

Perestroika: greatest test yet

In July coal miners in the Soviet Union staged the country's biggest industrial action since the Russian Revolution, giving President Gorbachev's reforms their most serious challenge yet. MIKE TAYLOR comments in *International Labour Reports (ILR)*.

This July a quarter of a million coal miners - one-fifth of the industry's workforce - went on strike in pits thousands of miles apart. Unrest flared up on 10 July at Medchurenk, Siberia. By 14 July, half the 300 000 miners in the Kuzbass coalfields in Siberia, the country's most important coal producing region, had downed tools, followed by miners in over 100 pits in Donbass in the Ukraine, Karaganda in Kazakhstan, and in Vorkuta (see map). Up to 10 million tons of coal were lost.

Among the miner's main demands were more independence from Moscow in decision-making, drastic cuts in government bureaucracy, and better wages and living conditions. Workers on some coalfields even went further to issue overtly political demands.

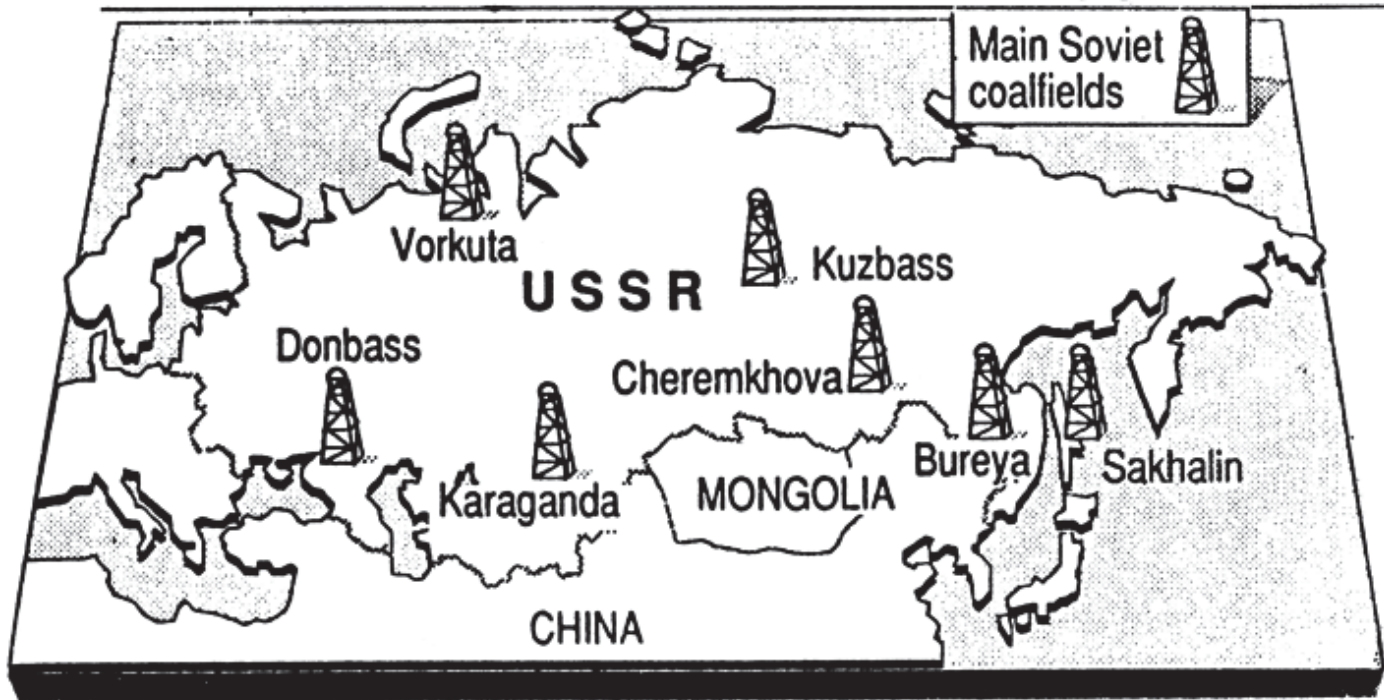
"Scream of despair"

At a debate in the Supreme Soviet, President Gorbachev heard a delegate from Keremovo, Siberia, describe the strikes as a "scream of despair" at the failure of the Communist Party and official trade unions to protect workers' rights. The miners' demands exposed the appalling conditions in the Soviet coalfields, including a dire health and safety record, overcrowded hostels, schools and hospitals, a severe lack of shops and amenities, food shortages, and pollution so bad that in some towns, cars must use their headlights during the day.

On the Moscow TV news 'Vremya', one miner declared, "We live for our pits. They're our home, but all we have produced has been taken by the Ministry, and they've given us back nothing, ab-



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solutely nothing". Another declared that if "Soviet power" was to survive, there must be early and genuine elections to local and regional councils.

Council elections are in fact scheduled for this autumn, but some radical Soviet politicians fear that they will be "fixed". A worker from the Keremevo strike committee pledged to "fight the bureaucratic apparatus that sits on our neck - the people who don't work and yet live better than anyone else".

The Communist Party media gave remarkably sympathetic coverage to the strike with on-the-spot reports and a full airing of the miners' grievances. The Party newspaper *Sovietskaya Rossiya* remarked, "Until now perestroika was a revolution from above. Now it is getting powerful support from underneath".

For their part, the miners signalled their support for Gorbachev's reforms when they stopped an attempt by the underground Democratic Union, which advocates multi-party democ-

racy, to capitalise on the strike.

"We won't move"

On 17 July, President Gorbachev dispatched a high-level team to Siberia, including Coal Minister Nicolai Schchadov and Chairman of the official All Union Central Committee of Trade Unions (AUCCTU) Stepan Shalayev. Miners camped out at the Kuzbass strike headquarters shouted, "We won't move from here until Prime Minister Ryzhkov and Gorbachev arrive".

However, after a warning from the President that the strike could endanger his reform programme and cripple the economy, 15 out of 19 strike committees in Kuzbass recommended an end to the strike on 19 July. The government promised pay increases which will cost Kuzbass 70 million roubles (70 million pounds), pledging also to get thousands of tons of meat, sugar and consumer goods worth 10 billion roubles into shops.

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Yet as the Siberian miners streamed back to work, more miners joined the strike across the Ukraine, prompting Gorbachev to make a personal appeal on television on 23 July. He pledged a sweeping agenda of political and economic reforms, and said that any agreement with the miners should immediately be ratified by the new Soviet Parliament. He said there would

have to be urgent action to draft laws on property ownership, land, taxation and trade union.

Coal miners have traditionally been the bedrock of support for the Communist party, and provide the nation's power feedstock as well as generating crucial foreign exchange - hence the Soviet leaders' readiness to accede to virtually all their demands. ☆

Demands reflect grim conditions

The demands of strikers in the Donets Basin in the Ukraine, released by the Ukrainian Central Information Service, are broadly similar to those of miners in the Kuznetsk Basin and other regions. They include:

Self-management

- regional economic self-management for Donbass

Wages

- increases of 20% for evening shifts and 40% for night shifts
- time used in travelling to coal face to be included in paid working hours
- removal of upper wage levels
- increases of up to 60% for women miners in hazardous operations

Terms and conditions

- annual leave of 45 days per year
- compensation of 50% of average wage to disabled miners
- retirement after 20 years continuous work
- miners to be provided with apart-

ments after 10 years

- ban on punitive transfers
- maternity leave of three years at woman's full average wage
- holiday pay and financial aid for medical treatment
- full pay for workers temporarily laid-off
- better quality, and increased supplies of food
- tax exemption for retired miners
- no work on Sundays

Health and safety

- recognition of silicosis, anthrax, tuberculosis, rheumatism, cancer of the skin, lungs, and thyroid, and ear, nose and throat complaints as work-related diseases

Union rights

- 50% reduction of union staff
- official miners' union to fund the strike
- no reprisals for the strike
- guarantees to be published in national press that strike can continue until all demands are met ➡

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Co-operatives

- ban on establishment of co-operatives and disbandment of existing medical and food co-operatives, believed to be a cover for private businesses reselling state goods at high prices

Miners in several coalfields added overtly political demands to their lists:

- **Pechora, near Vorkuta**
 - abrogation of the article in the Soviet constitution which guarantees the leading role of the Communist Party (considered to be an extreme demand, which President Gorbachev does not support)
 - "power to the Soviets" i.e. workers' councils to be more than rubber stamps
 - direct elections with one person, one vote; election of deputies by 'mass organisations' to be cancelled
 - election of the President and leaders of local and regional councils by direct and secret ballot, not by the legislature
- **Chervonohrad, Ukraine**
 - the dismissal of leading local officials including the first Secretary of the Communist Party in the Ukraine, the chief of police, and the head of the KGB
 - the establishment of an independent trade union under the name 'Solidarity'
- **Karaganda, Kazakhstan**
 - an end to nuclear bomb testing at the Semipalatinsk testing ground ☆

The role of unions under socialism

Can existing trade unions lead the working class movement and are they viable in the new political conditions? This is the question people in the Soviet Union are asking themselves after the dramatic events connected with the recent miners' strike. *Moscow News* interviews Stepan Shalayev, chairman of the AUCCTU, and Teimuraz Avaliani, Chairman of the Strike Committee from Kemerovo.

MN: *The AUCCTU Chairman came to the Kuzbas as a member of a governmental commission. The miners' demands were addressed to him, too. Would it not have been more logical for the miners to invite him over to their side and for him to make these demands rather than receive and consider them?*

Shalayev: Just look how a journalist's inaccuracy can wrongly influence public opinion. Someone called the commission "governmental", and this word started appearing in the papers.

But it was a joint commission of the CPSU Central Committee, the USSR Council of Ministers and the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions. How could it be governmental if it was not headed by a government member but by Nikolai Slyunkov, Member of the Politburo? I hope you realise the difference. We must think more carefully about how such small misunderstandings can sometimes lead to major conflicts.

I asked to be included on the commission straight away. We contacted local trade union people right at the beginning of the strike and we knew how complex the situation was. I arrived as the AUCCTU Chairman to consider the working people's demands. At the first meeting in Kemerovo I told miners that I'd come to defend their interests, as a member of this commission.

Avallani: I think everything is quite clear here, unfortunately. In our country the AUCCTU is an organ of state powers. The trade unions deal with pensions, sick pay and work conditions not independently, but in close liaison with state departments. Therefore, the AUCCTU is for us miners another high echelon of power giving out orders. That's why we didn't invite Comrade Shalayev to our side, but made demands on him as on other representatives of power. Both my comrades and I believe he's also responsible for the socio-economic situation that took shape in the Kuzbas.

But we're also to blame for our

trade union having lost the ability to fight. We have tolerated for too long a role that doesn't belong to it, that of instrument of the command-administrative system, and forgiven our trade union people for their compliance and lack of principle. So, when the situation became critical, they just hid behind our backs.

MN: *Why were the Soviet trade unions unable to lead the working class movement of miners in defence of their rights and of the principles of perestroika?*

Shalayev: One of the main rules of our work is that labour conflicts should be considered in time, before they lead to stoppages. In the Kuzbas social and economic problems had been very much ignored. The miners had to go to extremes. And some of us didn't know how to react. I can't justify this, but I understand. However, we have a legal procedure for settling individual labour conflicts which determines a trade union committee's rights - the administration is obliged to fulfil its decisions. This makes it possible to protect the interests of working people. Last year we considered half a million labour conflicts and only in one percent of cases decided in favour of the administration.

There is no such procedure for collective labour disputes. But then, neither is there any clarity regarding who should consider disputes and adopt decisions, and within what period of time (allowing for complaints against them). So it's hard to under-

stand what you should be demanding from whom. That's why we've been insisting on such a law since June 1988. The AUCCTU prepared a draft and submitted to the USSR Supreme Society Presidium in April. If the document had been adopted in time, we could have shoved it in front of the lazy administrators in time, and avoided strikes.

Avallani: The roots go very deep. The trade unions have obediently repeated the activities of our economic

managers for decades. Have we ever had trade union committees at our enterprises? No, we had management departments checking fulfilment of production programmes by the trade unions. And let's face it - an economic manager picks trade union committee chairman just as he picks heads of departments.

They were subordinate forever, how could they demand anything? So we had to take things into our own hands and make demands which were purely of a trade union nature. Even



when making political demands we mentioned economic demands, trying to turn things towards man's interests. All this could very well have been done by the trade union leaders, only - it couldn't. The trade unions have for too long been a haven for weak Party and economic personnel who don't know how to work. What leadership can you talk about when these people have been led all their lives?

MN: *Both the draft law on the rights of trade unions prepared at the AUCCTU and the draft law on work collectives, signed also by the AUCC-TU Chairman, envisage too many procedures and agreements before a strike is recognised as legal. The impression is created that, when preparing these documents, the trade unions think: somebody else will be organising strikes and protecting the interests of the strikers but not us. Is this impression correct?*

Shalayev: No. When preparing the draft we were drawing on our international experience. We referred to ILO recommendations, and the conventions our country has signed. We envisaged various ways of settling labour conflicts. A strike is an emergency measure, but what comes before this emergency? Labour commissions and arbitration. We are not interested in complicating things, like, for example, in Britain, where to announce a strike nearly all trade union members should vote for it by post. The draft also speaks of the right of trade union committees to announce

strikes only in cases when the administration either doesn't abide by procedure, or doesn't honour agreement.

Avallani: Here, too trade unions lag behind and are guided by old yardsticks. They were again hoping for some small, insignificant conflicts, as if consciously not putting into action the mechanism of quick and effective settlement. And I don't see them as having power to influence political questions. Both the coal industry and agriculture are today subsidised by the state. That means we're parasites, doesn't it? But grain and coal are profitable. Maybe the price policy is wrong - when a ton of coal is equal in price to be a bottle of vodka? How are we to struggle against this policy? What ways out do the drafts of the AUCCTU offer us? Practically none. So, we strike again?

MN: *A situation is taking shape where trade unions are becoming closely linked with the administration, while a spontaneous working class movement is growing. When will the trade unions be able to go over to the other side and how?*

Shalayev: Yes, our local trade union leaders are often criticised for being too dependent on the administration., How do we avoid this? First of all, by electing trade union leaders on an alternative basis - directly at the meeting. When they have a choice, people prefer to vote for the most principled person who won't sell himself for behind-the-scenes privileges, or

give in to pressure. The second trend is to elect more workers. This is the most independent category of people, with the strongest links with the masses, and unlike engineers, they do not fear for their careers. We're implementing these principles and chairmen are becoming more independent.

Avallani: Trade unions can hardly figure prominently in the working class movement in the present conditions of pure subjectivity and no independent decision making. I know that some change is planned in the functions of trade union organisations. But the principle remains the same - to agree and draw out the decision-making process for as long as possible. And we already know the scenario. On December, 18, the workers of the Shevyakovo mine put forward their proposals and these were sent to the Trade Union Central Committee, from there to the regional TU committee, then to the association, and finally back to the mine.

No, a cosmetic overhaul won't do. We must start setting up a fundamentally new type of trade union. Maybe alternative trade unions.

MN: *Have new strikes been forecast - the time, the place? In the event of a large-scale labour dispute, how will the AUCCTU, primary organisations and strike committees act? Will strikes be used as a tool in the struggle for the interests of working people in the future, too?*

Shalayev: We know there is social

tension at a whole number of metallurgical enterprises and at railways. This alarms us very much. We've already put out recommendations as to how trade union activists should behave in conflicts. We must consider the situation at all levels - trade union committees should make demands on the administration, regional TU committees on the regional leadership. TU Central Committees on the ministries. If agreement is not reached at any section of this chain and the workers would still resort to a strike, the TU committees must lead the strikers.

But I stress once again: the main task is not to let emergencies develop, but to settle questions in time. We now have to learn to lead in hard conditions. And real leadership always means responsibility.

Avallani: It's hard to make forecasts yet. If some of our demands are satisfied, this could cause social tensions in other industries or regions. If the government doesn't change economic policy very soon, strikes are inevitable.

At the same time it must be realised that we are not adventurers, or enemies of the state. Strikes mustn't be held because of absurd demands. Or, to be more precise: people should not be led to such a state. We know what a strike means. The situation can get out of control at any moment, and it is very hard to imagine what the consequences could be.

We've also realised what a mighty weapon it is. We don't intend to abuse it, nor do we intend to let it go. ☆