

The Crisis of the Trade-Unions in Russia, Belarus and Ukraine

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In this excerpt from his talk to a Socialist Project public forum on November 30th in Toronto, David Mandel discusses his new book, "Labour After Communism: Autoworkers and Their Unions in Russia". Mandel is a leading Marxist authority on post-Soviet labour. He teaches political science at the University of Quebec, Montreal.)

The book revolves around the issue of "class independence." That is a strategic orientation whose starting point is the antagonistic relations of labour and capital, labour and the state. From that it follows that the labour movement's priority is to build a correlation of forces increasingly favourable to labour and that the basis of labour's strength is the solidarity, consciousness, and active commitment of workers, their confidence in their collective capacity to effect positive societal change.

"Class independence" stands in opposition to "social partnership," the dominant strategy in the former Soviet Union and the world today. "Social partnership" takes different forms, but at bottom it is based on the view that labour and capital share a fun-

damental interest in the success of the given enterprise and of the economy as a whole. Serious conflict is viewed as a failure of communication or the refusal of the parties to understand their long-term interests. Under "partnership," negotiations backed by real force are replaced by "concertation," pseudo-negotiations based on wishful thinking.

By embracing "partnership," the post-Soviet labour movement sealed the workers' defeat. And it has been crushing, with its living standards falling by two thirds; the comprehensive economic security of the Soviet period eliminated; and a major decline in education and culture. Even political rights, the principal gain from the fall of the old system, have been eroded. There is still considerable freedom of association and press but none of the countries can be termed a bourgeois democracy, that is, a relatively law-based state which allows free, if unequal, political competition, as long as the bases of capitalism are not threatened.

Of course, "class independence" would not have guaranteed victory. Objective circumstances were highly unfavourable. Nevertheless, the

losses suffered could at least have been much smaller. Most unions did not make use of the resources they had, to fight.

The most unfavourable condition was the legacy of totalitarian rule which did not allow workers to organize independently. As a result, they entered the new period without experience of collective action or free discussion. Anyone who still sees the Soviet system as "socialist" must fit that into their analysis. The Soviet labour movement did play an important role in undermining the dictatorship, once Gorbachev created the initial opening. But it could not develop the needed organizational or ideological independence and served as a battering ram for forces hostile to its interests. Events moved too quickly for most workers to gain the experience necessary to develop independent analyses and organizations.

The international context was also unfavourable. It was a period of capitalist offensive. Socialism, even as a theoretical option, was everywhere in retreat. Soviet workers thought they had already experienced socialism and believed liberal ideologues who told them that

only capitalism was “normal.”

“Shock therapy” was another objective obstacle. It was conceived to disarm potential opposition to capitalist restoration subordinate to Western interests. Overnight, the social system was turned upside down, disorienting workers and throwing them into heightened insecurity.

The auto and farm-machinery sector, the focus of the book, lost two thirds of its

ism” but by “social partnership”.

In most plants, there was no resistance to the all-out attack on rights and living standards by the state and management. Where workers resisted, they received no substantive support from other local unions or from the national level. To be fair, the national union was starved of resources. But that only reflected the abysmal level of

unions to try to organize the employers, hoping that their organization would negotiate a national agreement with them and impose it on the individual plants. Of course, nothing of the kind happened.

Politically, the federation, to which the autoworkers’ union is affiliated, formed electoral alliances the directors’ organizations, which failed miserably. In 2000, the federation joined



workforce in Russia between 1991 and 2003. About 90% of those who remain belong to the union inherited from the Soviet period. It includes management, often even the plant director. At the plant and national levels, it embraces “partnership.” In practice, the affiliated local unions continue to function as junior personnel departments. This is no longer justified by “social-

solidarity, a logical consequence of “partnership,” which teaches workers to show solidarity with their bosses rather than with “competing” workers.

In conditions of industrial collapse, local struggles could achieve little. But on the sectoral level, the watchword was also “partnership.” Magical thinking led the national leaders of the metalworking

Putin’s party. It was back to the future under the secure wing of the same state that is leading the offensive against workers.

The only bright spot is that some independent unions formed in the early 1990s have survived — though they represent only a few per cent of total union membership — and have shifted to the political →

opposition, adopting at least social-democratic positions.

The Ukrainian autoworkers' union was different, in that it elected a committed socialist and supporter of "class independence" as president. He actively supported local struggles, holding them up for emulation. He cajoled the local leaders to amend the constitution to exclude management. Through education and a national paper he reached out directly to the rank and file. He got the union's constitution changed to ensure rank-and-file workers were represented in elected bodies. He tried to organize other national leaders to depose the federation's conciliationist leadership. His union supported the left-social-democratic Socialist Party of Ukraine.

But he could not generate enough support to wean most plant presidents away from the idea of "partnership." As a result, he could not obtain a share of the dues that would have allowed him to reach more of the rank-and-file directly. Meanwhile, the industry was being destroyed even faster than in Russia. It lost three quarters of its jobs between 1991 and 2003.

After ten years, he stepped down as president to

try changing things "from below," becoming director of the School for Worker Democracy. This rank-and-file education has yielded real, if limited, results, despite its meager resources.

In Belarus, the issue of "class independence" played itself out differently. Here the rank-and-file of the union was

cent between 1991 and 2002, to about 150,000.

After Lukashenko became virtual dictator in 1996, the union turned to outright political opposition, and eventually pulled the federation behind it. In the 2001 presidential elections, the federation's president was the candidate of the democratic opposition.

But the union's position in the plants was more ambiguous. After the 1991 strike, some plants elected independent leaders, but the pressure from below was unable to dislodge most conciliationists. The national leaders at first appeared determined to do what they could to support rank-and-file forces for "class independence." But gradually, they made peace with subservient plant leaders. This occurred as they focused most of their energy on political

struggles.

This seemed to make sense — after all, the state was the ultimate employer. But in practice, it was a self-defeating strategy, because subservient plant leaders refused to mobilize workers for actions against the government. They refused because their directors told them to. As a result, the national leadership could not



more active with a significant current opposed to partnership, thanks, in part, to a month-long general strike in 1991 that shook things up. The union elected a national leadership committed to "class independence." And, thanks to the government's rejection of "shock therapy" — most plants are still nationalized — employment fell by only twenty per

build a correlation of forces against the government. Its active support among workers continued to fall.

Another problem was its failure to offer workers a programme that they could support against the government. In 1992, it created the Labour Party, on the face of it a step towards "class independence." But the party's programme was ambiguous, calling for a strong welfare state but also for "economic freedom" for the enterprises. Byelorussian workers were well aware of the effects of liberal economic policy in Russia and Ukraine. Despite his dictatorial rule, Lukashenko was perceived by many as defending Belarus against "shock therapy." The workers' misgivings were only heightened when the Labour Party entered an electoral alliance in 2001 with liberal parties under the aegis of the US embassy.

When the showdown came after the presidential elections, Lukashenko had little trouble getting rid of the union leaders, who were unable to call on significant rank-and-file support. Today, there is only a very small independent union movement in Belarus, though it keeps on fighting against very harsh odds.

What is the responsibility of leadership for these defeats? Most leaders will say that it was hopeless to mobilize demoralized, scared

workers against management. "Partnership" was their only option. Yet, a minority of leaders in all countries opted for independence, and the workers in their plants put up active, often heroic, resistance. What set the workers in these plants apart was the quality of their leaders, since the rank-and-file were no different from the sizable minority of workers, in all three countries, who showed they were ready to actively resist. But in most workplaces this minority was too weak to force a change in leadership. Had there been a leadership willing to lead and unite the active minority behind a realistic strategy based on "class independence," they may well have awoken the others, the demoralized majority, to join the struggle. Certainly, the most probable outcome occurred. But it was not the only one possible, and especially not the enormous scale of that defeat. The leadership cannot evade its responsibility for what happened.

A final point on socialist trade unionists: A consistent strategy of "class independence" must have socialism as its ultimate goal. Unions that strive for independence from management but accept capitalism as unavoidable, end up trapped in their own contradictions. To posit socialism as the strategic goal is to reject the legitimacy of capital's power in the enterprises and in the state. It is to view capi-

tal's power as a usurpation that is tolerated only because workers are too weak to challenge it frontally. But the long-term perspective is to build the correlation of forces to the point where labour can realistically challenge the very existence of capital as a social and political power against labour.

It is unlikely that unions, except in extraordinary circumstances, can be won over to socialism. But the role of socialists is to promote "class independence" within unions, to win over workers and to organize them politically. Difficult as that is today, that strategy alone offers the perspective of successfully resisting capital's already quarter-century offensive and eventually mounting a counter-attack. The crisis of organized labour is at bottom a crisis of political representation: workers today have no party to represent them politically, on the level of "class against class."

In the region of the former Soviet Union, there is no socialist movement of any significance, though workers are losing their allergy to socialist ideas. As noted, the independent elements of the labour movement are shifting leftwards. As always, there is hope. But things would be a lot easier if labour in the West could score some important victories. This would open up ideological space for an independent labour movement in the former Soviet Union. ■