

# Russia's labour movement *after the coup*

Report by DENIS MCSHANE\*

**R**ight-wing forces worldwide who were hoping that Russia had now fully signed up for the neo-liberal project of global capitalism should pause a moment. The latest news from labour movement forces inside Russia is that, far from crushing them, Yeltsin is building new links with Russian trade unions.

In an astonishing reversal of fortune, the anti-Yeltsin trade unions in Russia have emerged from the Moscow events strengthened, while pro-Western trade unions founded since 1989, have suffered a set-back, despite their slavish adherence to Yeltsinism in the past two years.

Before the Moscow events, Russia's labour movement was divided broadly into two camps: the inheritors of the old Soviet trade unions such as the Federation of Independent Unions of Russia (FNPR) and the VKP, the co-ordinating body of the communist-run unions in the CIS, were critical of Yeltsin's economic policies. With 70 million members, the FNPR continued to dominate Russian workplaces, acting as a social agency of insurance, holidays and even food distribution.

Its leader, Igor Klochkov, joined the Civic Union alliance with Alexander Rutskoi and was loud in his criticisms of economic liberalism.

In the other camp, were independent trade unions such as the miners federation, NPG, and the Sotsprof unions. These relied heavily on support from the US labour federation, AFL-CIO, and had great difficulty in penetrating the enterprise

alliance between managers and the official union.

Moving between factions in these post-Soviet trade unions were left-wing intellectuals like Boris Kargalitsky, a member of the Moscow City Council and promoter of a militant and radical politics.

When Yeltsin dissolved parliament, the official FNPR union appeared to throw itself decisively on the side of Rutskoi and Khasbulatov. At its congress, which coincided with Yeltsin's announcement, Klochkov talked of a general strike and ranted against Yeltsin.

Russian politics is never one-dimensional and Klochkov's bombast was empty wind. While he was making his speeches to impress foreign visitors, the FNPR's dominant industrial unions were drawing back sharply from confrontation. In messages sent to Western European labour groups, they made it clear that they wanted no conflict.

When Rutskoi and Khasbulatov tried their luck with an insurrection, the FNPR's mood changed quickly. The FNPR and the VKP joined the independent unions in denouncing the would-be putschists and expressing full support for Yeltsin's restoration of "law and order." The industrial unions met and dismissed Klochkov.

The FNPR's swift re-positioning appears to have paid off. Despite earlier suggestions that Yeltsin would ban organisations linked to the parliament, the FNPR has not been touched. Their newspaper, *Rabochaya Tribuna* (Workers Voice), can continue publishing. In a job-switch, Yeltsin has appointed Yuri Yarov to head the important

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tripartite committee which determines Russian labour policy. Yarov is close to the FNPR and disliked by the independent unions. A proposal to take the administration of social security funds away from the unions has been shelved.

While the FNPR appears to have emerged unscathed from the Moscow events, the independent unions – pro-Yeltsin as they may have been – have suffered. The independent miners' union, NPG, had its office in the White House, where its leader, Victor Utkin, was a deputy. That office is now closed. The Sotsprof office in the Moscow City Council building is also closed.

### Why the FNPR emerged stronger

When the crisis started, the independent pro-Yeltsin unions appeared to emerge reinforced at the expense of the anti-Yeltsin FNPR. But the reverse has happened. The reason is that, behind Yeltsin stand not just powerful Western interests, which have far less influence in Russia than the British and US media would have us believe, but a large part of the military-industrial and heavy-

industry complex and its allies in the Russian Army.

For this group, labour peace is essential and the old-style unions are best at delivering a controlled workforce. Independent unions or activists like Boris Kargalitsky, who has been released after a brief detention, are a nuisance to be brushed aside. For many of the US and European investors also, the compliant trade unions of the FNPR are a better bet than launching into a mass de-unionisation drive.

Thus, unlike lurid images of Yeltsin as a Pinochet or a Somoza, a butcher of democratic opposition – images, to be sure, reinforced by the tanks shelling the White House – it may be more accurate to see him as another France's General de Gaulle, who was authoritarian and statist, but sought to divide and, where possible, incorporate workers and unions rather than crush them.

The test will come in the elections in which the Socialist Party of Working People in Russia will stand. Set up by anti-Yeltsin parliamentarians, including the former dissident, Roy Medvedev, the party will include Boris Kargalitsky on its list of candidates. The party is excluding all communists but including monarchists from the Union-Renaissance group. Since metaphors of colour dominate Russian politics, it is tempting to see the blue-black Yeltsinites, having seen off the red-brown putschists, now confronting a pink-purple party of royalist social democrats.

Whatever Russia's post-election politics, the underlying economic crisis deepens. A new report by the London-based Centre for Economic Policy Research stresses the rapidly widening income and wealth gap developing in Russia. The central government, trapped in the Kremlin-White House power struggle, has been unable to either levy taxes or create a social security net. The first task of the new power-holders in Russia will be to exert economic authority, which, unless Russia is to give up all vestiges of democracy, further underlines the need for coalition rather than dictatorship politics in the years ahead. ☆

