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Soviet Miners Shake Kremlin

Libertarian Labor Review

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Soviet miners returned to work in early May after striking for over two months. The strike began on March 1 in the Donbas coal-fields of the Ukraine, and quickly spread to the mining regions of Kazakhstan, Siberia and the Urals. The government newspaper *Isvestia* reported that coal production was cut by 82% with over a third of all coal mines being shutdown. Estimates range upwards to as many as one million miners on strike at its height in the latter part of March. Initially it was intended as a short warning strike demanding full implementation of the agreement reached after the 12 day strike in 1989.

The independent miners' union, the NPG, demanded safer working conditions, earlier retirement, and wage increases between 100% and 150% (which would be needed to offset the huge price increases planned for April). Yet within hours after the strike began, their various strike committees began to demand the resignation of Gorbachev and an end to centralized power. No longer content with the empty promises of "perestroika", striking miners in the Ukraine held meetings around the theme of "Down with the power bureaucrats".

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Gorbachev and the central government at first tried to pretend the strike was insignificant. Then as more miners joined the strike, pay raises were offered in return for "increased productivity." When these new promises were not accepted, Gorbachev (in his typical rule-by-decree style) issued a back-to-work order, and threatened a "state of emergency" decree (i.e. martial law) the beginning of April. The order was not only ignored, but flung back at him, when strikes spread to other industries. Machine tool workers in the Urals staged warning strikes in support of the miners. On April 4, a one-day general strike took place in Minsk, capital of the Byelorussian republic. Dock workers and workers at the heavy machinery complex in Baku, capital of Azerbaijan, went on strike the second week in April. Strikes broke out across the Georgian republic on April 12. Gradually the miners' strike was building into a general strike as more and more strike committees took up the call.

At the center of the rebellion was the independent miners union, the NPG. The NPG grew out of the strike committees setup during the 1989 strike. Although similar to Poland's Solidarity in some respects, the NPG has managed to retain much of the rank-and-file control and local autonomy which no longer exists in the former. Alongside the a national executive with offices in Moscow remain the local strike committees which did not disband after the 1989 strike. The power of the strike committees was indicated by the way the strike became much more radical in its demands and the rejection an agreement worked out by the national executive which would have doubled miners' pay but left Gorbachev in power. Revolutionary consciousness among the miners, however, is uneven.

The Siberian miners are clearly the most radical, wanting more than just better pay or even better bosses. Since 1989 they have sought some form of worker control over the mines, including the ability to make their own agreements on coal sales. Miners in other regions, on the other hand, are more trusting of authority, being

content to see ownership of the mines transferred from the Communist central government to someone else.

In the case of the latter, the someone else for now are the nationalists and liberals, who run the various republican governments. Early in the strike, the strike committees took up Boris Yeltsin's demand for a transfer of governmental power to a coalition of the republics, and a transfer of ownership of natural resources, including the coal fields, to the republics where these were located. Republican governments began conducting their own negotiations with the strikers. On March 23 a separate agreement was reached between the republic of Kazakhstan and the 100,000 miners of the coal-rich Karaganda district, after the republic claimed ownership of its coalfields. A few week later, on April 20, the Ukrainian miners made a similar arrangement with the Ukrainian republic. Only the Siberian miners remained reluctant to return.

The nationalist and liberal republican leaders used the strike as a weapon to win concessions from the central government, in the same way that Gorbachev had exploited the strikes in 1989 against his opponents. The sympathy strikes in Byelorussia, and Georgia were enthusiastically supported by the nationalists as long as it suited their interests. A Communist attempt to recall Boris Yeltsin from his post as head of the Russian republic, failed in large part due to the strikes. Finally on April 24, Gorbachev struck a deal with 9 of the 15 republican governments. In return for helping to get the miners back to work, Gorbachev agreed to turn over the coal fields to the republics and to power sharing with the republican leaders.

The striking miners of Siberia, however, did not have much faith in deals leaving Gorbachev in power and them with no control over the mines. Boris Yeltsin spent May Day in the coal fields trying to persuade miners to trust him that the new arrangement would work. Yeltsin promised to turn the mines over to the workers "as soon as possible." When the soviet government made good its pledge to transfer ownership of the coal fields, the last of the

striking miners, no doubt exhausted and feeling they had done the best they could for now, began to go back.

The nationalists showed their true colors within days after the last of the strikers returned. On May 16 the Soviet Government announced that 13 of the 15 republics, all but Georgia and Estonia, had agreed on an economic crisis program. The program included a ban on strikes along with a prohibition on wage increases not tied to improved productivity, essentially the same plan proposed by Gorbachev which the strikers had rejected earlier.

It remains to be seen if the workers will comply with the nationalists' strike ban, when the much ballyhooed Soviet market economy fails to bring much improvement.