

Russian workers breathe life into unions

Bob Arnot interviews Kirill Buketov

Bob Arnot: The last twelve months in Russia have appeared to be particularly turbulent, even by Russian standards. The economic decline deepens but simultaneously the development of a deeply criminalised “wild west” capitalism has continued. For the Russian trade union and labour movement has the year seen significant change? Perhaps we could begin by considering the situation in the old official trade union federation, the FNPR (Federation of Independent Trade Unions).

Kirill Buketov: The changes in the FNPR have been more incremental than dramatic but they are beginning to cumulate and make a real difference. Firstly, you must remember that in the past the trade unions and management were in some respects staffed by an interchangeable personnel. A career in the trade unions, management and the party was the usual route for careerists of various kinds. However, one of the consequences of the reform process has been the separation of these functions. Those trade union leaders (either at the centre or at the enterprise level) who were “self interested” now saw that money, power, etc., resided elsewhere and began to abandon the trade unions. Furthermore, the older Stalinist cadre is subject to time — either death or retirement has begun to bring changes and the result is that there is a replacement of the cadre.

In what way does this manifest itself practically?

Within FNPR structures this is bringing about changes that at first sight may seem trivial but which are symbolically important and have underpinned much more significant practical change. For example, the old nomenklatura privileges relating to access to cars and drivers that were enjoyed by trade union leaders have been withdrawn and even the hierarchical structure of canteen facilities has been removed. This is symbolically important as it signifies the end

of the old confluence between the nomenklatura and the trade unions.

More significantly the new cadre has implemented changes in youth policy and is attempting positively to recruit young workers into the trade unions. From my own point of view the changes in the trade union

newspaper are also of significance. The editorial team of the newspaper is drawn from younger elements within the movement, often with a profoundly anti-Stalinist past. Furthermore, in the past the newspaper was simply distributed free to enterprise union committees and then freely to the membership. Now, however, the paper has to be paid for, but the number of copies produced grows constantly, both subscriptions and general distribution, because workers recognise both its independence and its usefulness.

Has this begun to have any real impact on the nature of trade union activity and interventions?

The policy orientation has been changing constantly but since the well-supported day of action on 5 November 1996 real change has begun to occur. Before this event the level of involvement reflected the Soviet tradition of a perfunctory turnout and participation. Now, however, involvement is much more active as the economic and social situation has deteriorated so markedly for ordinary workers throughout the country. This has led to heightened demands and trade unions, as they are increasingly seen to be genuinely independent, are the vehicle through which these are expressed.



There is a real difference between the workers' movement and Zyuganov's nationalistic, anti-semitic Stalinists

between the November 1996 and March 1997 days of action?

Certainly! By the time of the next big day of action on 27 March 1997 the main slogan had become explicitly political and was unambiguously anti-government. The state was extremely perturbed by the growth of popular discontent and the mobilisations throughout the early part of the year in many regions and many sectors of the economy. Yeltsin's response was to revamp the government, with the addition of Chubais (the Minister who had been responsible for the privatisation campaign under the Gaidar government) and Nemtsov (the regional governor who had introduced apparently successful reforms in Nizhny Novgorod). Their brief was to change the social and economic situation. As a consequence pensioners were at last paid the billions of roubles owed to them in pension arrears. This was completed by 1 July 1997.

Furthermore, a new programme has been introduced to pay wage arrears, which has been the prime reason for strikes and popular unrest. Priority has been given to the payment of the military services, for the obvious reason. Next, payments will be made to defence sector enterprises with the eventual aim being the removal of wage arrears by 1 January 1998.

Did this process accelerate

Given the enormous budgetary

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problems the regime faces, as a result of enormous expenditures and the failure to collect tax, it raises the question of how the state can deal with these problems.

The government has attempted a variety of strategies. First, it tried to get money from Gazprom, Lukoil and the other major industrial groupings, headed by the ex-nomenklatura and the new capitalists, that have been the major beneficiaries of the reform process. The industrial groupings have been made to pay their tax debts. The second instrument utilised by government has been the attempt to strengthen tax policy. This has applied mainly to firms but also to individuals. It is not easy to get people to pay their taxes because people are reluctant to pay for the Chechen war and can see clearly that there is no democratic control over the state budget. For example, during the election campaign the state budget was effectively utilised as Yeltsin's campaign fund! The third instrument utilised has been the sequestration of funds from the public sector and this has resulted in reduced budgets for TV, education, etc. This is really no option at all and alarms the trade unions because it is an attempt to solve the problems at the expense of another group of workers and the trade-off is unsustainable. The fourth instrument utilised has been further privatisations. For example, the state has sold off shares in Svazinvest and intends to sell off Norilsk nickel. These privatisations are little more than the transfer of assets to the powerful industrial groupings close to the ruling circles under the pretext of raising funds to pay the wage arrears. Workers in the short term may receive their back pay but in the longer term the money to pay it has been stolen from them! Furthermore, even in the short term there is no democratic control over the funds raised. The communications workers' trade union has proposed that if the state sells assets, then no one controls money, but what they wanted was 30% of the revenue to be controlled by them and dedicated to the social sphere.

So you are arguing that under the pressure of popular discontent the ruling group is being forced to confront the issue of wage arrears, but has the discontent forced any other changes?

Another change worth identifying is the degree to which the trade unions have refused to be incorporated into the structures of the Yeltsin government. For example, in the Kuzbass under popular pressure Yeltsin replaced his criminal

friend Mikhail Kisluk (very unpopular and thought to be responsible for the collapse of the coal industry) with Aman Tulayev, a relatively popular, leftist politician, supported by the trade unions. It was also proposed that the chairman of the Kuzbass trade union federation should become the deputy governor of the region. In the past, as part of the nomenklatura, this would have been quite normal but the trade union chairman refused, reflecting the trade union's desire for independence and their reluctance to be incorporated or blamed for the absurdities of the Yeltsin government. Similarly, Mikhail Shmakov, the Chairman of the FNPR, was proposed for the post of Minister of Labour but refused.

Whatever its past and for all its present problems, the FNPR is the only trade union force and only it can mobilise millions of workers to take to the streets in protest. No political party can achieve this. The extravagant claims of the so-called independent trade unions need to be assessed. For example, much was made of Sotsprof which did play an important role in smaller enterprises and firms. In some instances it was the only way of organising where the FNPR was unreformed and for workers it was the only form of self-defence and organisation. Workers who tried to change their trade union committees and were unsuccessful turned to Sotsprof.

However, under pressure from the rank and file at enterprise level, FNPR unions have begun to change. For example, there is more democracy at enterprise level than ever before and this is particularly true outside of Moscow and Moscow region. Many of the wide range of strikes and actions that have occurred in recent times have been led by new radical and militant trade union committees. For example, in the Vladivostok area at the Bolshokamin ship building yard, 500 workers led by a woman chair of the trade union committee broke police lines and blockaded the Trans-Siberian railroad. It is possible that she will get 10 years in jail but a campaign has already begun and it is unlikely. Many new leaders are emerging in the course of struggle.

At the enterprise level many leadership changes have occurred: Stalinist bureaucrats jumped ship pretty quick, therefore the new people who filled their spaces had had nothing to do with old-style nomenklatura or management. These are generally a younger generation and this is the case also at the upper levels of the FNPR. At the middle levels there are still old bureaucrats, particularly at the regional levels and the centre, but they will eventually be voted out or they will

see this is not their old organisation.

What about the "free trade unions"?

The free trade unions officially supported the mass action of 27 March 1997 which shows the shift in their attitude towards the FNPR. Originally they distrusted its old bureaucracy but now they are unable to do this. Sotsprof leaders are criticised by their own membership particularly for their financial support to Yeltsin's election fund. This was a result of illegal money laundering to support the Yeltsin campaign. Large sums of money were given to Sotsprof who in turn sent 4 milliard roubles to Yeltsin's campaign fund, keeping perhaps 10%! Khramov, the leader of Sotsprof even boasted about his role in this prostitution of the union and it is little surprise that the membership have become disillusioned and as a result many officials from the free trade unions have gone into the FNPR.

From the outside the situation in the trade unions appears somewhat complex. Can you briefly outline the structures that now exist?

Broadly speaking there are three federations. The FNPR (Federation of Independent Trade Unions) which as we have been discussing is undergoing some qualitative changes. Second, the KTR (Confederation of Labour of Russia) which is comprised mainly of transport workers (in particular seamen and rail workers). Finally, there is the VKT (All-Russian Confederation of Labour) which was created by Sotsprof and the NPG (Independent Miners Union). Note that because of Sotsprof's problems some Sotsprof structures belong directly to the VKT.

The free trade unions really need to strengthen their organisational basis and create a joint federation to match the FNPR. This would have the beneficial effect that two or more powerful confederations might push each other into stronger organisational forms and more radical positions but the problem is that the government can play one off against the other.

Some western commentators have argued that the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF) is a progressive force and that they represent and articulate the interests of Russian workers. To me this seems bizarre in the extreme. Would you comment on this?

The KPRF's words are very radical but they have to be judged on their deeds.

The KPRF fraction is the largest in the Duma and initially there were hopes that they would exert pressure to change legislation and social policy. But this fraction will never support any law or proposal in order to help ordinary people. They have even failed to support basic trade union proposals. For example, the Duma has to set the minimum wage and to set it at a level below the poverty level is absurd. But when the issue was discussed even the liberals were more supportive than the KPRF! There are many similar examples from their actions in the Duma.

Furthermore, at demonstrations and actions the KPRF happily march under banners of Stalin and with anti-semitic slogans. The speeches of their representatives are always full of chauvinist and nationalist demagoguery. This after all is the party that has never recognised its responsibilities for the crimes of the past and actually boasts about its CPSU antecedents and tradition. In the past the FNPR has been criticised and blamed for being part of state structures but this is even more true of the KPRF at the present. Many regional governors have come from the Zyuganov party but they have done nothing to help people survive. They are responsible for the past and they share responsibility for the present with the Yeltsin regime.

What Zyuganov has tried to do is hijack workers' protests for his own party purposes. For example, the general council of trade unions organised a day of action for 27 March 1997 and one week after the decision was made on the date, Zyuganov's newspapers tried to claim they had organised the protest action! On the day itself FNPR insisted that if KPRF wanted to take part in the day of protest then it must call on all its members to go to the demonstrations in trade union and not KPRF groups. But as the majority of KPRF active members are pensioners they are not in trade unions, so columns of KPRF pensioners joined the demonstrations! Even then ordinary trade union members were appalled at their slogans and the portraits of Stalin that they carried. Clearly there is a real difference between the workers' movement and Zyuganov's nationalistic, anti-semitic, Stalinists.

What do you see as the next phase in the campaign against the government's disastrous economic and social policies?

The next day of action will be similar to a general strike and will probably take place in the autumn. Meanwhile, in addition to general day-to-day campaigning, a

special campaign on non-payment is underway. Its main task is to lay bare the responsibility for non-payments. The government argue that it is the fault of corrupt enterprise management but clearly it is deeper than this and is the responsibility of the government. The broader idea is to attract the attention of the international community, hence the participation of the ILO and ICFTU.

Superficial observers, particularly westerners passing through Moscow, could argue that even though non-payments remain a problem, the government policy of seeking monetary stability has worked. Economic activity seems to have increased, the availability of goods has improved, unemployment is very low and the superficial signs of prosperity seem to be expanding. Furthermore, there will undoubtedly be a propaganda campaign oriented towards the west connected to Moscow's 850th anniversary. Yet this picture is clearly misleading — would you comment on this?

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There are a number of elements to this. First, on a simple level the statistical system has more or less collapsed and the statistics are massively removed from reality. Second, Moscow's relative prosperity is clearly a result of its privileged position. For example, the majority of the foreign investment that comes into Russia goes to Moscow and even that which goes to the regions has an impact in Moscow. Third, there is the question of the mayor of Moscow, Luzhkov. Luzhkov is a real populist politician and is extremely popular in Moscow because he pays attention to social questions and social problems in Moscow. For example, he opposes social reforms suggested by the Chubais and Nemtsov govern-

ment. What they want to do is over the next 2-3 years make Russian citizens 100% responsible for their own electricity, housing and gas costs. They argue that the communal provision of utilities encourages wastefulness and overconsumption but of course the real reason is the privatisation of communal costs and the removal of these costs from the state budget. Luzhkov, however, opposes this and has proposed a special Moscow programme which will continue subsidies for the population. Luzhkov is a pragmatic populist who attempts through words and deeds to minimise the possibilities of popular discontent, keeping Moscow stable and allowing those who are benefiting from the reform process to enjoy their prosperity. The combination of social subsidies and the celebrations arranged for the 850th anniversary could be likened to the “bread and circuses” of Roman emperors! Meanwhile in the regions the situation is much different and real hardship, extreme poverty, high levels of unemployment, disease and even malnutrition, provide a stark contrast with the apparent affluence of Moscow.

We've already discussed the role of the KPRF but are there any other parties that might provide a focus for anti-government activity?

No present political party stands on a platform that is pro-worker. All the mainstream parties have their origins in the former ruling group and Zhironovsky, Lebed and Chubais in their own ways have sought to incorporate the workers and use their power for their own ends. None of them represent workers' interests. Each represents particular factions of the old ruling group and nomenklatura in the new circumstances. They all broadly have the same ultimate aim, the creation of some form of capitalism, even though their particular routes for the transition may be marginally different.

With regard to current left parties, it is very difficult to talk of a left that really exists. The grouplets are very small, unrepresentative and not connected to the wider labour movement. You can only call them parties if you believe that ten people with a party name constitute a party!

As a consequence trade unions can and must play a political role. They are the only social force that can represent and defend workers' interests. In the longer term a workers' party based on the trade unions is the only possibility for Russian workers to intervene and determine their future.