconsiderable role in them. The time for politics has come upon us. And the fact that a “pure” class organization is today an unachievable goal for left-wing forces by no means removes the necessity of acting in accordance with their ideas and principles.

Footnotes