


Behind the news:2

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The Russian Miners' Strike of February 1996

The Russian coal miners' strike which began on 1 February, 1996 was widely and dramatically reported by the Western media as a potentially decisive intervention on behalf of all the victims of 'shop therapy' which might prove the last nail in the coffin of reform. In fact the strike was called off at 3 a.m. on the morning of 3 February, the end of the strike being barely reported even in Russia: all but one journalist had got bored with waiting and had filed reports that the strike was continuing before going off to bed. Technically the strike was suspended until 1 March, but the resumption of the strike was barely discussed at the meeting of the union presidium on 28 February. How could a strike begin with such a bang end so soon with barely a whimper? 

Simon Clarke and Vadim Borisov have been researching the workers' movement and the restructuring of the Russian coal-mining industry since 1991. The research on which the present article is based has been funded by the ESRC and by the Westminster Foundation. Further information, including reports and working papers, are available from our World Wide Web site: http://www.warwick.ac.uk/WWW/faculties/social_studies/complabstuds/complab.htm

The miners in the workers' movement

Ever since the miners' strike which swept across the Soviet Union in July 1989, the coal miners have been seen, and have seen themselves, as the vanguard of the workers' movement. The 1989 and 1991 miners' strikes played a decisive role in accelerating the disintegration of the Soviet system and then of the Soviet Union itself. Since 1992, supported by successive strikes and strike threats, the miners have extracted concessions from the government which have enabled them to reduce the impact of the catastrophic decline in production on their employment and standards of living. Although the government has consistently sought to isolate the miners, following the example of Margaret Thatcher, first conceding their demands while smashing other workers so as subsequently to condemn them as selfish and sectional, successive miners' strikes have enjoyed mass support, both in society and in political circles. Thus the miners have been able to represent themselves as the vanguard of the working class, struggling not only for their own sectional interests but for the interests of the people as a whole. The fact that the World Bank has been devoting its attention to the industry over the past three years, proposing a closure programme modelled on that carried through in Britain, only elevates the significance of the miners' struggle to the global scale.

Yet, at the same time the trade union organisation of the miners is in many respects very weak. In the first place, the miners are divided between two trade unions. The Independent Miners' Union (NPG) emerged from the workers' committees which grew out of the 1989 strike. Although it is much smaller than Rosugleprof, the union which was formed out of the former state trade union, and its membership is patchily distributed, it has a strength disproportionate to its numbers because it organises primarily the key underground workers. The NPG leadership has always been closely associated

with Yeltsin, the union's president Aleksander Sergeev being a member of Yeltsin's advisory Presidential Council, and received substantial support from the AFL-CIO on which it came increasingly to depend.¹ Accordingly, NPG has tended to support a market economy, to defend the government and to blame the management of the industry at all levels for its problems. Most of the Rosugleprof leaders, like those of NPG, emerged from the strike movement of 1989, but Rosugleprof identifies much more closely with management and directs the bulk of the blame for the condition of the coal industry at the government. Although at mine and regional level (apart from Kuzbass) the two unions nowadays frequently co-operate and NPG members participate in Rosugleprof actions,² the political division between their leaderships has presented a serious barrier to collaboration in representing the common trade union interests of their members.³

Second, neither trade union has a very effective trade union organisation. On the one hand, both trade unions are heavily dependent on management at all levels: the main function of the trade union at enterprise level remains that of administering the social and welfare apparatus, trade union leaders usually seeing themselves as a part of the management apparatus.⁴ Where NPG has established primary groups they too are usually assimilated to management, while NPG's national offices are provided by Rosugol', the management body for the industry. As a reaction against the 'democratic centralism' of the Soviet era, both trade unions have decentralised constitutions so that the bulk of union dues remain at local level where they are used mainly to pay for welfare benefits, there is limited communication between the centre and the base, and decisions of higher bodies are not binding on lower bodies. In these circumstances it has proved very difficult to conduct organised and disciplined strikes as an instrument of trade unionism. The 1989 strike was a purely

spontaneous outburst, with the then official trade union leaders sitting opposite the strikers in the negotiations as a member of the joint government-Party-union delegation. The 1991 strike began as a one-day strike which developed spontaneously and largely beyond the control of the workers' committees and newly founded NPG. Between 1991 and 1994 the majority of strikes and strike calls were 'directors' strikes', strikes which were encouraged by, or at least had the tacit support of, mine and association directors in their struggle to extract resources from Moscow. The strike of February 1996 was the first national miners' strike called by the trade union against the express opposition of management.

Third, the success of the miners despite the weakness of their organisation has owed a great deal to the support they have received from other workers. However, although the miners have enjoyed widespread support for their demands, they have shown little solidarity with other groups of workers. During the 1989 miners' strike in all the coal mining regions workers from other industries, from transport and construction, municipal services, health and education came to the miners to offer their support and proposed to strike in solidarity. However, the miners refused all such offers arguing that they could resolve all problems (not only theirs, but those of the whole population) by their own efforts, and that it would be better for other workers to continue working for the needs of the population.⁵ In 1989 it was indeed the case that the strike was settled on the basis of lists of demands drawn up not only by miners but also by local authorities on behalf of the whole population, but the exclusion of other groups of workers from participation in the movement deprived the latter of the experience of struggle through which their leaders could emerge, could develop their organisational and negotiating skills and could build their own organisations. Meanwhile, the employers and political authorities

learned fast and were well prepared to nip subsequent attempts to develop independent workers' organisation in the bud. For example, many of the strikes of teachers and health workers which swept Russia in the spring of 1992 had a spontaneous origin, but were rapidly taken over by management and the bureaucrats of the old trade union who used them for their own purposes, to extract resources from the government, so that the impulse to developing independent worker organisation was neutralised.

One cannot blame the miners alone for the uneven development of the workers' movement, but their 'vanguardism' has certainly played a role in reproducing and reinforcing the passivity of other groups of workers. Moreover, despite the dependence of the miners on the support of other workers for their success, we do not know of a single case in which the miners have acted in support of other groups of workers in their turn, beyond sending occasional messages of support. In the coal mining regions the teachers and health workers were hard hit in 1991 by having to pay prices inflated by the high wages of the miners, and were involved in militant action of their own seeking to achieve pay increases to compensate for inflation. But, far from supporting the workers in the budget sector, NPG and the workers' committees in 1991 and 1992 actively opposed their demands (primarily on political grounds). In regional strikes in September 1995 in Kuzbass there were at least token displays of solidarity between miners and teachers, but in January 1996 there was no co-ordination or even communication between the teachers and the miners who were simultaneously on strike, with the same demand of payment of moneys due from the government (nor was there any communication or co-ordination with the miners of the Ukrainian Donbass, who were on strike at exactly the same time, although a declaration of solidarity was received from the miners of Kazakhstan).

The 'vanguardism' of the miners is an ideological illusion not only in the sense that it gives a misleading impression of their strength and the degree of their organisation, but also because it gives a misleading impression of their independence from other groups of workers. It has only been when their demands have enjoyed widespread social and political support that they have been successful. Although they refused all political slogans and rejected collaboration with any of the nascent democratic political groupings in 1989, the miners' movement enjoyed widespread support as an obviously democratic rising. Through to 1991 the miners' movement was increasingly politicised as it forged links with the broadly based movement for democratic reform, although it was Yeltsin and the 'democrats' who were the principal beneficiaries, the miners being paid off in May 1991 with handsome wage increases which were soon to be eroded by inflation.

From 1991 to 1993 the miners rapidly became disillusioned with politics and increasingly turned to trade union forms of struggle, with Rosugleprof gradually displacing NPG as the dominant representative of the miners. However, the success of the miners in this period did not so much depend on their trade union strength as, on the one hand, on the support they received from their employers, who had an equal interest in beating the subsidy out of Moscow and, on the other, the political conjunctures in which the miners pressed their case. Thus, the strike of 6 September 1993 coincided with the confrontation between Yeltsin and the Supreme Soviet and it was in the interests of the executive to pay-off the miners to ensure that they did not play an active political role at such a delicate moment. Similarly it took only small scale local strike action to extract substantial concessions from Gaidar on the eve of the election of December 1993. Relative political stability through 1994 meant that the miners were

not able to take effective action and were largely confined to a supporting role in relation to the management of the industry. However, the strike of February 1995 corresponded to a further political polarisation, in this case linked to the start of the Chechen war, and attracted much more political support, the miners securing a massive increase in the budget subsidy to the industry, which had earlier been cut in line with the recommendations of the World Bank. But the Kuzbass strike of 12 October 1995, expected to lead to all Russian action, provoked almost no reaction because it coincided with the jostling for position in the pre-election period, in which the miners had no role to play.

The February 1996 miners' strike

The February 1996 strike came at an especially delicate time, in a situation in which the Communist Party was on a roll following its electoral triumph (with 51 per cent of the vote in the Kuzbass coal-mining region), Anatolii Chubais, the last reformer in the government, had just been sacked, and Yeltsin was about to announce his candidacy for the June Presidential election. Everybody was desperate to demonstrate their commitment to the people, and the miners once more presented themselves as representative of the people. The background to this strike, as of all those of the past three years, was the economic demands of the miners which focused on the payment of the subsidy due to the industry from the state budget.

The Russian coal-mining industry is dependent on government subsidy to a degree matched only by agriculture and the military sector because the government has shifted subsidies from electricity generation and rail transport onto coal. As part of its 'stabilisation' programme, in order to meet the demands of the IMF and the World Bank, the government has been attempting to reduce the scale of the subsidy year by year, which implies pit closures and wage

cuts, keeping the industry under pressure by deferring and delaying payment of the subsidy for as long as it can. Moreover, the coal industry has also suffered to an exceptional degree from non-payment by its customers, above all municipal heating plants and electricity generators as the latter's own customers have failed to pay their bills. The decline in the subsidy, delays in its payment and the growth of commercial debt have been associated with a relative decline in the real wages and living standards of the miners, deteriorating working conditions and long delays in the payment of their wages, delays of three to four months being normal, with no indexation of the wage to account for inflation when it eventually is paid.

Miners' strikes have become a regular feature of the bargaining process between the mining trade unions, the coal industry and the government over the scale, payment and distribution of the subsidy. Over the past two years spontaneous strikes at mine and section level over the non-payment of wages have become the norm throughout the industry. For a period such spontaneous strikes were successful in securing the payment of wages to the section or mine which struck, but this tended simply to involve the diversion of payment from one group of workers to another, on which grounds these strikes were usually opposed by Rosugleprof, while they were supported by NPG, which used them to build its authority, asserting that non-payment of wages arose because of management incompetence and corruption rather than because of non-payment of the subsidy by the government.⁶ Conversely, Rosugleprof has focused on the government's policy and practice and has concentrated on calling regional and national strikes, which NPG at national level has refused to support.

The decision to picket the White House from 24–26 January 1996 and to strike from 1 February in the event of the government not meeting its obligations was taken by the presidium of Rosugleprof at its meeting of

11 January. Negotiations with the government were complicated by the sacking of deputy prime minister Anatolii Chubais, with whom the existing agreements had been signed, on 16 January. It was only on 23 January that the trade union delegation met with prime minister Chernomyrdin, a meeting also attended by NPG leader Aleksandr Sergeev although NPG was not a party to the dispute. The government promised to prepare within two weeks a draft resolution concerning the distribution of an additional 3 trillion roubles for the industry for 1996 and the prolongation of the special arrangement for the coal industry according to which 50 per cent of the money received by enterprises can be used for the enterprises' own needs, primarily the payment of wages, whereas in other industries 80 per cent of receipts are diverted to the payment of tax debts. However, the miners were not prepared to wait for two weeks. The common reaction was that 'the government has been behaving as though this is the first time that they have heard of the problems of the coal industry. What does "we will consider within two weeks" mean? What have you been doing these last four years? We have to strike!'

From 24–26 January around 900 miners participated in the picketing of the government buildings. One of the miners' demands was that Yeltsin should meet them since the government had shown itself unwilling or unable to understand the problems of the industry. On 25 January the President of Rosugleprof, Vitalii Budko, was invited to meet one of Yeltsin's principal assistants, Aleksandr Livshits, the following day. At that meeting Livshits confirmed that 600 billion roubles would be transferred to the miners by the end of the month and that the President was prepared to guarantee the industry a subsidy of 10 trillion roubles for 1996, the same in money terms as the subsidy for 1995. Budko reported the results of this meeting to the picketing miners. His

main point was that all the promises that had been made remained only on paper and that it was necessary for the pickets to return to their regions and to get everyone out on strike. His proposal was met with a roar of approval. After this the miners piled up their placards in the form of a hump-back bridge, with its highest point opposite the White House, and set fire to them, and, leaving their helmets by the fence, the miners left.

On the morning of January 31 Yuri Malyshev, General Director of Rosugol' (the body which manages the coal industry) conferred with the directors and trade union presidents of coal-mining enterprises through an intercom link. The majority of trade union presidents confirmed that they would carry out the decision of the presidium of their trade union, which had been endorsed by a meeting of the miners' representatives who had been participating in the White House picket. Yuri Malyshev appealed to them to reverse the decision, or at least to postpone the strike to 10 February to allow Rosugol' time to reach a constructive resolution of the problem.

According to the trade union's figures about 87 per cent of the industry's employees joined the all-Russian strike on 1 February. Although this is probably an overestimate, the strike nevertheless was undoubtedly the largest in the history of the trade union. In response the state duma summoned government leaders to account for the state of affairs in the coal industry at a hearing on 2 February, at which the duma members overwhelmingly supported the miners.

Despite the massive response, the February strike revealed the same weaknesses and inadequacies in trade union organisation as had been shown in previous strikes. Thus, as soon as enterprises began to pay out delayed wages their labour collectives spontaneously abandoned the strike and returned to work. This behaviour simply exposed the remaining miners and their organisation, the trade union leaders having to negotiate with the

government against the background of a crumbling strike which was not under its control.

The presidium of the union met in the evening of 2 February to decide what to do next. The mood among the regional representatives was to continue the strike, even when their own miners were already drifting back to work, while the national union leadership favoured terminating the strike before it collapsed. As Budko said to one regional leader, 'How can you vote to continue an all-Russian strike when you cannot even hold on to people in your own enterprise!' The discussion went on long into the night, the presidium voting at three in the morning, by a majority of only one, to call off the strike. The decision was unpopular, particularly with the coal regions such as Rostov which had remained solid.

The weakness of the strike had a number of sources. First, the lack of any trade union discipline as mines returned to work without any regard to the decisions of the union's executive body or of the meeting of mine representatives. This lack of discipline was encouraged by the fact that the union's constitution, adopted in reaction against the centralism of the Soviet era, leaves every collective free to make its own decision in all matters so that decisions of union executive bodies are not binding on the union's primary groups and the union has no sanction even against strike-breaking.

Second, many of the more profitable deep and open-cast mines had no interest in the outcome of the dispute since they do not depend on government subsidies. On the other hand, the union's demands did not address the main problem faced by these mines, which was the problem of non-payment by commercial customers. Despite appearances, the government has a responsibility for the latter situation since the problem arises primarily because coal enterprises have no sanction against defaulting customers because the coal industry is forbidden by the

government to cut coal supplies to energy plants. Not only did many of these mines not join the strike, some even increased their output in an attempt to expand their markets. Thus, as soon as the strike began the Western Siberian open cast coal association, Kuzbassrazrezugol', started to supply coal to the Novolipetsk and Cherepovets metallurgical complexes, traditional customers of the northern Vorkuta coal field whose miners accordingly decided to resume work. This activity not only undermined trade union solidarity but effectively negated the impact of the strike as a whole.

Third, lines of demarcation between employee and employer are still not clearly drawn, particularly in the coal industry which, although nominally privatised, remains in state control. Thus, at all meetings between trade union representatives and mine directors, general directors of the coal association and representatives of Rosugol', the latter constantly stress their common interest with the workers, that they are all in the same boat, that they are a single team negotiating with the government on behalf of the industry as a whole, and all these people remain members of the trade union, as they were in the Soviet period. However, when the chips are down and the workers need real support to extract concessions from the government, management at various levels appears on the other side of the barricades from the workers. Thus, while the directors were very happy to have the support of the trade union in their negotiations with the government, once matters came to a strike and the directors themselves came under pressure from the government they used every trick in the book to press union representatives at all levels to call off the strike, putting them under strong personal pressure, spreading disinformation about the extent of the strike, deflating the figures to foster a defeatist spirit among the strikers, and paying out wages in order to undermine the strike. Thus Viktor Nekrasov,

the general director of one of the most powerful coal associations, Kuznetskugol', borrowed money at a high rate of interest in order to pay out wages and so to encourage several mines to return to work. This in turn provoked a chain reaction throughout the region, undermining the strike and the trade union of which Nekrasov is himself a member, but which has no power to sanction members who commit such acts. Similarly, as we have seen, Kuzbassrazrezugol' sold coal to the traditional customers of Vorkutaugol'. Malyshev, the general director of Rosugol', before and during the strike turned all his attention on the union rather than pressing the government to meet the workers' demands, arguing that the union's action was irresponsible and would provoke a crisis in the industry from which it would be difficult to recover.

The collapse of the strike led to widespread recriminations, but the principal lesson of the strike for many of the leaders of the trade union was that the union still has a long way to go before it can really consider itself to be an effective force, able to represent the interests of its members. The miners can hardly claim to be the vanguard of the working class when they cannot even sustain a strike of their own for more than twenty four hours. The reality is that if the miners' union is to contribute to building a workers' movement in Russia it has first to set its own house in order. Rosugleprof will be holding its second congress in Moscow from 22 to 24 April, 1996, at which many of the issues raised above will be discussed. Two matters in particular will almost certainly be addressed: first, the exclusion from trade union membership of all those who carry out the functions of the employer, starting with directors of mines, associations and Rosugol' itself. Second, the restoration of democratic centralism to the union, on the basis of which it can build a disciplined organisation which is able effectively to carry out its trade union functions. □

Notes

1. The withdrawal of AFL-CIO support at the beginning of 1996, following the latter's change of policy with the removal of its former chief, Lane Kirkland, dealt what will probably prove a fatal blow to NPG's national leadership.
2. NPG has been too weak to initiate any national action of its own since 1994. The February 1996 strike was endorsed by most NPG regions, but not Kuzbass. NPG representatives joined the picketing of the White House, but Rosugleprof would not permit them to carry their NPG banners, since their union had contributed nothing to the organisation of the action.
3. For a full account of the development of NPG see Simon Clarke, Peter Fairbrother and Vadim Borisov (1995) *The Workers' Movement in Russia*, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham: Chapters 1 and 2.
4. On the development of the official trade unions see Simon Clarke, Peter Fairbrother, Michael Burawoy and Pavel Krotov (1993) *What about the Workers? Workers and the Transition to Capitalism in Russia*, Verso, London; Simon Clarke and Peter Fairbrother (1994) 'The Emergence of Industrial Relations in the Workplace', in Richard Hyman and Anthony Ferner (eds) *New Frontiers in European Industrial Relations*, Blackwell, Oxford; Simon Clarke (1994) 'Trade Unions, Industrial Relations and Politics in Russia', in Martin Myint and Paul Lewis (eds) *Parties, Trade Unions and Society in East Central Europe*, Frank Cass, London; Simon Clarke, Vadim Borisov and Peter Fairbrother (1994) 'Does Trade Unionism have a Future in Russia?', in *Industrial Relations Journal* 25/1, Glasgow: 15-25; Vladimir Ilyin (1996) 'Russian trade unions and the management apparatus in the transition period', and Vladimir Ilyin (1996) 'Social contradictions and conflicts in Russian state enterprises in the transition period', both in Simon Clarke (ed.) *Conflict and Change in the Russian Industrial Enterprise*, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham.
5. The same was true in Donbass, where in 1989 the miners would not allow non-miners onto the city square where the permanent strike meeting was held. In the 1993 strike in Donbass the situation was very different, with the miners actively encouraging the generalisation of the strike (Simon Clarke and Vadim Borisov (1994) 'Reform and Revolution in the Communist National Park', in *Capital&Class* 53, Summer: 9-13; Vadim Borisov (1996) 'The strike as a form of labour activity in the period of economic reform', in Simon Clarke, ed. *Labour Relations in Transition*, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham.
6. Both NPG and Rosugleprof refused to support a spontaneous strike at Yuzhnaya mine in Vorkuta which lasted from 14 to 20 November 1995, calling on the workers to return to work pending a Vorkuta-wide strike on 1 December which had been called by Rosugleprof on 14 November and endorsed by NPG the following day. The workers vociferously rejected the appeals by representatives of both trade unions and the City Workers' Committee at a meeting on 15 November. The mine director then locked out the production workers by closing the mine for repair, and used a small amount of money arriving at the mine not to pay the strikers, as would have been the case in the past, but to pay the repair workers (V. Ilyin: Vorkuta, Sept.-Nov. 1995. Quarterly Report of the Information-Analytical Centre for the Coal-Mining Industry, ISITO, Moscow. The Information-Analytical Centre is supported by a grant from the Westminster Foundation).