

RÉSUMÉ

Partenariat social et indépendance de classe dans le mouvement syndical post-soviétique

David Mandel

Cet article se penche sur le rôle des stratégies syndicales dans les défaites subies par les mouvements ouvriers en Russie, en l'Ukraine et en Bélarus après la chute du régime communiste. Il cherche à démontrer que, malgré un contexte domestique et international difficile, ces défaites n'étaient pas inévitables. L'orientation stratégique prédominante du « partenariat social, » qui dans les faits subordonne les intérêts des travailleurs à ceux du capital et de l'État, en porte une partie de la responsabilité. Cette orientation ne correspond pas à la réalité socio-économique, même si, paradoxalement, celle-ci la favorise. Comme orientation de rechange, l'article propose « l'indépendance de classe », une stratégie qui tient compte des contradictions qui opposent les intérêts des travailleurs à ceux du capital et de l'État et qui est étroitement liée à une perspective socialiste.

Social Partnership and Class Independence in the Post-Soviet Labour Movement

David Mandel
Université du Québec à Montréal

Introduction

From a left perspective, the history of the labour movement can be viewed as a long and arduous struggle of the working class¹ for self-determination, whose ultimate expression would be the replacement of capitalism by a self-managed society without exploitation, that is, by socialism. That struggle has been conducted against the bourgeoisie and the capitalist state, but even more so against ideological currents within the labour movement itself that implicitly or explicitly accept capitalism as inevitable, or at least preferable to any real alternative, and that reject the claim that labour and capital are opposed by contradictory interests. On the political level, revolutionary socialism has competed for workers' allegiance with reformism of various hues; while in the trade-union movement the proponents of "trade-unionism of struggle" ("syndicalisme de combat," in French) have fought it out with the supporters of "social partnership."²

¹ "Working class" is defined here broadly as all salaried employees, except for those exercising managerial functions.

² It will be clear from what follows that this is not a simplistic, abstract dichotomy. The rejection of reformism and of "partnership" does not mean a refusal to fight for reforms or a blanket rejection of concessions to employers. The issue cannot be decided in abstraction from the concrete situations in which the choices pose themselves.

As an ideological or strategic orientation, “class independence” is based upon an analysis of the respective interests of labour and capital, labour and the state, as fundamentally antagonistic. Labour’s relations with capital and the state are therefore determined in the final analysis by the correlation of class forces, rather than by any shared interests. It follows that the labour movement’s strategy in defending and promoting workers’ interests should give priority to shifting the balance of forces in the workers’ favour. While many factors can contribute to the labour movement’s strength, its main resource is the solidarity of rank-and-file workers, their active commitment to common goals, and the confidence in their collective capacity to effect progressive change in their conditions of employment and in society as a whole.

“Social partnership,” on the other hand, although it comes in a variety of forms and degrees, is a strategy ultimately based on the view that labour and capital share a fundamental, common interest in the success of the given enterprise and of the national economy as a whole. Success under capitalism always comes down to profitability, since without it there are no jobs, wages or benefits. Accordingly, any serious conflict that might arise between labour and capital tends to be viewed as being due to a failure of communication or the refusal of one of the parties to understand its own long-term interest. Negotiations take the form of “social dialogue,” rather than confrontation, and force (at least on the workers’ part), while not excluded, is relegated to a mostly symbolic role. It is worth noting that this harmonious view of capital-labour relations, often accompanied by “participation” schemes, has long been part of the arsenal of employers and governments.³ “Partnership” schemes should be distinguished from other forms of “dual power,” notably workers’ control, that arise in periods of labour offensive. These are, however, inherently unstable and lead quickly either to capital recovering the power lost or else to its expropriation. For the origins and evolution of workers’ control in the Russian Revolution, see my *Factory Committees and Workers’ Control in 1917* (Netherlands: International Institute for Research and Education, 1993).

³ The most famous case is probably the “Japanese model,” whose reality is succinctly presented in Briggs. For the U.S. experience, see Leary and Menaker and Parker and Slaughter.

Today, perhaps more than at any other time since the emergence of mass, organized labour movements in the latter part of the nineteenth century, “social partnership” predominates in virtually all countries.⁴ This is at once a consequence and a cause of the major shift in the balance of class forces against labour that began in the 1970s in the established capitalist countries and in the late 1980s in the former Communist world. I will make my own position clear at the outset: “social partnership” is at best a case of wishful thinking that bears little relationship to capitalist reality, and all the less so to capitalism in its current neoliberal version; at worst, it is a manifestation of corrupt union leadership. Most often, it is a combination of the two.

But though the premises that underlay “social partnership” do not correspond to reality, as an ideology it has strong roots in reality, namely in labour’s very real dependency upon capital, an inherent part of capitalism. As a rule, the strength of “social partnership” in the labour movement varies inversely with labour’s dependence upon capital. In other words, the ideology is more prevalent when labour is weaker, and vice versa. At the same time, as noted, “social partnership” itself contributes to, and reinforces, labour’s weakness.

This article briefly examines the role of “social partnership” in the defeats suffered by the labour movements after the demise of the Communist regimes in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, the three predominantly Slavic and the most industrialized countries of the former Soviet Union. That role played itself out somewhat differently in each of the three countries, but in each case it contributed significantly to the dramatic setback suffered by workers, who saw their savings wiped out, their real wages fall by more than two thirds⁵, and the initial promise of democracy broken,

⁴ On the international level, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions is one of the strongest proponents of “social partnership. See ICFTU. For an excellent analysis of the ideology of the “social pact” in the union movement of Western and Central Europe, see Wahl. In the US, the monthly newsletter *Labor Notes* has been conducting an uphill struggle against “partnership” in the labour movement for the past twenty-five years.

⁵ Goskomstat Rossii, *Rossiiskii v tsifrakh 2003*, Moscow 2003, p. 97. This is an official Russian source. The average fall in wages was greatest in Ukraine, less in Belarus. Real wages began to rise again after 1998, but despite several years of relatively strong overall economic growth (from a very low point), the progress of wages has been remarkably slow and what progress there has been is due in significant part to intensification and overtime.

if democracy is understood as a law-based state that allows free competition of social interests for influence on government policy.⁶

The argument here is not that a different strategy would necessarily have allowed workers to come out ahead from the fall of the bureaucratic dictatorship. Objective circumstances, outlined below, did not favour labour. But, at the least, the losses certainly could have been much smaller. The fact is that the unions did not make use even of the limited resources they readily had at their disposal to defend their members' interests. There were, of course, exceptions, but they were too few and isolated to affect the overall outcome.

Unfavourable Objective Circumstances

The distinction between “objective” and “subjective” conditions is at best relative⁷ but it is nevertheless useful for presenting the context in which post-Soviet trade unions have operated. “Objective” factors are those over which the unions can have little or no immediate influence; while “subjective” factors are within the immediate power of the unions to influence, mainly their strategic and tactical choices and the quality of their leadership.

One of the negative “objective” factors was, and remains, the legacy of more than half a century of totalitarian rule, during which workers could not organize independently. Gorbachev's liberalization eventually changed that, but that period was too brief for most workers to have gained experience of independent organization and action. Moreover, the political opening came to workers initially as a gift “from above”; they did not wrest it in struggle. Referring to the Soviet era, the president of the minority union at the Volga Auto Factory (maker of Ladas) observed that

⁶ The reference here is, of course, to bourgeois democracy, where the political competition is free (except, at times for the extreme left), though highly unequal. The verdict is still out on whether the “Orange Revolution” of December 2004 in Ukraine will improve on the highly “managed” and thoroughly corrupt “democracy” that preceded it. The social and political situations of workers in the three countries are presented in Mandel, chs. 2, 6, and 9. The analysis in this article is based largely on materials presented in that book.

⁷ The distinction is relative since there is always a strong subjective element in the judgment about what conditions can or cannot be changed by concerted action, and the “truth” often cannot be known apart from a serious effort to act upon them. Moreover, conditions that cannot be changed in the short-term might be open to influence eventually through the adoption of a long-term strategy.

“there was no working class; only isolated people in the same situation.” The first workers’ meeting that had not been convened and was not directed by management or party authorities took place in September 1989 to discuss strike action, the first organized collective action ever at this plant of 120,000 employees. Only two and a half years separated the coalminers’ strike of July 1989 (Mandel, 1991: 51-78), labour’s first major appearance on the public scene, from the system’s collapse.

E.P. Thompson argued that a working class “makes itself” as much as it is formed by circumstances (Thompson: 8). Soviet workers had too little time to “make themselves” before facing a massive assault by the new “democratic” states that they had only just helped to create.

This assault took the form of “shock therapy” in Russia and Ukraine.⁸ This policy, a key element of which was the rapidity of its execution, was conceived by the G-7 and actively promoted through the IMF⁹. Speed was politically necessary to exploit the “window of opportunity” presented by popular inexperience and credulity to undermine the potential for resistance and to create a situation of no return from a form of capitalism that, on balance, corresponded to Western interests. Virtually overnight, the government ended decades of economic security for workers, who, despite modest living standards, had enjoyed full employment and free or subsidized provision of housing, health, education, cultural and leisure services and basic consumer goods. In a matter of months, the very structure of economic life and the basic values of society were transformed. The profound ideological disorientation and insecurity that resulted became major obstacles to collective resistance, as most workers gave themselves fully to the individual struggle for survival, trying to adapt to the new conditions rather than to change them.

The international context was also unfavourable. Almost everywhere, labour was (still is) retreating in the face of capital’s offensive. The former Communist countries, and even those still under Communist rule, were busy restoring capitalism (except Cuba

⁸ For a presentation and critique of this policy from a left liberal point of view, see Stiglitz: 133-65.

⁹ For the role of the “West” in promoting this policy in Russia, see Reddaway and Gliniski: 172-82; 290-98; 414-26; 537-9; 563-70. This is by far the best general treatment of the Yeltsin era.

and North Korea). Nowhere (except for Brazil and South Africa, and not for long) was there a significant labour movement marching under the banner of socialism. Even domestically-oriented capitalist development seemed to have been squeezed out as a political option by the triumphant “Washington consensus” and “globalization.” In these circumstances, when the ideologues of the “free market,” who had come to dominate the Soviet mass media in the last years, told workers – who were convinced that what they had experienced in the Soviet Union was socialism – that “free-market” capitalism is the only “normal” system, that seemed to make sense to them. After all, they lacked any realistic knowledge of capitalism, another legacy of the totalitarian system.

The nascent Soviet labour movement played an important, perhaps crucial, role in shaking the foundations of the Soviet system, which proved remarkably fragile beneath its impressive totalitarian superstructure. But it failed to develop the organizational and ideological independence that would have allowed it to influence the choice of a path of development for post-Soviet society. And so this choice was made by forces fundamentally hostile to workers’ interests.

Russia

The overwhelming majority of Russia’s unionized workers are affiliated with the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia (FNPR), the Russian successor to the Soviet-era federation. In November 2001, it claimed a membership equal to fifty-four per cent of the salaried work force, down from seventy per cent in 1991, but still a high level of union density (Ashwin and Clarke: 86). Almost all of its affiliated unions were similarly inherited from the Soviet period. There are virtually no unions in private enterprises that were not created on the basis of former state plants.

The FNPR and its affiliates are strongly attached to “social partnership.” Despite the profound transformation of the socio-economic system and the privatization of most of the economy, they continue in practice to act as junior personnel departments for management. They also continue the Soviet practice of including managerial personnel in their ranks, including sometimes even the enterprise’s general director. And it is still not unusual for local union presidents to move on to top managerial positions, often to the post of assistant director for personnel. The major difference is

that in the past subordination to management was justified by the “socialist”, non-antagonistic nature of the society, while today union leaders cite “social partnership.” They also point to the depressed situation of most industrial sectors. This, in their view, calls for “showing understanding”, that is, for concessions to management. Workers and management, so the argument goes, are in the same boat and must row together to save the enterprise and jobs. The leaders’ concern to maintain good relations with management is so strong that most refused to sue management for failing to transfer dues to the union that had been automatically deducted from workers’ pay – a widespread practice in the mid-to-late 1990s –even though this legal recourse was generally effective for the rare unions that adopted it.

In reality, the experience of the first post-Soviet decade made very clear that management was more interested in enriching itself by stripping the enterprises of their assets rather than trying to restore them to health and save jobs. In view of the daunting and onerous nature of the latter task in the depressed conditions and the de facto moratorium on legality, it is not hard to see why managers chose pillage. This orientation of management has not substantially changed since the “oligarchs” at the head of Russia’s banking and resource conglomerates began buying up manufacturing plants in the late 1990s: investment outside of the resource sector has been minimal, although pillage of the plants has become somewhat more orderly.

There has been little union response to the all-out attack on living standards and workers’ rights on the part of state and management, which began with the launching of “shock therapy” in 1992 and continues to this day, despite the economy’s return to growth after the financial collapse of 1998 and the more-or-less simultaneous jump in oil prices. Thus, in the spirit of “partnership,” the president of the union of a St. Petersburg tractor factory explained that “we meet with the assistant director for finance and the head of the planning bureau each week and we ask: ‘Is there a possibility for indexing wages or raising them?’ The need for pressure does not arise. If the possibility exists, management itself does it [raises wages].”¹⁰ An analysis of the correlation of forces has

¹⁰ Interview with the union president of the Kirov Tractor Factory in St. Petersburg, in B. Maksimov, “Kuda vedut lidery,” unpublished article, 2000.

no place in the thinking of these union leaders and, since pressure is claimed to be unnecessary, they attach little importance to informing, educating, mobilizing their members or to promoting union democracy and rank-and-file participation. Indeed, by arousing the workers, such activities might endanger harmonious union-management relations. Union leaders typically speak of themselves as “buffers” or “middlemen”¹¹ between workers and management, rarely as representatives and leaders of the workers.

The resistance that has occurred – at times very stubborn, even heroic – has overwhelmingly been isolated in individual plants. And these struggles receive little support from the national branch unions or from the regional and national federations. To be fair, the national offices lack resources to be of much help, since they receive only a tiny share of the dues collected, at times as little as two per cent. But they rarely afford even symbolic support to struggles, since conflict is viewed as harmful or, at least, unfortunate and of no use. In reality, despite national leaders’ constant complaints, their tiny share of membership dues is a direct consequence of their unions’ adherence to “partnership.” For if workers are solidary with their employers, they will not be solidary with fellow workers in other enterprises, with whom their own might well be competing. The dispersal of union resources among local unions in Russia is a reflection of an abysmal level of solidarity: plant leaders refuse to pool their members’ dues with those of other plants in order to strengthen their national organization and so their own bargaining power. But these unions are not about power.

Isolated struggles can at most achieve only partial, usually temporary, victories when workers face a state-led offensive and when their sector is depressed. Clearly, the situation calls for national strategies and action. But on this level, too, “partnership” reigns supreme. Magical thinking reached a high point in 1997 when the four metalworking unions tried to organize their directors (who at the time exercised de facto ownership power, because of the dispersal of company shares) into an employers’ association in the

¹¹ Thus, according to V. Savel’ev, the newly elected president of the Yaroslavl regional union federation, “a trade-union leader has to be a talented middleman.” Saveliev spent most of his professional life in top managerial positions in the auto sector in Yaroslavl. See Obrazkova: 2.

hope that the latter would negotiate a sectoral agreement with the unions and enforce it on the members of the association. Despite the utter futility of these efforts, which were substantial, union leaders did not give up hope: "I'd like to work with a strong union of employers," sighed the vice-president of the Auto and Farm-Machine Workers' Union in 2002.¹² On the other hand, these leaders gave no thought to organizing workers in their affiliated local unions in an effort to force employers to sign a meaningful national or pattern agreement that would guarantee at least minimum norms across the sectors.

On the political level and in parallel fashion, the FNPR formed a series of electoral alliances with directors' organizations, all of which failed miserably to attract votes. Finally, in 2000 the federation's political wing, the Union of Labour, already part of an alliance with the "patriotic bourgeoisie," led by Moscow mayor Luzhkov, joined the United Russia party, a party whose only programme is support for President Putin. Thus, on the political level, too, the old practice dressed in new forms has been resurrected: once again the unions are under the fatherly wing of the state. Protests organized by FNPR have become rare, since as a partner to the pro-government coalition, it would in effect be protesting against itself. (In February 2005, the United Russia party organized a protest in support of the government, as a counterweight to mass popular protests, led by pensioners, against cuts in social spending).¹³

The major exception to the prevailing orientation is the so-called "alternative" unions, which first appeared at the end of the Soviet period. They are present mainly in transport, coalmining and metallurgy (in particular, at Norilsk Nickel), their former positions in secondary manufacturing having considerably declined. Their independence was initially limited to relations with management. Politically, the unions supported the Yeltsin regime. This support that was motivated largely by the leaders' hatred of the old system and their fear of a return to power of the Communists. But they were also counting on the government to reciprocate. However, if

¹² The National Vice-President of the Union of Automobile and Agricultural-Machine Building Workers in *Golos profsoyuzov*, Feb. 2002.

¹³ RTR Russia TV, Moscow, 1100 gmt 12 Feb 05, from *Johnson's List*, Feb. 13, 2005 (www.cdi.org/russia/johnson).

the Independent Miners' Union (NPG), the first and largest of the "alternative" unions, was able to obtain occasional economic concessions for its sector (the union's president was for long a member of Yeltsin's advisory council), the "alternative" unions as a whole were unable to change the regime's fundamentally anti-labour, anti-popular orientation.

As with the FNPR, a major problem is disunity. Although various national organizations were formed, struggles have remained largely isolated. The NPG, in particular, which had the potential to provide national leadership to the independent elements of the labour movement, was unable to overcome its particularistic orientation. This played an important role in the defeat of the last significant wave of labour protest in the spring and summer of 1998. The immediate cause of these strikes, demonstrations and civil disobedience was the widespread managerial practice of non-payment of wages, often for several months at a time. At the height of the protest wave, the NPG sponsored a miners' "picket" (encampment) opposite the main building of the federal administration, which attracted and inspired oppositional labour elements from far and wide, from both "alternative" and FNPR unions. The movement's potential seemed especially great after the financial collapse of August 1998, which completely discredited the Yeltsin regime. And the NPG presented unitary demands: Yeltsin's resignation, constitutional reform to make the government responsible to the electorate, a shift in economic policy in the interests of the people. The NPG's leaders were adamant that this time they were fighting for the entire working class. But in the end, they made a deal with the government for limited economic concessions to the coal sector.

This betrayal was not the only reason for the movement's defeat (see Mandel, 2004: ch.4), but it helped to seal the fate of the independent unions, which entered into a period of stagnation and relative decline that has lasted until the present. The "alternative" unions today are weak and constitute at most three per cent of the organized labour force. Their very survival in many enterprises is an exploit in face of managerial harassment and repression, often aided by the local FNPR affiliates. They also face a corrupt and increasingly hostile judiciary and a labour code, adopted in 2001 with the FNPR backing support, that deprives minority unions and

workers of many of their previous rights and makes it extremely difficult to strike legally.

From around 1998, the political orientation of the “alternative” unions has shifted considerably to the left. They now stand in opposition to the government and have attempted to form labour-based political parties. These attempts, however, have been top-down, purely electoralist, affairs and have not attracted much rank-and-file interest or support. Their main aim has been to elect deputies to the Duma who could use their positions to protect the unions from persecution and lobby for their interests.

Ukraine

In most respects, the Ukrainian labour scene has resembled that of Russia. The head of the Ukrainian Federation of Trade Unions (FPU) until the end of 2004, O. Stoyan, was a former advisor to Ukraine’s first president and he did his best to prevent or undermine labour protests directed against the government. On his fiftieth birthday, the government awarded him the medal “for services rendered.” Stoyan was candid in explaining his refusal to oppose the government, stating that his first concern was for the federation’s real-estate holdings, which might otherwise be jeopardized (Shagnina: 8). As in the case of the FNPR, these holdings are substantial, and the federation’s leadership has largely avoided accountability for their management to the affiliates, let alone the rank and file.

There was, however, at least one important difference from Russia: the Auto and Farm-Machine Workers’ Union, created in 1991 on the basis of existing local and regional unions that had formerly been directly affiliated to a national office in Moscow. This union elected a president, Vladimir Zlenko, who was committed to a policy of fostering “class independence.” He was also a convinced socialist (non-Stalinist, that is, a democratic socialist), another rare phenomenon on the post-Soviet scene.

Zlenko gave active support to all local struggles in his union and held them up as examples for emulation. He nudged, cajoled and pressured his central committee, consisting mostly of plant and regional presidents, to amend the union’s constitution to bar managerial personnel from membership. He finally achieved that in 1998, though enforcing the amendment was another matter. He also obtained an amendment ensuring greater representation of

rank-and-file workers at union conferences, congresses and councils. He tried, and failed, to organize opposition to Stoyan in the FPU and he convinced his own union to support the Socialist Party, which at the time was a left social-democratic party opposed to the government.

Zlenko had some active support among his local and regional leaders, especially in industrial region of Kharkyv. But it was not enough to move the majority of local unions away from “partnership.” Realizing that, he tried to follow a strategy aimed at supporting and generating pressure “from below” on the conservative, “conciliationist” leaders. To reach the membership, he published a monthly national paper and promoted rank-and-file education. But his capacity to do this was limited by local leaders’ refusal to share more than five per cent of their dues with the national office. This was twice as much as what the parallel office in Russia was receiving but far short of what was needed. In addition, the union’s economic sector was being destroyed at a faster pace than in Russia: it lost almost three quarters of its jobs between 1991 and 2003, and of the 129,000 remaining workers, many were not fully employed or receiving wages regularly.¹⁴

At 60 years of age, after two mandates, Zlenko stepped down as president, believing he was leaving the union in trusted hands, those of his long-time vice president. But it did not take the latter long to shift the union into the predominant “partnership” mould, meeting little serious resistance from the rest of the union on the way. Zlenko, however, did not give up the fight. He helped to found the School for Worker Democracy, which offers rank-and-file education imbued with “class independence.” Under his leadership, the school has developed working relationships with some major unions, including auto, defence, radio-electronics and textile. This, too, sets Ukraine apart from Russia, where a similar school has failed to elicit interest from FNPR-affiliates and works exclusively with the “alternative” unions. As for the “alternative” movement in Ukraine, outside of coalmining, it is of very little significance.

Belarus

In Belarus, the smallest of the three countries, the issue of “class independence” posed itself in the most original manner.

¹⁴ “Report of the President to the Central Committee,” Apr. 10, 2003. (unpublished)

The two large industrial unions, Auto and Farm Machine and Radio-Electronics, entered the post-Soviet era with the greatest potential. The majority of their members had participated in an almost month-long, spontaneous, general strike in April 1991 that shook up the unions' leadership, as well as the local and central political establishment. As a result, the rank and file was relatively active, and there was a significant force pushing to end the tradition of subservience. Another favourable circumstance was the high concentration of union membership in large industrial plants in the capital and its region. And while radio-electronics, which had been mainly producing for the Soviet army, subsequently lost most of its jobs, employment in the auto and farm-machine sectors fell by only 20 per cent between 1991 and 2002 (to about 150,000), a much smaller drop than in Russia or Ukraine. This was largely thanks to the government's rejection of shock therapy (unique among post-Soviet regimes), a choice in which the unions initially played a role. Even today, industry has not undergone large-scale privatization, and the state conducts an active industrial policy.¹⁵

Both unions elected national leaders in 1991 who were committed to "class independence." This was particularly evident on the political level. In 1993, they founded the Belarusian Labour Party along social-democratic lines, and in 1996, when President Lukashenko, following a referendum, illegally amended the constitution to reinforce his powers at the expense of parliament, reduced to an obedient tool, both unions adopted strongly oppositional positions. Under their prodding, the Belarusian Federation of Trade Union itself eventually also joined the opposition, and in the 2001 presidential election, its president, V. Goncharik, unsuccessfully ran against Lukashenko as the candidate of the united democratic opposition.¹⁶

Union policy, however, was rather less clear on relations with management. In a minority of factories, the April 1991 strike had resulted in the election of new, independent union committees. But

¹⁵ For a relatively balanced analysis, see Haiduk et al.

¹⁶ It is generally recognized that a majority voted for Lukashenko in that election, although the extent of his victory was smaller than what was officially announced. As an incumbent with vast power, Lukashenko enjoyed a major advantage over his opponent. But that was also true of Yanukovich in Ukraine, who was finally unseated in December 2004 by Yushchenko in the "orange revolution." The U.S. and European Community played similar roles in both campaigns.

in most plants, the pressure “from below” had not been sufficient to oust the old leaders committed to “partnership.” In some of these plants, minority alternative unions were formed. The national leadership maintained informal ties with them and, at least initially, was committed to supporting the local forces pushing for union independence.

But the national leaders eventually made peace, in practice if not officially, with the subservient plant leaders. This occurred as they focused their energy on the political struggle. On the face of it, it made sense to focus on the government, since it owned the enterprises and still largely determined wage policy. The problem was, however, that this led the national leaders to reconcile themselves to the persistence of “social partnership” in the plants. In return for the tolerance of union subservience to management, the plant leaders gave their support to the political campaigns of the national leaders, voting for them in the Central Council. But when it came to mobilizing the membership for these campaigns, the local leaders did little or nothing, because management, under pressure from the government, instructed them not to. The local unions that really mobilized were those that had broken with “partnership” and they regularly brought out a large proportion of their members, despite intimidation by management and the political authorities. But these local unions were a minority. As a result, the national leadership was unable to build a sufficiently strong correlation of forces against the government. Indeed, as time passed, active support among the rank and file for the unions’ political actions fell off.

Another obstacle to mobilizing the rank and file against the government was the unions’ failure to offer their members an economic programme with which they could identify. Although the national leaders demonstrated their independence vis-à-vis the government, they failed to develop independent positions vis-a-vis the bourgeoisie, in this case – the G-7 and its Belarusian allies. While the Labour Party’s programme called for a strong social safety net, it was vague on economic policy. Its advocacy of “economic freedom” for enterprises could not help but raise doubts among workers who were well aware of the disastrous results of neo-liberal policies in Russia and Ukraine. One of the unions’ leaders was, in fact, quite candid: “We’ll let them [the liberals] do their job and we will defend the workers.” Workers’ misgivings

were only heightened when the Labour Party joined an electoral alliance in the 2001 presidential elections with rightwing liberal parties under the aegis of the US embassy. The plan was akin to what had occurred earlier in Serbia and what would happen in Ukraine's "orange revolution". But the Belarusian situation was different. Despite his arbitrariness and authoritarianism, many workers saw Lukashenko's rejection of shock therapy as defending the country's economy – and so their livelihoods – from the destructive forces that the West wanted to unleash against it.¹⁷

When the political showdown came after the elections, Lukashenko had little trouble crushing the political opposition of the unions, since their leaders could not mobilize significant rank-and-file support. After the elections, the non-industrial unions, which had never been very enthusiastic about the Federation's opposition to the government, ousted the president, replacing him with someone from Lukashenko's administration. Meanwhile, in the two large industrial unions, subservient plant leaders, on orders from management, transferred their members into a new, state-sponsored Union of Industry. The members were usually not even consulted, but intimidated by management, nor did they offer much resistance. At the end of 2003, the leaders of the plant unions that were still affiliated with the Auto and Farm-Machine Workers' Union organized a putsch, replacing the national president with a Lukashenko loyalist at an extraordinary congress.

Despite significant sympathy for the deposed leader (at the extraordinary congress, despite enormous political pressure, only 227 of the 396 delegates voted to remove him), only a small minority in the sector's workers have remained loyal to him. Members of independent unions face severe harassment and risk losing their jobs. In March 2005, the loyalists in the auto and farm-machine sector counted about 500 people in the plants. These had merged the previous year with what remained of the Radio-electronics Union. The latter has so far been able to defend its president and its independent existence, though it has lost most of its local affiliates to the Union of Industry. The merged union is constantly threatened with loss of its official accreditation, which

¹⁷ Lukashenko's rejection of the "Washington consensus" helps to explain the hatred of Western governments for his regime, even while they tolerate more repressive dictators in other former Soviet republics.

would mean loss of its premises, of its right to a bank account, and other practical obstacles to open activity.

Besides this union, there are also the “alternative” unions formed earlier. But apart from the Independent Union of (potassium) Miners in the town of Soligorsk, which tends to keep to itself, these too have undergone a steep decline over the past years, beginning with the mass dismissal of the Minsk metro workers during their strike in 1996. At this point, it is really only international pressure that prevents the regime from completely destroying the open existence of independent unions.

Why “social partnership”?

If “partnership” made defeat inevitable, why is it still so predominant? As argued above, this ideological orientation has its roots in the real dependency of workers on capital that is inherent to capitalism. The more dependent workers are on capital because of “objective” conditions, the stronger they hold on to them of “partnership,” which reflects their lack of confidence in their collective ability to change conditions in their interest. The paradox is that by effectively subordinating union action to management’s interests, “partnership” acquiesces to and reinforces weakness, further contributing to the demoralization and blocking the sort of action that could rebuild confidence and solidarity.

It is not hard to understand the attraction of “social partnership” for union leaders who face aggressive employers and governments and whose membership is demoralized. In these conditions, leaders run a high personal risk if they try to mobilize the membership to confront management or the state. The chances of failure are considerable, and defeat might well lead to the leader’s removal by an angry management or a dissatisfied membership and even to the union’s destruction. On the other hand, since the leaders are subject to little pressure “from below,” their chances of coming out ahead personally are much better if they act as junior “partners” to the administration. Management will likely tolerate the continued existence of such cooperative unions and might even make minor concessions to help them maintain their credibility among the membership.

This kind of reasoning, perhaps in less crude form, can appear quite legitimate in the eyes of union leaders. But the members might ask why they need a union to move backwards. Even if this

strategy protects the union's existence, of what value is that if the price is the workers' continued weakness? In a moment of candour, an official in one of Russia's largest unions confided that it might be better if his union did not exist, since workers would have no illusions and they might begin to organize. (This was said at a time when non-payment of wages had reached epidemic proportions, and the union was unable or unwilling to do anything about it.)

Often, however, more blatant forms of corruption are also at work in influencing the strategic choice of union leaders. Those who "show understanding" can count on management's support in keeping their jobs. In post-Soviet circumstances, when the membership is divided and largely passive, the director's support is decisive. Moreover, most industrial union leaders are former engineers. The law formally protects them from dismissal after leaving their union positions, but management can make life very miserable. Besides, after several years away from production, they become de-skilled. (This is one reason why workers tend to make more committed, militant leaders. But they are quite rare among union leadership.) Last but not least, management generally offers cooperative union leaders substantial material rewards, including the perspective of a well-paying managerial position.

Union leaders themselves cite their members' passivity in justification of "partnership," arguing that in a confrontation with management they would be left hanging out to dry by an indifferent, fearful rank and file. But this argument is disingenuous, since these same leaders make no effort to overcome demoralization among the membership. On the contrary, they actively discourage spontaneous collective actions by workers to defend their interests and cooperate with management to extinguishing them when they happen.

Widespread demoralization is a fact. It is the major source of labour's weakness which has its roots in the "objective" conditions outlined at the beginning of this article. But workers are not robots. Their actions are not mechanically determined by their "objective" conditions. It is impossible to accurately gauge the potential of rank-and-file members for solidary, militant action without trying to organize it. Gramsci put it this way: "In reality, one can 'foresee' to the extent that one acts, to the extent that one applies a voluntary effort and therefore contributes concretely to creating the result 'foreseen.' Prediction reveals itself thus not as a scientific act of

knowledge but as the abstract expression of the effort made, the practical way of creating a collective will” (Hoare and Smith: 438). The point is not, of course, for the union to launch blindly into adventures, rejecting all concessions as a matter of principle. It is legitimate for a union – for the members, not the leaders in lieu of the members, as is generally the practice – to decide to cut losses when it judges the correlation of forces unfavourable and not subject to significant change in the acceptable future. But this calls for a genuine analysis of the actual and potential correlation of forces and it has to follow a serious attempt to resist. And a critical element of that attempt is a leadership that displays a will and determination to lead the members, offering them realistic tactics and goals. None of this is part of the practice of unions wedded to “partnership.”

The defeat suffered may indeed have been the most probable outcome. Nevertheless, it was not inevitable, certainly not in the disastrous form it took, which has taught capital around the world a lesson in how far workers can be pushed backwards. Despite widespread insecurity, weak solidarity and demoralization, a significant minority of workers in all three countries has displayed over the years a will to resist in the form of strikes and civil disobedience. These actions often attained positive results for the workers involved, but because they remained isolated, their gains were limited and they failed to make a tangible impact on the overall situation of the working class. Things could have been different had leadership emerged prepared to unite and lead these isolated struggles. The active minority, which for the most part was socially indistinguishable from the others, might have developed into critical mass, strengthening the confidence of the rest. Union leaders who support “partnership” cannot avoid a share of responsibility for the defeat by citing unfavourable conditions. Many of these leaders do not even admit there has been a defeat, let alone their role in it.

Class Independence and Socialism

In post-Soviet conditions, any leader who opts for “class independence” has to be something of a hero, that is an individual with a rather selfless commitment to the workers’ cause, since this course is a very difficult one and personally very risky. Historically, when the immediate perspective was bleak, such leaders appeared

from the ranks of the socialist movement. They were sustained by their political commitment and their long-term historical perspective. The weakness of the “class-independence” orientation in the union movement and the virtual exclusion of socialism from the post-Soviet (indeed, world) political-ideological spectrum¹⁸ are thus closely linked.

But they are linked in an even more fundamental way. Under capitalism, workers are dependent on capital, and no union or left political party can ignore this. “Class independence” is an ideological orientation, an independent worker’s ideology, and not a state of affairs that can exist under capitalism. But “class independence,” like socialism, rejects capital’s legitimacy and inevitability. It views capital’s power as a usurpation that must be tolerated only because the balance of class forces will not presently allow it to be overthrown. However, the strategic perspective is constantly to encroach on capital’s power, to try shifting the balance of forces until capital’s domination can be overthrown and replaced by democratic management of the economy. Unions that try to follow a strategy of independence from management but that accept capital’s legitimacy ultimately get entangled in their own contradictions (for example, when they become lobbyists for government subsidies to their employers).

“Class independence” is, of course, not a panacea that offers a blueprint to victory. It is an ideological orientation whose strategic goal is to end capital’s domination. Capital today is very dominant, and workers are highly dependent on it. The confrontation of this strategic orientation with capitalist reality does not always make for obvious and simple choices of goals and tactics in concrete situations. But it is an orientation that at least holds out the possibility for workers to move forward, even if the strategic goal of emancipation from capital at present seems only a distant hope. On the other hand, the accumulated experience with “social partnership” supports the observation that “capitalist society without a socialist alternative is very likely to downgrade to barbaric forms of social life” (Boron: 243).

¹⁸ Despite their names, the Communist parties are reconciled to capitalism. They are also strongly tainted by forms of chauvinistic nationalism, a legacy of the Soviet period.

Bibliography

- Ashwin, S. and S. Clarke. 2003. *Russian Trade Unions and Industrial Relations in Transition*. Houndsmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Boron, A. 1995. *State, Capitalism and Democracy in Latin America*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner.
- Briggs, P. 1998. "The Japanization of British Industry", *Industrial Relations Journal* 19:1.
- Haiduk, K. et al. 2004. *The Belarusian Economy at a Crossroads*. Moscow: ILO.
- Hoare, Q. and G. Smith. 1971. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. New York: International Publishers.
- International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU). *ICFTU Statement on the Global Compact*. www.icftu.org
- Leary, E. and M. Menaker. [n.d.] *Jointness at GM : Company Unionism in the 21st Century*. Woonsocket, RI : New Directions Regions 9A.
- Mandel, David. 1991. "Rebirth of the Soviet Labour Movement: the Coalminers' Strike of July 1989", in *Perestroika and the Soviet People*. Montréal: Black Rose Books, pp.51-78.
- Mandel, David. 2004. *Labour After Communism*. Montréal: Black Rose Press.
- Obrazkova, M. 2005. "Predsedatel' dolzhen byt' muzhikom," *Solidarnost'*, no. 3.
- Parker, M. and J. Slaughter. 1988. *Choosing Sides : Unions and the Team Concept*. Boston : South End Press.
- Reddaway, P. and D. Glinski. 2001. *The Tragedy of Russia's Reforms*. Washington: U.S. Institute of Peace Press.
- Shagnina, I. 2001. "Prosoyuzy Ukrainy: davaite druzhit', no ne trogaite nashe imuschchestvo," *Narodnaya volya* (Minsk), no. 15.
- Stiglitz, J. 2002. *Globalization and Its Discontents*. New York: Norton.
- Thompson, E.P. 1991. *The Making of the English Working Class*. London: Penguin.
- Wahl, A. 2004. "European Labour: the Ideological Legacy of the Social Pact", *Monthly Review* (January 2004), pp. 37-49.