

OLEG DUBROVSKII WITH SIMON PIRANI

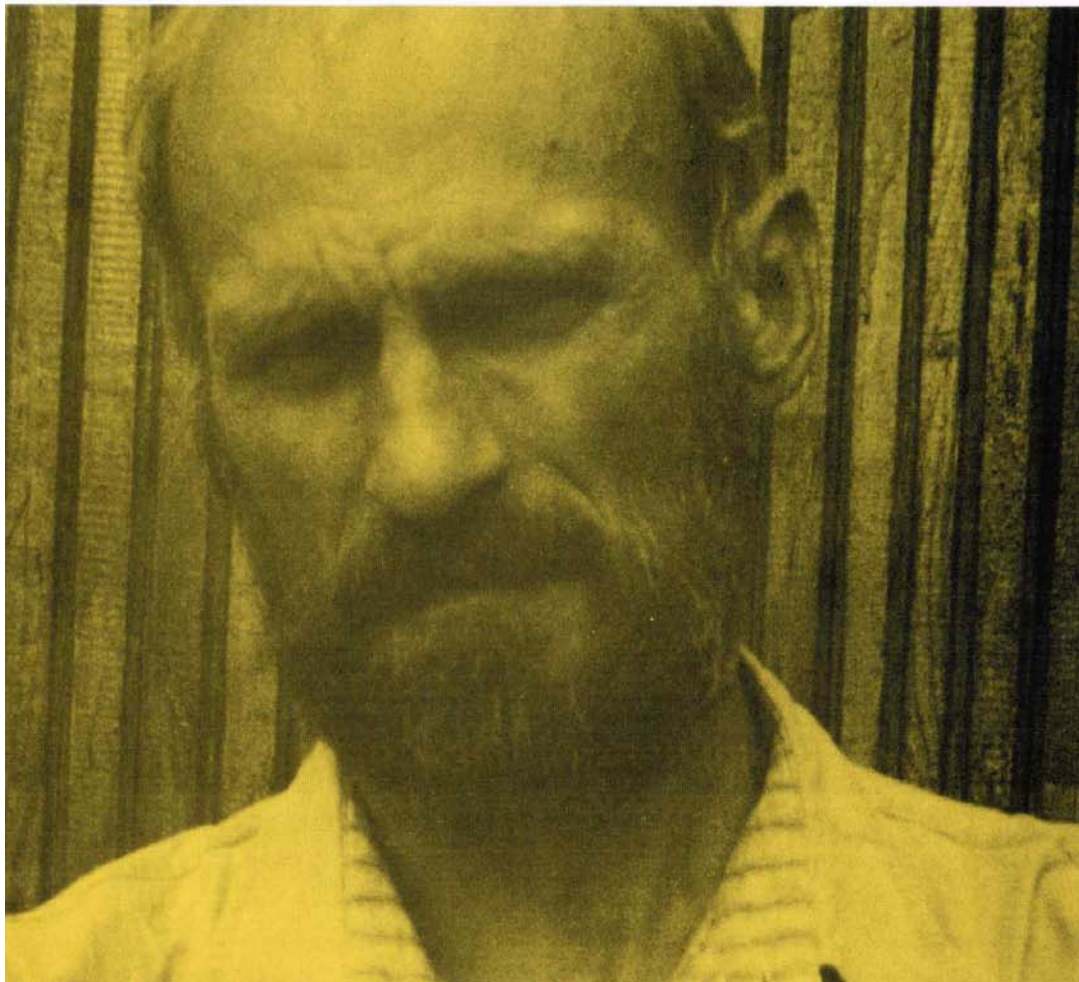
FIGHTING

BACK

IN UKRAINE

A WORKER WHO TOOK ON THE BUREAUCRATS & BOSSES

Протистояння в Україні



FIGHTING BACK IN UKRAINE

- **A worker who took on the bureaucrats and bosses**

Oleg Dubrovskii with Simon Pirani

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1. THE WAY TO DNEPROPETROVSK

By Simon Pirani

To get to Dnepropetrovsk in eastern Ukraine, you need a plane ticket to Kiev, a train ticket from there and a good reason to go. My reason was that I had been invited to see how ordinary factory workers live in one of the biggest industrial centres of the former Soviet Union.

This was not going to be a show put on for foreign visitors. The invitation came from Oleg Dubrovskii, a socialist who had organised protests and strikes in both the “new” Ukraine and the “old” Soviet Union. He wanted to show me Dnepropetrovsk, warts and all.

Ukraine, whose declaration of independence helped to finish off the Soviet Union in 1991, has a population of 52 million, the fifth largest in Europe behind Russia, Germany, the UK, France and Italy. Its land area is Europe's second biggest after Russia.

This huge new state is also one of Europe's poorest. Over the last five years its economy has collapsed. Industrial output has been slashed, agricultural production has been slashed, living standards have been slashed. (See Ukraine: some facts and figures, page 4-5).

Within the Soviet framework, Ukraine supplied grain, mainly to Russia, and imported oil, gas and manufactured products. The coal mines and engineering factories of eastern Ukraine played a key part in the 1930s industrialisation. The area remained crucial under Leonid Brezhnev, the CPSU general secretary from 1964 to 1983, who rose through the Communist Party ranks in Dneprodzerzhinsk, near Dnepropetrovsk.

The collapse of the USSR disrupted the old economic ties, especially those with Russia. Political relations soured too. Ukraine's first post-Soviet president Leonid Kravchuk and Leonid Kuchma who succeeded him in 1994, have both made the country's first priority integration into the world, and specifically European, market.

Ukraine, like Russia under Boris Yeltsin, started by tying the country's financial structure to that of the west. Ukraine's currency, the *karbovanets* or coupon, was supposedly equivalent to the Russian ruble when it was launched in 1992. But, as I boarded my train for Dnepropetrovsk from Kiev in September 1995, the money-changers at the station were paying 34 coupons for a rouble and 170,000 for a US dollar.

The rapid introduction of world prices caused a spiral of debt. The most important of Ukraine's state debts is the £2.7 billion owed to Russia, mostly for natural gas supplies. The loan has been restructured under IMF supervision but that did not stop gas supply cuts in the last three winters, which left some homes in eastern Ukraine without heating for two or more winter months.

Another consequence of president Kuchma's monetary policy was a spiral of debt between Ukrainian enterprises. As my overnight train journey began I read a newspaper report of 8,000 factories having their power shut off due to “chronic” non-payment of electricity bills.

Most telling of all are the human statistics. Ukraine's population, like that of Russia and some other eastern European states, is declining due to the rapid deterioration of living standards. Ordinary working class people were poor in the “old” days and now they are poorer still. But the worst thing of all is that they don't know what the future holds.

Take the war veteran with whom I shared my coupé on the train to Dnepropetrovsk. In 1943 he had fought at Kursk, the biggest tank battle in history and a decisive blow to the German fascist army.

This brave old soldier told me, over tea and salted cucumber sandwiches, that he was “surviving” in his Moscow flat. As a widower his only real joy is visiting his five sons and seeing his grandchildren. But trips like the one he was on were becoming too expensive. He was happy to have seen his son in Kiev, and looking forward to meeting another in Dnepropetrovsk. But as for the one who lived in Magadan in the Russian far east, he feared that, due to hyperinflation, he would never see him again.

At Dnepropetrovsk station, Oleg Dubrovskii met me off the train. We travelled over the expansive River Dnepr to the city's industrial *raion* (municipal district) by bus (ticket price 5,000 coupons, 100,000 times dearer than five years ago).

The Dubrovskii home is a minute three-bedroomed cockroach-infested flat, which Oleg shares with his wife Anya, 15-year-old daughter Natasha and son Yaroslav, nine. It was not long before my visit that Oleg's parents were able to move out.

On my first day in town Oleg took me to meet his workmates at the Dnepropetrovsk Construction Combine No.1.

“I have worked here for 33 years. All I have to show for it is a one-room flat for four of us”, said Kirill, who works on the steam boilers with Oleg. It took him nine years to get his family out of a dormitory block with shared kitchen and toilet facilities.

“I have never seen the sea,” he adds. “I have only been on a proper holiday twice, both times to sanatoria inland”.

Anatoly said: “We used to have meat once a week. We queued for it but it was cheap. Not any more. Dnepropetrovsk is full of goods but we cannot afford them.”

The Dubrovskiiis eat two meals a day. Over supper Oleg went through the family's incomings and outgoings.

It was early September and Oleg had just received his wages for July, 7 million kv (£26). Anya earned about the same. The family's rent is 2.5 million kv (£9.25) – but it was set to more than double in comparison to overall inflation over a year, because of a government programme to transfer the cost of public housing to tenants.

While these wages are about one-fortieth of British workers' pay, the prices are about a quarter. The cheapest sausage costs 300,000 kv a kilo, good imported sausage 2 million kv, that is a week's wages. Pork is 500,000 kv a kilo, beef 350,000 kv a kilo.

There was no sugar in the shops during my visit – it could only be bought on the market for 140,000 kv a kilo.

“Of course, people cannot make ends meet”, said Oleg. “And that is why the late payment of wages in most factories near here, it's at least two months behind, is like insult added to injury.” But how do people stay alive? “The overwhelming majority of workers have out-of-town kitchen gardens, little patches of land given them by the factory management under an agreement made with the agricultural authorities.

Ukraine: some facts and figures

Population: 52 million.

The population grew by 3 per cent from 1980 to 1990, and then started to fall, due to worsening social conditions. Between 1993 and 1994 it fell by 322,000. The birth rate fell. Life expectancy fell: in 1991 it was 66 for males and 75 for females, three years later it was 63 and 73 respectively.

Living standards: have fallen by 80 per cent since 1991.

Education: far fewer Ukrainian children go to school than in Soviet times.

Between 1989 and 1994, enrolment rates fell from 61 per cent to 44 per cent for nurseries; 88 per cent to 83 per cent for primary schools; and 64 per cent to 47 per cent for secondary schools.

Environment: causing concern.

In 1995 a chemical accident in Kharkov, the second biggest city, left residents without water for a week. It was followed by an alarming increase in cases of cholera in eastern Ukraine. The government drew up a list of “potentially hazardous ecological breaking points”, which included Simferopol . and Lugansk as well as Kharkov.

Industry: has suffered a collapse.

It is estimated that between 1990 and 1995 gross domestic product fell by 58 per cent, although statistics may have been exaggerated at the beginning of the period.

Agriculture: output has sunk.

Between 1990 and 1995, crop production fell by one third. Between 1989 and 1994, production of meat fell by 41 per cent, milk by 52 per cent and eggs by 36 per cent.

Privatisation: “disappointing”, say western economists.

By 1995, about one-third of large enterprises, one-tenth of small enterprises, and one-third of living accommodation had been privatised.

Foreign debt: 4.82 billion (January 1995).

More than half of this (2.7 billion) is owed to Russia, including just under 1 billion for gas.

In Soviet times: Ukraine was the second-biggest Soviet republic after Russia.

Once the Russian empire had been destroyed by the February 1917 revolution, an independent bourgeois republic was proclaimed in Ukraine. After the Bolshevik-led revolution of November 1917, Ukrainian nationalists sided variously with the Germans, Russian Whites and Poles against Moscow before being driven out by the Red army.

From 1919, most of Ukraine was under soviet rule; it was part of the USSR from its foundation in 1922. But large parts of western Ukraine was divided between Poland, Czechoslovakia and Romania: these were incorporated into the USSR in 1939-40, after the Stalin-Hitler pact was signed. In 1941-44 the Nazis occupied Ukraine and committed many of their most barbarous crimes there.

In 1991, after the failure of the August coup, Ukraine declared independence. This helped precipitate the final dissolution of the USSR in December that year.

“On these they grow potatoes, cabbage, beetroots, sunflowers and other necessities for their families. People work five days in the factories and two days on their plots. People had these plots in Brezhnev's time but now they are more important than ever.

“In not a few cases, workers own larger out-of-town plots with small wooden houses on them, and grow food not only for their families but also extra supplies to sell on the town markets”.

As for things that can not be grown, like margarine, sugar and meat, people often go without.

The gap between workers' wages and the income of their bosses has widened dramatically in the “new” Ukraine.

“Ten years ago, when all firms were controlled by the state, the director received a wage two, or at the most three, times greater than that of the workers. Now it is usually ten or 20 times greater.

“Some comrades who work at the Dnepropetrovsk Milk Factory No.2 told me of the extreme case of their director, Mr Veritel'nikov, a former member of the Supreme Soviet. In May, the workers were paid 4 million kv each; he received 400 million. Workers went on holiday penniless, he went to Miami.”

Pensioners in Dnepropetrovsk have been reduced to destitution, as they have throughout the former USSR. During my visit, many attended a demonstration demanding legal action against savings companies which had disappeared with people's money.

The issue surfaced in July, when investors in the Pripyat savings company called a meeting to protest over the loss of their cash deposits. Hundreds of people who had had the same experience with all manner of trust funds and savings banks joined in. The cheated investors, backed by an anti-mafia campaign group and the liberal Ukraine People's Party, began holding weekly protest marches. The mayor promised an investigation. The anti-mafia campaigners accused the police of working hand in hand with the dodgy financiers.

Dnepropetrovsk has 1.2 million people – more than Birmingham. Its economy, based entirely on heavy industry, seemed secure enough in Soviet times. But its present is uncertain and its future, frankly, bleak. President Kuchma is fond of saying that one in three of Ukraine's state factories must close – and told an audience of British businessmen and politicians at a London seminar: “We need to do to our coal industry what you did to yours in the 1980s.”

Dnepropetrovsk has not yet suffered large-scale closures, but factories are shedding labour fast and there is virtually nobody under 30 in industry. Young people look for ways to cash in on the “informal” economy – trade, retail... and crime. A recent newspaper survey showed that 40 per cent of young people are “employed” in this way.

What eastern Ukraine desperately needs is new industry and new technology. But this is exactly what the west has no intention of providing. Western capital is cherry-picking. French companies have taken controlling shareholdings in the Volodarsky clothing factory and Dnepr tricottage plant. “But” said Oleg, “the western Europeans are not interested in the steelworks. The Karl Liebknecht works has been working on an order for Stalinist China for the last two years. Almost all the wages during that time were paid not in money but in cheap Chinese goods – Thermos flasks, video recorders, blankets.

“Unfortunately, among workers there is little understanding of the capitalist firms' intentions. Many

workers still have illusions that a kind-hearted boss is going to arrive and save their factory. But the capitalists only like this area to the extent that it provides cheap labour and there is little organised workers' resistance.”

And are the circumstances better or worse for organising that resistance? I asked Lyuba, who was on strike with Oleg in 1992 at an electric power combine.

“In the factory, it's worse”, she said. “Before – in theory at least – you had a formal structure through which you could complain about things. Now the manager is the tsar and God. If you don't like what he says, there's the door. They use the fear of unemployment quite consciously.

“But in the long term, perhaps we are better off. There's "bourgeois democracy" the right to form parties and unions, and relatively free rights of expression and assembly. It is possible to organise workers independently of management, without fear of repression”.

Workers' resistance in Dnepropetrovsk in “Soviet” times and in the “new” Ukraine, is the theme of this pamphlet. We will hear the story of Oleg Dubrovskii, who took the road of rebellion against the “old” system and then resistance to the “new”, in his own words.

The narrative, from here to the end of chapter 6 is based on an interview with Oleg tape-recorded during my visit. (In chapter 5, I have also used written reports he circulated among Russian and Ukrainian socialists.) The italics are my questions and comments, the words in roman type are his.

2. THE REBEL'S TALE

Could you describe life here in the 1970s, under Brezhnev, when you began work?

At that time, Dnepropetrovsk was very well off compared to most provincial areas of Ukraine or Russia. Brezhnev himself came from near here, and the area had the highest rating for the supply of foodstuffs. These were low quality but very cheap, and the choice of goods available was better than elsewhere. And there was plenty of alcohol available at low prices.

But there was demoralisation. The level of labour discipline fell with every passing year. Workers drank more and more during working time.

People felt completely alienated from the labour process, from the products of their own labour. They had no interest in these things whatever. They knew they would get their 140 rubles a month whatever happened. And they knew that if they were sacked they would soon find another job and get the 140 rubles somewhere else. The threat of unemployment just did not exist.

A worker could be sacked for repeated absenteeism or particularly aggravated drunkenness. But he would just sign on a few days later at a nearby factory. In the new factory the worker would have the same influence, the same say in what he did, the same interest in it, as in the previous one – none at all. He collected his 140 rubles and cursed the technologically illiterate, incompetent, vulgar party bureaucrats who were in charge of every factory.

At that time the trade unions had only one function – to hand out vouchers for factory shops which sold scarce consumer goods, and the *putevki* [passes or tickets] which entitled workers to go to holiday homes and sanatoria, or even, once every few years, to take their families to the Black Sea Coast.

Personally, since I found myself in constant conflict with the official union structures and managements, I never received holiday *putevki* and I never asked for them either. And so I have never in my life been to the Black Sea or to a holiday home.

Were there any political discussions at work?

When we chatted at meal breaks, workers were concerned mainly with how to get hold of goods that were in short supply, and where their next drink was coming from and, of course, they would curse the factory bureaucrats. It was rare to hear complaints against the higher organs of the party and government in Moscow, but more often than anything else workers would curse those wretched bureaucrats at factory level for the fact that they were incapable of organising anything, for lousy working conditions, for the appalling health and safety regime, and so on.

Although no one had much to say about the government, they certainly did not think they were living in a workers' state. The alienation was great and the workers were conscious that this state was not their own state. They talked about “them” and “us” and this was “their” state, that is, the bureaucracy's state, but not ours. If you had come and told those workers that they lived in a workers' state, they would have sworn at you, or just laughed.

What made you start thinking politically?

I left school in 1972 and for a year I worked in the land surveying department, measuring out and

preparing sites on which new factories were to be built. I started my military service in 1973. Even then, I had begun to reflect on a big question: why was there this huge, monstrous gap between the official propaganda which said that the working class was hegemonic, that it was the builder of communism, that it was the ruling class in the past, present and future Soviet state and the reality, in which the workers' conditions were poor, in which they were unable to defend their social rights, in which they were exploited, in which they had no possibility of political self-expression, in which they were crushed by the ruling elite?

I saw this contradiction right in front of my eyes. I began to wonder, why?

At school I had worked hard at history and social sciences, and tried to understand politics. They taught us dogmas and stereotypes. But here, right around me in the Soviet Union, I saw relations of ruler and ruled, of the subordination of some people by others. I noticed a social division of labour between those in charge and the oppressed. It was like a master-slave relationship. I felt a sharp sense of protest.

In 1974, when I was in the army, I applied to join the Communist Party of the Soviet Union CPSU). I had some idea of doing something to it from inside, of becoming an opposition element. Soldiers who had made such an application attended special courses organised by the army's political department. We were given lectures and we were able to use a library of party literature.

And there I became acquainted with the only legal source in which I might find answers to my questions about the contradiction between propaganda and life — the stenographic reports of the congresses of the CPSU.

The first one I read was the report of the sixteenth congress in 1930, at which Stalin's clique rejoiced in its victory over the Right Opposition led by Bukharin, Rykov and Tomsky. I saw a completely different picture of the so-called inner-party struggle, and the contradictions which tore the party apart, from the one taught at the lectures.

I was not able to read all the reports: even now I have not read the reports of the eleventh congress of 1922, the twelfth (1923) or the thirteenth (1924). After the sixteenth congress report I read the fifteenth (1927), and then the eighth (1919), ninth (1920) and tenth (1921). I saw for the first time the speeches of the cursed and damned Trotsky, who was ceaselessly abused in all the official propaganda, who was supposed to have committed every mortal sin. I saw the platforms of the main opposition groups, and I began to try to apply the platforms of these groups to “Soviet reality” of the 1970s. I tried to extrapolate from them an understanding of how the parasitic elite at the top of the party had assumed mastery over the working class.

In 1975 I left the army and started work at the high precision cold-rolling steel mill in Dnepropetrovsk, which supplied the war industry. I continued to study in the evenings. I reached the conclusion that the platform of the Workers Opposition of 1920, led by Shlyapnikov and Kollontai, best represented the interests of the working class and best expressed the problems workers faced.

At the same time, I found myself getting involved in constant conflicts with the party structures and the management at the factory.

What I saw at work on one hand, and what I had read in the stenographic reports on the other hand, made me feel a deep revulsion for the very word “party”. I thought that trade unions might be an alternative, a form through which it would be possible to organise the working class, to resist, to

make protests.

I have already referred to the official unions. They were part of management. And it was not possible to organise independently. No chance. I learned, in snatches, from listening to western radio stations, that somewhere in the USSR underground independent trade union groups had been formed, and that they were being persecuted by the KGB. I knew of the organisation set up by Vladimir Klebanov, the SMOT free trade union. But it was not possible to do anything like that in the mid-1970s in Dnepropetrovsk.

There were of course ways of protesting individually. In 1976, every worker was compelled to do two days' unpaid work, and to attend a demonstration, in honour of the 25th CPSU congress. I protested about this at a general factory meeting, and I was summoned to the factory's Party Committee as a result. But nothing came of it.

We also had in 1979, for the first time, a war between two “socialist” states, China and Vietnam. We had always been taught that this was not possible, so this caused some discussion. We thought China was the aggressor. Together with some workmates, I presented myself at the local barracks and volunteered to fight on Vietnam's side. They said they did not want any volunteers.

When did you begin active propaganda and agitation for workers' self-organisation?

The early 1980s was a turning-point, and the reason was the struggle of *Solidarność* in Poland. I had wondered what form workers' opposition to the Soviet regime might take. And in 1980/1981, I understood that it would be exactly in this form that the Polish workers had themselves found a way to fight back against, and even to drag down, the Stalinist regime.

I collected all the information I could about *Solidarność* from every possible source. Much of it came via western radio stations. And under the impact of the Polish events I came to the conclusion that, rather than the programme of the Workers Opposition, an anarchosyndicalist programme was needed through which to mobilise workers. I thought that everything depended on workers' self-activity. I turned away from the politics of the Workers Opposition which was clearly Marxist, despite being condemned as an “anarchosyndicalist deviation”.

I began word-of-mouth underground propaganda in Dnepropetrovsk in support of *Solidarność*.

Was this at the cold-rolling mill?

I began to talk to people about *Solidarność* in 1980-1981, but it was only in 1984 that I began any systematic propaganda. By that time, I had already been sacked from the cold-rolling mill.

Why?

The management had introduced a system of fines for failing to fulfil certain targets, and the workers were becoming absolutely exasperated. They were being literally ruined by these fines. In my section, anger was especially concentrated against a particular shift foreman, who was keen on the fines, but was also keen on drinking, especially during working hours.

One day when this foreman was on the late shift, after most of the management had left for the day, he got particularly drunk and the workers discussed what to do about it. It was proposed to draw up a document, signed by everybody on the shift, to send to the party officials at the factory, protesting about this foreman's drunkenness and in particular about his boorish behaviour towards women

workers.

I have already said how much I hated the very word “party”, and I suggested that rather than appeal to the party committee we should have a word with this foreman ourselves. We did so, and this discussion led to some pushing and shoving. To cut a long story short, it ended up with the foreman taking a beating from me. He had a bone in his leg broken.

Thanks to the fact that he had been drunk, I was not seriously punished. I did get sacked but it's interesting to note that this took some time, that there was a system of appeals to party and trade union committees through which my case was taken, lasting some months, before they could get rid of me. This is in contrast to the “new” Ukraine, where private employers have the absolute right of hire and fire.

I soon found another job, at the Dnepropetrovsk Industrial Power Combine, which centralises the generation of electricity, steam for industrial purposes and heating to 26 factories in the industrial *raion*, including food and clothing factories, a water treatment plant and the construction combine.

It was there at the power combine, in 1984, that I began to propagandise systematically in support of *Solidarność*. In the summer of 1984 I spoke out at a factory meeting against another plan for two days' unpaid labour this time labour in the fields, to complete the CPSU's programme for food provision. At a general factory meeting, in front of the management, I urged workers to boycott this forced labour. And before long I was called to a “pre-emptive discussion” as they called them, at the local offices of the KGB.

The KGB had been considerably expanded in 1983, just after Andropov became the CPSU general secretary. Formerly they had had offices in each town. Now extra offices were established in every urban *raion*, and particular KGB officers were assigned to each factory and obliged to report on the “ideological situation”.

These officers would turn up at the factory once a month and meet with the secretary of the party organisation, the trade union secretary, the management and other informants.

After this “pre-emptive discussion”, at the time of the 7 November anniversary of the Russian revolution, I prepared a leaflet but I had second thoughts and decided not to distribute it. I developed my campaign of word of-mouth propaganda through 1984, 1985 and 1986.

I called on people to boycott the *subbotniki* (compulsory overtime on Saturdays) and to refuse to work for nothing. I called on people to boycott the political education classes. And the KGB continued to keep an eye on my activity, and on the activity of Baptists and Evangelists who came to the factory and gave out leaflets.

And at this time the Soviet Union itself began to change very fast. Gorbachev, who became CPSU General Secretary in 1984, soon launched the policies of perestroika (economic reform) and glasnost (increased political openness).

3. PERESTROIKA ON THE DNEPR

What difference did Gorbachev's reforms make to you and your efforts to organise workers?

In 1987, thanks to the policy of “glasnost”, I was able to announce for the first time in a legal forum — an open meeting organised by the CPSU at the industrial power combine — that I stood on the programme of anarchosyndicalism.

Attendance at these “open meetings” was compulsory for the whole workforce. And I used one such meeting as an opportunity to propose that during the political education classes, at which attendance was also compulsory, an open debate should be held between a representative of the CPSU and myself as an active anarchosyndicalist.

The CPSU representatives were furious, and said they could not and would not allow such a discussion. One of them, a veteran of the war with Japan in 1945, thumped his chest and said he had not gone to fight in Japan so as to end up having “some kind of discussion about some sort of anarchosyndicalism”! But the proposal had been made, and eventually — after six months, in the spring of 1988 — a functionary from the Industrial *raion* committee of the CPSU, Moroz, gave permission to the factory committee to go ahead, and they had to debate with me at the political education class.

At the same time as carrying on this political fight with the CPSU, I was constantly trying to encourage workers to organise, to express solidarity with each other on basic workplace issues. In 1988 I stood for election to the trade union committee. It was a secret ballot and I was elected by a clear majority against one of the so-called “Marxist Leninists”, who had spent his life working with the management and the CPSU against the workers at the plant, and had put in a fair bit of time participating in witch hunts against me.

The issue worrying workers at the plant at this time was the management's constant attempts to make them do extra work outside their contracts. For example, engineers who were contracted to maintain and repair equipment would suddenly find they were being told to paint it too. Other issues were gnawing away safety standards, worries about the organisation of work, etc. But the main thing were these extra tasks, which managers asked workers, on a variety of pretexts, to do unpaid.

The managers were being paid a bonus for reductions in outgoings from the plant's wages fund. So obviously the more additional tasks they could get workers to do for nothing, the more they would benefit directly. The repair personnel, for example, were often asked to unload goods that arrived at the factory. Management didn't want to spend money hiring haulage workers to do the job properly, and although they did not ask people to work outside normal hours, unloading jobs have to be finished once they are started and often dragged past the end of the shift. Myself and others urged workers collectively to boycott these extra jobs, and quite often they did so.

There were more widespread attempts to set up independent trade unions in the perestroika period. Were you involved in these?

Yes. In early 1989, various activists including myself, mostly anarchosyndicalists, tried to form an independent trade union in Dnepropetrovsk. At first we tried to form a section of the new union Sotsprof, which at first stood for “Socialist Trade Union”, but was later changed to “Social Trade Union” when the organisers felt that the word “socialist” was becoming unpopular. But we succeeded in bringing together only some middle-class professional people and some workers in

small co-operatives. Some individual members of Sotsprof, including myself, worked in the big state-owned enterprises. We had members in engineering and machine-building factories, in the power combine, etc. But we had little success in building organisations.

For a start, any independent form of organisation faced the most ferocious opposition from the party and trade union organisations as well as from management. For example, in 1991, when the August coup took place, the chief engineer of our factory decided that I would be sacked in line with the so-called “emergency measures”. Feeling brave, with tanks on the streets in Moscow, he yelled across the plant, “I’ll not allow any *Solidarność* to get in here”, and announced that my dismissal was imminent. This was a reference to my constant attempts to win support for the independent trade unions.

We shall return to the issue of the August coup. For now it should be stressed that it was not only the open opposition of the CPSU that made things difficult for the independent unions. The fact was that the official unions, for all their strike-breaking betrayals, still gave out those cheap *putevki* and made available foodstuffs and other goods that were in short supply. Obviously the new trade unions could not aspire to such functions.

We had no material benefits to offer workers. On the contrary, we said that in the first instance, establishing really independent workers' organisation would be hard. There would be victims in the moral and material sense, as there had been in Poland. There would be police surveillance, there would be discomfort.

And workers said to us that they wanted something from these organisations. Their attitude was one of dependence. They were not yet looking for means to achieve self-organisation or stand up for their rights. They thought that the activists could give them something on a plate, without them taking part in struggle themselves. Of course we could not give anything to anybody. So these initial attempts to organise independent unions in the big plants failed.

This had a further consequence. The independent unions had a membership among students, middle-class people, co-operative employees etc. — and very quickly degenerated. They became bureaucratised. There were numerous cases of financial corruption.

As a result of these developments, the anarchosyndicalists in Dnepropetrovsk, including myself, decided to leave Sotsprof. In 1991, together with other activists, we formed a new organisation, Ukrainian Sotsprof and that went the same way.

More recently, the anarchosyndicalists became active in a very small organisation, made up only of their co-thinkers, the International Workers Association. It consists of a few dozen people, again mostly middle-class professionals, photographers, artists etc.

I myself, working in the power combine and talking to workers in the big state-owned factories, came to the conclusion that it was necessary to work inside the official trade unions, to try to change them from the inside.

It is not an easy task. The very idea of trade unionism has been so discredited. A large number of workers do not even know what the unions are for. Many have left. But the majority remained, and I came to the view that we need to get genuine working-class activists inside these structures, to change their essence from within, to change them into organisations which stand up against arbitrary management dictatorship and fight for workers' rights against exploitation. This would mean expelling the traitors, strike-breakers and management agents from these organisations and

replacing them with true working-class activists.

Do you think these bureaucratic organisations can be changed? Is it a matter of changing them or rather of splitting them, exploding them so to speak, in such a way that real workers' organisations could emerge?

One possible variant is that these organisations will split, certainly. That is something that I have frequently discussed with comrades here. I have developed the idea that union organisations in which working-class activists develop influence can always then break their links with the pyramid of official trade union bureaucracy. They can declare themselves independent at whatever moment is appropriate and such a declaration could be made by a factory organisation, or the organisation of one *raion*, or on whatever scale you like.

The important thing is to start at the base, the grass roots, on the factory floor, and change the essential character of the trade union's activity. That is the place to start turning them from agents of management into weapons of working-class struggle. And then we will see.

4. FROM SOVIET UNION TO “NEW UKRAINE”

What did the collapse of the Soviet Union mean to workers in Dnepropetrovsk?

We could start with the event that triggered that collapse — the defeat of the putsch staged in August 1991 by the GKChP [*Gosudarstvennii Komitet Chrezvichainogo Polozhenia*, or State Committee for the Emergency Situation, led by Gennady Yanayev. This committee placed Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev under arrest, put tanks on the streets of Moscow and ruled for three days before collapsing on August 21 1991]

During the three days of the putsch, workers here were in a state of complete bewilderment. The radio in the power combine announced that in Moscow barricades had gone up and that armed conflict had broken out.

I spent those days with my anarchosyndicalist comrades. First we hid the archives of the local anarchist groups, fearing a clamp down. Then we went around the factory districts, painting slogans on the walls against the GKChP. On the night of 19-20 August, we put together a leaflet denouncing the GKChP as an anti-working-class dictatorship. On the 20th, we distributed it around the factories.

While the workers were passive, due to their confusion, the management and the party structures — which were on their last legs at that time leaped into a sudden flurry of activity. It seemed to them that the dying monster of Stalinism was again raising its head. At the CPSU *raion* committee offices, the *partkhozaktiv* [short for *partiinii khozaistsvennii aktiv*, a grouping of party activists in the economy] was in constant session for three days. All the party secretaries, factory directors and chief engineers were present. The *raion* committee had already named some “communists” as a plenipotentiary troika [i.e. group of three] as they called them in Stalin's time. Their job was to direct things at the factories and ensure industrial discipline during the so-called “emergency situation”.

The CPSU experienced a sudden revival. In the two years leading up to the coup, I should say that the party's membership in Dnepropetrovsk fell by about 80 per cent. But during the putsch, many of those who had left the party ran to its offices asking to “renew” their membership. Some of these also took the opportunity to make threats against me and expressed the hope that the authorities would once and for all “sort out” myself and those at the power combine who supported me.

And what happened after the three days, after the coup was defeated?

All the managers and bureaucrats who had suddenly got so courageous under the GKChP fell completely silent. The CPSU was prohibited and very soon disappeared. All the great political denunciations stopped, and those who had been making them started busying themselves working out how to incorporate the factories in Dnepropetrovsk in to the capitalist economy.

What about your own political activity?

The conditions under which I was working had changed, of course. Before then, everything took place in the context of a fight against Stalinism. In a certain sense, one side of that conflict just disappeared after the August putsch. That is to say, Stalinism ideologically fell to pieces. I can give you one example, out of dozens, of what happened to the CPSU members. It concerns one member of the party committee at the power combine, who worked as a manager and served for several

years on the trade union committee. In March 1989, this man had orchestrated a decision by the trade union committee to send information about my activity “anti-party activity and the demoralisation of the labour collective” as they called it to the KGB. It all sounds like a sick joke: a trade union committee informing the political police about the political activity of a member of their trade union.

Anyway, this same man, who had all his life so furiously and so slavishly defended the power of the CPSU, underwent a remarkable overnight transformation after the collapse of the GKChP. He turned up at work wearing the badge of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists of Stepan Bandera [an extreme right-wing nationalist organisation, whose members formed partisan bands to fight on the side of Nazi Germany against Soviet forces during the Second World War].

At that time, after the 1991 coup, the workers' material situation worsened rapidly. Managements started to lease out factories, effectively turning them into capitalist private property. Workers were deprived of rights that previously had been guaranteed, at least formally. Managements sensed that they had unlimited power. The payment of wages began to be held up more and more frequently. There was a lack of supplies of both cheap foodstuffs and manufactured goods. The prices of what was available rose fast. And so arose sharp feelings of dissatisfaction among workers — and a new wave of disputes, primarily of an economic character.

My activity was concentrated around such disputes. I distributed working-class, trade union and revolutionary literature at five or six factories in our district, and in the power combine itself I did my best to organise resistance to the management.

In 1992, the first strike in the power combine's history took place. It has a workforce of about 150, and nearly all took part. There were three demands: an increase in pay; an increase in the basic wage in proportion to bonuses; and the publication of details of managers' salaries. The workers felt particularly strongly about this last point. It was known that, while in the latter days of the Soviet Union managers' wages had been higher than their own, now in the “new” Ukraine the gap had widened.

A three-member strike committee was elected, with myself as the chair and two other members. First we held a one-day warning strike, in support of the three demands. In response, the management increased the basic pay rate. They also made public a list of the salaries of the entire staff of the company for the first half of 1992. Of course it was formulated in such a way that, without the help of financial experts, an ordinary worker would find it hard to know what was there in black and white and what had been left out. But even from this document, we found out, for example, that the director's secretary earned more than the steam boiler operators who worked 12-hour shifts in conditions of loud noise, fumes and high temperatures.

It was decided to stage a further, indefinite strike, until all three demands were met in full. But in the course of three days' further action, people caved in to a campaign of threats and bribes by the management. On the first day everyone was solid, but on the second people gradually drifted back and on the third I was outside the factory on my own with the placard that we had made. I had told the workers before the strike that, if it began, would take it through to the end. I thought surrender was out of the question. The three strike committee members were offered a choice whether to leave supposedly “of their own accord”, or to be sacked.

To explain how important this was, it is necessary to point out that in the “new” Ukraine, all the police measures introduced by Stalin in the 1930s to control workers – labour books, cadre departments, the internal passport system and residence permits – were still in force. In

Dnepropetrovsk, managements in the state-owned factories, which still meant the vast majority, the local authorities, police and all the rest still used these documents. And at the time of this interview they still do.

The choice offered to the three strike committee members was this: either to have it entered in our labour books that we had left the power combine of our own accord, in which case we would be able to get another job at a state-owned factory quite easily; or to be sacked for “systematic failure to fulfil labour duties”. The two other committee members chose the former, I chose the latter.

And so I found myself an experienced, highly qualified worker with two children to support unable to get another job in a state-owned factory. For six months I went from one factory to another, getting turned down by one personnel manager after another. And then I was compelled, in order to feed myself and my family, to take a job as a security guard at a private factory wielding a club, guarding the material wealth of the new Ukrainian bourgeoisie!

At the end of 1993 I again got the chance of a job among a large body of workers at the Dnepropetrovsk Construction Combine No.1, where there was a vacancy for a steam boiler engineer, which is my trade. And I still work there now.

What about the big strike wave that began in the Donbass and spread to Kharkov and other cities, in the summer of 1993? Did it have any effect in Dnepropetrovsk?

Unfortunately, no Dnepropetrovsk workers participated, as far as I know. It was an extremely important movement and an unpleasant experience for the new pro-bourgeois regime. The miners of Donbass went on strike, supported by many factory workers there, with a series of economic and political demands. The Krivoi Rog iron ore mines also came out.

Within a few days, the political demands had become predominant: the strikers wanted the resignation of the Supreme Soviet and of the president of Ukraine, at that time Leonid Kravchuk. It is a tragedy that the workers in the huge Pridneprovye industrial region, which lies between Donbass and Krivoi Rog comprising Dnepropetrovsk, Dneprodzherzhinsk and Zaporozhye did not join the strike. Perhaps if they had done so the government of Ukraine could even have fallen.

Individual activists, including myself, did everything possible to change the situation and bring workers out on strike in solidarity with the movement. We distributed leaflets and went to the factories to urge the necessity of supporting the strike. We had done the same in 1989 and 1990 when the miners went on strike. But, in 1993 as at that time, the workers were not yet ready to strike solely on the basis of working-class solidarity. The feeling for such solidarity was still very weak. Nevertheless, the strike movement was an important experience and showed that it was possible to unite the miners and factory workers. [For a fuller account of this movement, see Appendix 2].

How did your political views develop after the collapse of the USSR?

At that time, I was a member of the Confederation of Anarchosyndicalists, which had been formed at a conference in Moscow in 1989. But I was also studying Marxist literature which I had not been able to get hold of before. I became particularly interested in the work of Trotsky and the Left Opposition, from the mid-1920s onward. Up until then, the Trotskyist programme had been completely unknown to me.

In 1990, I came into contact for the first time with emissaries of the international Trotskyist

movement who had found a way of getting into the USSR. They were Swedish comrades, who were on a trade union delegation to Dnepropetrovsk. They gave me a copy of *The Revolution Betrayed*, Trotsky's analysis of the degeneration of the Soviet state, written in 1936. This was the first thing written by Trotsky after his exile from the USSR that I had ever read. Even in the perestroika period, this sort of material had not been published here.

The Revolution Betrayed made a powerful impression on me. I had been trying to understand the social, political and economic development of the USSR and it greatly contributed to that. At the same time, I became acquainted with the analysis of present day developments by various Marxists. My thinking on the question of the revolutionary party had also begun to change. Having been enthused by Polish *Solidarność*, and having seen the rottenness of the CPSU, I had for many years believed only in self-organisation of the workers and categorically rejected any form of party organisation.

But with the failure of the various attempts to organise independent trade unions, the problems we encountered when fighting with syndicalist methods, the limitations of the mass spontaneous resistance on one hand and trade union forms of struggle on the other, I came to the conclusion that the workers did after all need their own party, in order to bring together on a political programme all the disparate activists, who are separated from one another. It seemed to me that in the face of the decline of class consciousness, the formation of or at least, co-operation between comrades with a view to the formation of a party based on Trotsky's ideas would be a great step forward.

As from 1994 I had clearly come over to the Trotskyist point of view and from then I worked together with representatives of various Trotskyist tendencies. I joined the Socialist Workers Union [the group in the former USSR which is part of the Workers International to Rebuild the Fourth International]. I combined my political activity with new attempts to organise my fellow workers in the construction combine to resist the catastrophic fall in living standards brought on by privatisation and hyper-inflation.

5. GETTING THE WAGES PAID ON TIME

During 1995 there was constant industrial conflict at the Dnepropetrovsk Construction Combine No.1, where Oleg Dubrovskii works. This chapter describes how this conflict, which began over the issue of unpaid wages, became a fight to democratise workers' organisation. It is edited from written reports by Dubrovskii circulated to worker activists in Russia and Ukraine.

At least since I started working at the combine at the end of 1993, its management was becoming more powerful, more arrogant, more uncontrollable. In our plant, the fabrication plant no.1, even the formal structures of the official trade union were dying away.

The plant produces reinforced concrete blocks and units, mostly for residential construction. In 1994 production went in fits and starts. Sometimes it would grind to a complete halt. The steam boiler house where I work was an island of comparative stability, because it was in continuous operation. It provides steam not only for the Construction Combine, but also for adjoining factories including another building materials plant, a panel fabrication plant and the Dnepropetrovsk Industrial Construction Combine.

The general mood of workers in the combine was depressed. There was no belief in anything, least of all in their ability to change things by their own action.

There was great confusion. Some longed for the “era of stagnation” [the Brezhnev period]. Others watched the endless propaganda on television about the “bright capitalist future”.

Nationalist and anti-semitic prejudices grew. Fables spread in Ukraine about ways to get rich quick through voucher schemes, privatisation, shares, dividends and all the rest.

I agitated in the plant against the pro bourgeois regime, against the illusions in the “market” and private property, against the fraud of privatisation. I argued for the formation of workers' committees at the plant. And I distributed literature by Trotsky, which was now available, along with revolutionary Marxist newspapers and pamphlets.

The first step — protest

At the end of December 1994, the steam boiler repair men at the plant went on strike, demanding the payment of wages for November, which were still owing, together with compensation for value lost due to inflation. [At this time, prices were rising in Ukraine at an annual rate of more than 800% per year].

There were talks with the plant manager. First, threats. Then, yes, he admitted, the law of the land works against ordinary employees but he could only help within the framework of that law. The two sides failed to agree, as they say.

The strike had been initiated in the hope that our demands would be taken up by the whole combine. Leaflets calling for wider action were pasted up. And although there was a raging discussion, and the management flew into a tantrum, the production workers did not join the strike.

The management threw scraps to the fabrication plant workers, a million *karbovantsi* (£6.50) of what was owing to them for November. To the boiler repair men's credit, this did not get them back to work.

The strike continued in the first few days of 1995. More threats of disciplinary measures from the management, supported by the combine trade union committee. I was delegated by the strikers to approach the oblast committee of the union. Its secretary, Mr Pogrebnyak, promised to come and intervene.

On 5 January 1995 the whole boiler room staff had gathered to support the striking repair men and to attend the meeting with Mr Pogrebnyak. He never appeared. Instead he was meeting management, working out a joint stance.

The combine manager, Mr Pronenko, gave a written answer to the strikers' demands. The main point was: "Under the law as it stands, the management cannot be held materially responsible for delay in wages payments".

The next day, talks between the strikers, the management and Mr Pogrebnyak from the union. The latter was asked: "What about the collective agreement in the plant [i.e. agreement between unions and management defining workers' terms and conditions]? What if its conditions have been broken?"

He replied that, yes, the collective agreement had been broken, and yes, that under part of Ukrainian law management had responsibility... but that that law was subordinate to the Administrative Code, in which no such responsibility was stipulated. There was no way of legally enforcing collective agreements, and no procurator would ever convict any management for breaking one.

In other words, collective agreements only operate if the management feel like it! It's a matter of their good will!

Conclusion of the talks: the management has no responsibility to the workforce; the collective agreement is a fiction; wages can be delayed again ... and you either shut up and accept it or find another job.

But, the management told us in the guise of "legal advice" from their lawyer... if you go on strike again we will sack you for gross industrial misconduct.

The boiler repair men decided to suspend their action.

After that followed three months of relative calm. I continued my agitation. The workers kept on discussing what to do.

Then one fine April morning, the 20th, a group of workers from the steam boiler house and the external heating service stopped work and marched up to the fabrication plant manager, Mr Pashkovskii, to demand the immediate payment of wages for February which they had not yet received. That day the workers in the fabrication plant itself had received a million kv each for their February wages, but these auxiliary staff had had nothing.

On 21 April there was an unprepared, partial strike by some fitters, assembly workers and the machine repair shop. The steam boiler engineers proposed that on 25 April, the first day after the [Orthodox church] Easter holiday, there should be an all-out strike, and for the first in the combine's history a general workers' meeting organised independently of the management.

25 April. The machine repair shop and the boiler room struck.

The works were plastered with leaflets calling the independent meeting. On the agenda: the non payment of nearly three months' wages; the absence of any collective agreement. We hoped for an exchange of views between different sections of the fabrication plant and maybe even the election of a strike committee.

Management were determined to frustrate this sort of activity. Before the meeting they paid each employee another million kv of February's wages. (A negative result but a result nonetheless!) The meeting took place but only 20 workers attended.

26 April. Bad news. The machine repair shop broke the strike and returned to work after the lunch break. Then the combine boss, Mr Pronenko, visited the plant and regaled hundreds of workers with mystifying figures and empty promises.

The strike ended. The wages kept getting delayed.

The second step – resistance

Three weeks later, on 18 May, hundreds of production workers walked out of the fabrication plant without the slightest warning, a few minutes after the start of the morning shift. They wanted their wages for March and April.

It was a completely unprepared, spontaneous strike. I had no idea it was going to happen. It was a reminder of an old political truth: that activists cannot start a movement, they can only help it to develop.

There were rowdy negotiations. The management swore there was no money and would be none. But by the end of the day money to pay the wages for March had miraculously appeared. But on 19 May the strike continued. It was decided to picket the plant gate. I proposed the formation of a strike committee but the workers decided against, on the grounds that its members would soon face all sorts of sanctions, up to and including the sack.

We formulated four strike demands: (1) Wages to be increased in line with prices. (2) Prompt payment of wages, with compensation in the case of late payment. (3) Rapid drafting and conclusion of a collective agreement. (4) Regular checks on the combine's accounts by the Labour Collective Council [*Soviet Trudovogo Kollektiva* – since 1987, a body nominally elected democratically by all staff in a workplace, and nominally the enterprise's sovereign power between general meetings. See Glossary.] This Council to be re-elected with 60 per cent of places reserved for workers' representatives.

Over the next three days, these demands were signed by the entire fabrication plant workforce. I was delegated to present our case to the combine management, the trade union oblast committee and the municipal council. The workers also demanded the re-election of their trade union representatives and the reformation of the moribund fabrication plant union organisation.

23 May. After four days, the strike came to an end. The fabrication plant boss, Mr Pashkovskii, together with the combine's chief engineer, Mr Stratienco, announced that April's wages would only be paid to those who went back to work. Talk about impudence!

The bribery appeared to be successful. The less well-organised parts of the plant caved in and went back to work.

The management had not a word to say, of course, about paying future wages on time, still less about a collective agreement. Nor did Mr Shapa, the combine trade union boss.

On 6 June the combine manager, Mr Pronenko, had the cheek to tour the plant, saying that the delay in wage payments was due to the general crisis of payments, that under no circumstances would there be any compensation, etc.

After the strike, I distributed a leaflet in the combine in the name of the Socialist Workers Union. “How can we oppose the arbitrary dictatorship of management?”

it asked. “Only by organisation! The bosses are organised. The workers are divided. The power of the management and their puppets in the trade union structures must be answered by workers' organisation, workers' power starting with workers' committees in every shop and every plant. “Only when workers can elect their own committees, without any sanctions from management, will we be able to end the system of dictates. Only then will we be able to make the management respect workers and negotiate with them about wages, working conditions, social benefits etc. As long as we have no organisation of our own, we are just hired slaves without any rights.”

The third step: unmasking management mischief

Our strike campaign had highlighted the absence of a collective agreement at the combine. The management were embarrassed by this.

And so on 26 June, the fabrication plant workforce was suddenly informed that a conference had been called (by whom?!) to conclude a collective agreement. Not in the local school hall, where larger meetings are usually held... but in the combine manager's office.

“Sign a collective agreement in the manager's office? You cannot be serious!”, said an elderly workmate, a former party and trade union activist of many years' experience.

The selection of delegates to this meeting was by disgraceful management manipulation. Managers went round the shops asking certain people if they wanted to attend, “representing” their workmates. I was among the “chosen”!

27 June. In the combine manager's immense office. A portrait of Lenin (!) above a table far too big for a room of that size. The shameful farce was underway.

Eighty delegates, nominated by management, representing a workforce of nearly 2000. And virtually the entire managerial staff. All sitting in tightly-packed rows in a room that was far too small. Over by the only open window, across the table, was the top management of the combine. With them – and not with the workers! – were the combine and oblast trade union representatives, Mr Shapa and Mr Pogrebnyak.

The agenda had been fixed in advance by the management. Mr Oginskii, the personnel manager, took the chair.

First speaker: the combine boss, Mr Pronenko. On and on about the collapse of Ukrainian industry and especially the building industry...

And then some words about the Labour Collective Council, whose re-election we had demanded in

our strike campaign. Mr Pronenko said the election of this council was not covered by Ukrainian law, and therefore Soviet labour law still applied. This law, he claimed, stipulated that the council should comprise 50% management, 50% workers.

An important point ... because he was lying! Having organised plenty of workers' actions against the "red" bosses I well knew that Soviet law said no such thing. In 1987 a law had been passed to the effect that Labour Collective Councils should be elected, but their exact composition was not specified. And even then, on the "eve" of perestroika, no one ever suggested that the manager should appoint half the council!

Second speaker: the combine trade union boss, Mr Shapa. Health and safety, blah blah blah, holiday *putevki*, blah blah blah, sanatoria, the factory shop, days off ... Not a word about the paralysed trade union structure. Not a word about the industrial disputes of recent months. (It was this same Mr Shapa who had yelled down the phone to the striking boiler repair men a few months before: "What are you playing at? You've had another million [*karbovantsi*]. Be happy with that there's no money and there's not going to be any.")

The chair, Mr Oginskii, proposed to jump straight to the next point on the agenda. Isn't there going to be discussion on the reports? No there is not. The meeting decided, with only my vote against, to hurry ahead.

The draft of a new collective agreement was produced by the management. None of the delegates present let alone the workers who were out on strike demanding it had ever seen it before. The combine's lawyer read it out loud. Long and tedious. The delegates' attention wandered and they talked among themselves. The chair called for order in vain. But they just wanted to get it over and done with and get out into some fresh air. Actually, it was worth paying attention.

Apparently, a commission had been established back in February to draft the collective agreement. Who was on this body we do not know. Certainly, there was no opportunity to amend, add to or discuss the draft.

This draft covered everything under the sun, except the only really important thing: what was to happen to wage payments in the present conditions of uncontrolled inflation? And what responsibility did the management have to make sure these payments were made?

I addressed the meeting. This is the gist of what I said:

"The factory manager has painted a colourful picture of Ukraine's catastrophic economic situation. But why, Mr Pronenko, do you suggest that we must suffer? It is the bosses at all levels who have brought the economy to this dead end. Why should we pay the price? Pay no attention to all these managerial commands to "understand", "take account of the situation" etc. Our business is to demand that we get from our work sufficient means for us and our families to live. How the managers get themselves out of their mess is their problem.

"About the Labour Collective Council. Half of its members to be appointed by the manager? That's a sick bureaucratic joke, reminiscent of the time when the party bureaucracy ruled the factories and was accountable to no one. The Council must be constituted through elections, and in no other way. Otherwise it's a mockery. If it turns out that half of its members are to be appointed by the manager, I propose it should be boycotted by the workforce."

I criticised the combine trade union boss, Mr Shapa, for the fact that he had not once voiced the

demands put forward in a series of industrial disputes by the workers he is supposed to represent. I said that we should call the combine trade union leadership by its right name: a dumb, unprincipled adjunct of the management.

I said it was completely wrong for the management to constitute a commission to decide on the text of the collective agreement. Even the trade union had not participated in the drafting commission. How, then, can it be an agreement? Who agreed with whom?

I said the procedure was a “shameful farce”, and that it was ridiculous to try to conclude a collective agreement in the manager's office in this way. I continued: “Let us agree with the demand of the fabrication plant, to elect a new, militant, principled trade union committee. Such a committee could then put its own draft collective agreement as an alternative to the management's. Then let these drafts be discussed as widely as possible throughout the combine.”

The delegates listened intently. But unfortunately only one spoke, Mr Prilutskii, president of the moribund fabrication plant about trade union committee, asking work wear. The other delegates, unfortunately, were silent.

The chair seized on the fact that I had said it was wrong to conclude the agreement in the manager's office. He asked if delegates wanted to reconvene in a larger hall. I protested that this was not my point. He tried to take a vote on this matter. The delegates lost their patience and there was general uproar. Most of them just wanted to go home, or at least get into the fresh air. It was agreed to proceed with the agenda and to vote on the collective agreement.

Out of 80 delegates, all but three voted to accept the manager's annual report. All but one (myself) voted to accept the trade union report. All but one voted to accept the work of the drafting commission, that is, to accept the collective agreement.

Elections to the Labour Collective Council. Mr Pronenko, the combine manager, grinning in response to my protests, said: “OK then, if we now have democratisation, I agree. Let us reduce the management representation on the Council to 40 per cent, and have workers in 60 per cent of the places.” (This was the same man who an hour before had said that the law stipulated it had to be 50-50!)

This was agreed. And then Mr Pronenko read out a list of names for the management representatives and then proposed a list for the worker “representatives” too! So much for “democratisation”! Both lists were accepted. The delegates wanted to go home.

The pyramid of oppressive power is still in good working order in the “new” Ukraine. At least, in our combine, the workers were beginning to see how it operates.

Fourth step: cutting off steam

Through the summer, wages continued to be delayed. And open conflict broke out again in the autumn.

In the boiler house we had to do some emergency repair work. Payment was agreed but no money was forthcoming. On 12 September, as the trade union representative for the boiler house, I handed to the combine's chief engineer, Mr Rublevskii, a letter demanding prompt payment, signed by all the workers.

18 September. A trade union meeting in the boiler house. The combine lawyer and the chief engineer were invited. Despite threats from them, and claims that we had no legal right to strike, it was resolved that if the back payments were not made by 2 October, we would stop work and extinguish the boilers.

The decision was unanimous, by a free vote. That didn't stop Mr Rublevskii singling me out as an "agitator" and "provocateur"!

We informed the management and the combine trade union boss of our decision. No reaction, except that two days before the strike was due to start the trade union boss sent his deputy to remind us that under a 1990 (that is, "Soviet") law, it would be illegal.

2 October. Strike. We extinguished the boilers and occupied the boiler house. Not only the Construction Combine but three other factories to which we supplied steam had to stop work. Their managers phoned constantly demanding steam. The reply: "Sorry, we're on strike."

The manager of one factory came and proposed to pay our back wages immediately in US dollars! We declined and referred him to the combine manager, Mr Pronenko.

The latter had not been anywhere near the strikebound boiler house. Neither had the combine trade union boss. In fact all day we tried to contact this so-called "workers' representative" by phone, but could not reach him. We got his deputy, who said our action was illegal and he would not talk to us.

This trade union committee was a complete puppet of the management and everyone in the boiler house could see it.

That night, fearing that the management would organise strike-breakers to seize the boilers and start them up, we continued the occupation.

3 October. Another workers' meeting in the strikebound boiler house. More calls from factory managers imploring us to give them steam.

Enter Mr Pronenko, with his retinue of combine and plant management representatives. We agreed to negotiate in the framework of our trade union meeting. They participated, and capitulated completely. They agreed to all of our demands. The strike ended and we started up the boilers. A small but important victory.

Note the whole thing had been done without any trade union official coming anywhere near the boiler house.

4 October. The boiler house workers received all their back pay, but the rest of the shops in the fabrication plant were a month behind. Unfortunately, the workers, instead of uniting against the management, just complained about their colleagues in the boiler house. The level of class consciousness is still low.

The fifth step: getting rid of stooges

18 October. General meeting of the trade union in the fabrication plant. A new trade union committee was elected, 75 per cent of it new faces. Among those elected: myself, from the boiler house; also the long time committee president, Mr Pryluskii, a management puppet, strike-breaker and former CPSU committee secretary (for which function he was on full-time release from work

for many years).

A week later this committee met for the first time, to elect a president and resolve various organisational questions. The above-mentioned strike-breaker had invited to this meeting the fabrication plant manager, Mr Pashkovskii, and the plant chief engineer, Mr Tabrin.

I demanded a vote on whether or not to admit these people to our trade union meeting. After Messrs Pashkovskii, Tabrin and Pryluskii had all created a huge rumpus, the meeting decided to exclude the first two. They were part of management and not committee members.

They had to leave. It was a punch on the nose for them, metaphorically speaking. For us, a small moral victory.

Straight after them went Mr Pryluskii, announcing his resignation from the factory committee. Good riddance.

I was nominated to take his place as president but declined, proposing for the position another very good comrade, a worker from the main production area of the fabrication plant. That comrade was duly elected.

To sum up: the management lost its control over our fabrication plant trade union committee! Progress!

And more steps still in front...

After taking these steps towards a truly representative, democratic union organisation in the fabrication plant, we tried to take that fight into the trade union structure at combine and oblast level.

On 26 October, a general meeting of the combine trade union took place, to elect a new committee. Here the management had the upper hand. The former party secretary of the combine was in the chair. Alongside him on the platform were the combine trade union boss and his deputy.

In his opening speech the trade union boss described the boiler house strike as “a betrayal of the interests of the combine”. In reply, I criticised the activity or rather, non-activity of the combine trade union committee in the wages dispute.

Our new fabrication plant trade union president spoke also, but unfortunately most workers did not participate in the discussion.

Management representatives got to their feet and concentrated on attacking what I had said. Their argument boiled down to a repetition of the old Stalinist idea of what a trade union should be that it should unite workers with management. They certainly did not want an independent trade union, expressing the interests of the combine's workers!

The next item of business: election of the combine trade union leadership. At my proposal the combine committee chair was elected there and then at the mass meeting. Unfortunately there were only two candidates the combine trade union boss Mr Shapa, and his deputy Mr Lysenko. We had to choose the lesser of two evils and the management were voting for Mr Shapa. The majority went against them and despite them insisting on three recounts on various pretexts, Mr Shapa lost. A 100 per cent opportunist was replaced by a more cunning bureaucrat, Mr Lysenko. Some days later,

representatives from the Construction Combine attended an oblast conference of our union, the Builders and Construction Workers Trade Union. There the opportunists were in complete control.

The oblast committee consists of 59 persons. Of these there are four factory directors; 21 other managers; 23 trade union committee presidents on full-time release for trade union duties; and 11 workers.

Look at these figures and imagine: could such a pro-management line-up be found in any trade union committee in Britain?!

... Back at the combine and without the help of this body we continued our fight over wages and conditions.

The management had Broken an agreement, reached in settlement of the boiler house strike, to institute a new shift system. On 1 November, we decided to operate the new shifts ourselves. Management pressure and threats made no difference.

Later that month we moved from the boiler house that the whole fabrication plant should strike, over a series of wages and conditions issues. In a ballot of the entire plant, the proposal was rejected. This time.

And so the management continues to delay payment of our wages. And we continue to fight back.

6. LOOKING BACK, GOING FORWARD

What are the prospects facing the working class in Ukraine? How will workers pursue the fight for better living standards, build their organisations and give expression to their political interests?

You explained [at the end of Chapter 4] how you reached the conclusion that a new working-class party was needed. You see the starting-point for that in the programme developed by Trotsky and his followers. How do you think such a party will be built?

One problem, a very serious problem, is that the Stalinist regime and here I mean not only under Stalin, but also under his successors Khrushchev, Brezhnev, Andropov and Gorbachev used, or perhaps I should say speculated in, the same terminology that is used by revolutionary Marxism.

Stalinism and the Stalinist regime was never anything but a mortal enemy of workers. But the bourgeois propaganda, churned out by an endless quantity of newspapers, television programmes etc., tries to link the memory of the October revolution [i.e. the Russian workers' revolution of 1917] with the memory of Stalinism. This propaganda tries to equate the power of soviets with the power of the Stalinist bureaucracy. And the task of bourgeois propaganda is made all the easier because of the perversion of Marxist terminology that went on under Stalinist regime, which left a terrible legacy in workers' consciousness. Such terminology calls forth in workers' minds associations with that regime.

That is why, to start with, we have to constantly reiterate that in no sense do we defend what was. We do not defend what the regime did.

In Ukraine, it is very important to explain that we do not defend the legacy of Stalinism in its dealings with the peasantry. Many workers came from the countryside one or two generations ago – and now they have been able to learn the truth about how the so-called “miracle” of forced collectivisation was achieved in 1930-1933. Today everyone knows about the man-made famine inflicted on Ukraine at that time by Stalin. And now workers are no longer afraid to recall that their parents were forced to sign confessions that they were “kulaks” [better-off peasants], or exiled, or deprived of their homes and material possessions. [Forced collectivisation was the policy by which peasant farmers were compelled to give up their own plots of land and join collective farms, undertaken with great violence in 1929-31. Those who refused were shot or jailed; those deemed “kulaks” were deported. The collectivisation drive and related policies wrecked the agricultural economy, especially in Ukraine, where it gave rise to a famine in 1932-33 which killed 4-6 million people.]

This, and many other crimes of Stalinism, were all carried out while the regime continued its dirty trade in socialist terminology. And now workers are alert. They are repelled by the past.

When we present ourselves as socialist, they may believe that we are trying to return to what was. So we must continuously emphasise that real socialism completely rejects, and has always completely rejected, the Stalinist regime, its methods, its practice, its ideology. We must show how the regime perverted and destroyed the essential ideas of the October revolution.

And destroyed many of those who made the October revolution, too.

Yes. The leaders of the regime strangled and suffocated the power of the workers' soviets, strangled the whole movement of the October revolution in the name of socialism.

The bureaucrats are correctly seen by workers as enemies. But remember that all these bureaucrats were called “communists” and today in Ukraine, right throughout the whole pyramid of power, all the key positions are filled by former functionaries of the CPSU. They may now call themselves “nationalists”, “democrats” or whatever – but the workers consider that these people are “communists”.

Having been left this legacy by the Stalinist regime, we have to separate out the hatred workers feel for these so-called “communists”, from communism and Marxist ideology which is a weapon for the working class itself.

We must state honestly that there is a low level of consciousness generally among workers here. Some yearn for a “good” boss or believe that “good” capitalists are on the way; others yearn for the Brezhnev years when there were plenty of cheap foodstuffs and cheap vodka. But these moods will change. The most serious problem is the alienation of workers from the terms and values of socialism, as a result of the counter-revolutionary activity of the Stalinist regime.

You sound pessimistic.

I am not at all pessimistic. I think that if the activists combine honest, principled and active work on behalf of workers and their rights, with socialist agitation and the strongest possible criticism of every attempt to resurrect what was under Brezhnev or Khrushchev, this will bear fruit.

The struggle to build a workers' party will be a long one. One big technical problem and also a problem of political development, is that here in Ukraine the only revolutionary Marxist literature we can get our hands on comes from Russia. It deals with Russian themes and Russian problems; it tells you what the Russian workers are doing. But we also need newspapers on Ukraine itself: we need to present to workers the facts of the class struggle here, in the Donbass, in Prdneprovye, in Krivoi Rog, in Kiev and so on. We need to get together the means to publish newspapers, pamphlets and books.

What direction do you think Ukraine as a whole will take, politically and economically, in the near future?

The immediate perspective is not good, in the sense that the working class is not able to organise resistance to the introduction of capitalism that is going on apace.

In the next few decades, I believe two alternatives will develop: either Ukraine will become a semi-colony of the developed countries of the west, which sells cheap labour power on the European market, in which western European firms can carry out experiments with dangerous technical processes, and in which dumping of toxic waste will also become commonplace or there will be a socialist revolution, which will put a stop to this offensive of world capitalism and take Ukraine out of the world capitalist market.

What is for sure is that Ukraine does not have the ability to compete favourably on the capitalist world market. Transnational companies will come here to take advantage of the low price of labour power. As for Ukraine's huge industries, there is simply no need for them in their present

form in the world capitalist market. These industries must inevitably be cut down. As president Kuchma is fond of saying, every third factory must close.

In the midst of such a process, what should we do? As adherents of the Fourth International [the international political organisation founded by Trotsky and his followers in 1938] we must try to develop ourselves as cadres, try to lay the basis for a new party.

We will take part actively in all labour conflicts, put forward our point of view inside the trade unions, increase our moral authority within the working class. From this basis it will be possible to form a party, with sections in the factory, a party which has sufficient authority among workers to lead strikes and play a role in the coming political struggles of the working class. There is certainly no way to a new future except through those struggles.

7. WORKERS EAST AND WEST UNITE!

Workers' resistance to the effects of hyper-inflation, in particular, the strike wave in the summer of 1993 and the miners' success in wringing from the authorities promises of pay increases, threw the Ukrainian regime into deep crisis.

In September 1993, the prime minister, Leonid Kuchma, resigned. In January 1994, president Leonid Kravchuk also stood down early and called a presidential election. He was opposed by Kuchma, who won in the second round, narrowly, with 52 per cent of the vote. Before the poll, Kuchma talked of establishing closer links with Russia and affected hostility to Kravchuk's policy of opening Ukraine up to the West, which many people saw as the cause of the economic crisis. His strongest support was from industrial eastern Ukraine.

But once in the president's office, Kuchma redoubled the "reform" programme which opened up Ukraine's economy to western capital. His policies added to the misery of industrial eastern Ukraine, and in the coal fields particularly. Miners struck repeatedly to demand the payment of wages left unpaid for months. In the spring of 1996 this conflict culminated with an extremely bitter strike in Donbass. The miners blockaded railways and main roads. They were pilloried by right-wing newspapers and some of the strike leaders were arrested.

As these struggles unfolded, and as Ukraine opened up to western capital, its workers' movement, like that in Russia and other parts of the former USSR, opened up to contacts with its counterparts in western Europe and north America. This is my own account of how some of those contacts have developed — SP.

From the right wing of the workers' movement in the west there came to the former USSR high-up officials of the American trade union federation, the AFL-CIO. The federation spends about \$30 million (£20 million) a year, almost half its total budget, on influencing workers' movements in other countries. Most of this money comes not from American workers but from the US government, largely channelled through the privately-run, extreme right-wing National Endowment for Democracy or the governmental US Agency for International Development. The AFL-CIO has established an agency in Moscow, the Free Trade Union Institute. Through its Organisers Programme, it funds trade union officials throughout the former USSR who agree with its right-wing policies.

These emissaries of right-wing American unionism preach collaboration with multinational companies and the regimes that welcome them, such as Yeltsin's and Kuchma's.

But other voices from the western workers' movement have been heard in the former USSR, singing a very different tune of the need for trade union organisations independent of employers, managers and the state, of the need for international solidarity against the multinationals.

In Ukraine an early initiative came from miners in north east England. In 1991, anxious to support Soviet miners struggling for improvements in pay and living conditions, they sent a representative to the Donbass. Delegations were exchanged: Donbass miners marched in London in the great demonstrations against pit closures in October 1992; Durham miners addressed meetings in Ukraine, explaining the capitalist reality of pit closures and state violence. They also warned their Ukrainian comrades off involvement with the "Union of Democratic Mineworkers", founded after the 1984-85 British miners' strike by leading Nottinghamshire strike-breakers, which had joined

with right-wing electricians' leader Eric Hammond in an attempt to tie the Russian and Ukrainian

miners' movement to the scabs “anti-communist democratic” bandwagon.

Other British trade unionists worked to build links with the miners' movement. In 1994, five trades councils joined with the miners of north-east England to protest when coal bosses in Kazakhstan replied to a strike over unpaid wages with sackings and legal sanctions. Trades unionists travelled from London to an international conference called by miners in Pavlograd, western Donbass, in April 1994.

That summer, when miners rallied in Mezhdurechensk, Siberia, on the fifth anniversary of their historic 1989 strike, a pompous-sounding AFL-CIO official gave a po-faced greeting. In contrast, a London bus worker spoke of rank-and-file unity and the need to resist bureaucracy.

The collapse of the Soviet regime and the opening-up of the former USSR to western capital has brought both dangers and opportunities. Most importantly have come new possibilities for workers east and west to rebuild internationalism — a militant, class-conscious internationalism, an internationalism of ordinary people struggling to take their own future into their own hands, an internationalism intertwined with the struggle for social liberation. We can, and must, realise those possibilities.

Appendix 1 – OLD COMRADES DONT FORGET EACH OTHER

This article by Oleg Dubrovskii appeared in Megapolis Ukraine, a popular weekly published in Dnepropetrovsk, 5 August 1985

The local press has gladdened its readers' hearts, by announcing that Vitalii Ya. Shibko, deputy to the Supreme Soviet from the Samarskii *okrug*, has been appointed Ukrainian ambassador to Lebanon. [The *Samarskii okrug* is a small administrative unit in the Dnepropetrovsk area, named after the Samara river, not to be confused with the Russian town of Samara.]

The elevation of a deputy to such a post is, of course, a trick that only the apparatus knows how to play. Even if, in April 1994, “Ukrainian democracy” swallowed the bait, the residents of the Samarskii constituency have the right to ask: did we really intend to send our parliamentary representative to the Mediterranean coast? He is now “getting the Ukrainian embassy in Beirut up and running” ... but is he really doing so in line with his pre-election promise to light for the interests of the working people, the needy and the pensioners”?!

The press informs us that Vitalii Shibko is a “Marxist Leninist, elected to the Supreme Soviet as a member of the Socialist Party of Ukraine, that before his election victory he taught history at the Dnepropetrovsk Metallurgical Institute, and that earlier still he did Komsomol and Communist Party work in the Industrial and Samarskii *raions* of Dnepropetrovsk.

What's more, our local boy plays an exclusive rote on Kiev's political Olympus. He has managed to be at once a “temporary adviser to president Kuchma” and “a particularly close confidant of the parliamentary speaker, A. Moroz”.

In the display by puppets of western financial interests, which goes under the name of “the conflict between two branches of power”, Kuchma appears as the decisive restorer of market capitalism, and Moroz personifies those “socialists” who attracted to the image of western social democracy. Shibko, we may presume, is the “connecting link” between these contending groups of bureaucrats. Serving two masters like these certainly needs delicate diplomatic skills and, evidently, once this sort of service was no longer required in Kiev, our “deputy-diplomat” was named ambassador to Lebanon.

Well, an appointment is an appointment. And, to quote press reports further, our Marxist Leninist” is now busy “selecting his team of assistants from among his closest colleagues. To serve as the embassy accountant, Shibko has called on Ms Zotova, who worked with him in the Dnepropetrovsk city executive committee and previously served as ideological secretary in the Industrial *raion* committee.”

It's the same old faces, isn't it! ... let's recall where they were in 1988. The author of these lines had already, for more than a year, carried out legal activity as an anarcho-syndicalist activist at his factory, the Dnepropetrovsk Industrial Power Combine (DPEU). In September that year, the factory trade union organisation gave a report and there were fresh elections. There was a secret ballot for the first time (democratisation!) and despite desperate resistance by management, my candidacy not only went forward but I was successful. The steam boiler section had chosen an anarcho-syndicalist representative. And in that section on 7 November [the anniversary of the Russian revolution] appeared the first issue of a wall newspaper, *Delo Truda* [Workers Deed]. This newspaper, whose contents had been approved at a meeting in September, called for independent trade unions, reported on the struggle of Polish *Solidarność*, quoted Trotsky...

The factory's "Marxist-Leninists" "signalled" to their *raion* committee. And on 9 November, the first working day after the holidays, the first secretary of the Industrial *raion* CPSU, Sal'nikov, and the ideological secretary, Zotova, came tearing along to the DPEU to sort out this free trade union newspaper. What on earth was going on here? And continuing for more than a month!

There were meetings of the factory trade union committee and the party committee, trade union and party members' assemblies, "investigations" in the boss's office. The management, trade union and party functionaries were solidly united. "We will uncover the extent of this agitation and expose all those who have supported it," proclaimed Koval'chik, the secretary of the organisation department of the trade union oblast committee, from the platform at a general workers' assembly.

What on earth is this, I wondered, hearing public accusations of "attempts to do another Karabakh" [i.e., to start a conflict like the one in Nagorno Karabakh which sparked war between Azerbaijan and Armenia], and of "involvement in workplace accidents"? What year are we in? 1988, or maybe 1928, when these same "Marxist Leninists" "exposed" the opposition...

In November 1988, V. Shibko entered the fray with an article in *Kotel'shchike* [The Boilermaker], a newspaper published, jointly as usual, by the party, trade union and Komsomol organisations. He attacked *Delo Truda* from a Marxist Leninist' standpoint: it is impermissible to counterpose the trade unions to the party, that sin has long ago been committed by the Workers Opposition... only under the leadership of the party... and so on and so forth.

Now it is obvious why, from the numerous cohorts of our city's social science teachers, it was Shibko who could be relied on to pull up the roots of anarchosyndicalism among workers. It was those early connections with "Komsomol and party work in the Industrial *raion*" that stood him in good stead.

In November 1992, when I met Shibko personally, at an open meeting of the Socialist Party of Ukraine, he described his participation in this witch hunt as "a party assignment". But the longer our acquaintance went on, the clearer it became that these Marxist Leninists, while grovelling in front of western capital and its Ukrainian protégés, maintained their disloyal attitude to Trotskyism and anarchosyndicalism.

In the summer of 1993 I visited the Dnepropetrovsk Metallurgical Institute with the aim of presenting to the history department library, free of charge, a selection of anarchist and Trotskyist writings. There were negotiations between myself, Shibko (in his academic capacity) and the history department's chief librarian. My only condition was that students should have free access to this literature. The talks were successful. Shibko assured me that this literature was needed and that students would be able to read it freely.

November 1993 – I was back at the Metallurgical Institute's history faculty, with the best intentions: to add to the selection of Trotskyist publications there. But the left-wing literature I had previously donated was nowhere to be seen. One of the librarians assured me that it never had been. The history department chief librarian, looking me straight in the eye, denied that Shibko, or herself, had ever negotiated with anyone about such literature, or that it had been donated! Shibko himself was not in the faculty, but on "study leave" or rather, as later became clear, on the "road to power".

After all this, where are we to find honesty among these "Marxist Leninists"?! Just as before, whenever they get half a chance, they obstruct any left alternative. Moreover, their methods are far removed from any discussion of ideas. To be fair, it must be said that Shibko is no worse than others. Selections of left literature have suffered the same fate at other higher education institutes in

Dnepropetrovsk: they have disappeared without trace.

So you see the sort of person who has been appointed to improve his diplomatic talent through contacts with Beirut bankers. And with him is his “close collaborator from the Dnepropetrovsk City executive”; with him, for sure, are other comrades from his past in the CPSU.

The new social-political situation, and the balance of forces between the competing capitalists, has compelled our “red” exploiters and oppressors to change the form of their rule. To resolve the problem of its ability to compete, the ruling class on the territory of the ex USSR is transforming state capitalism into private capitalism. One of the formal decisions taken was the banning of the CPSU in August 1991 but not one of its functionaries, not even at the lowest level, has been knocked off the pyramid of power.

The bosses have switched places, from an apparatus of executive power to management positions in the large companies, etc. Everyone is aboard former *raion* committee instructors, so-called teachers of social science and even of so-called “communist ideology”.

Old comrades don't forget each other. “Under the old regime”, they fulfilled their functions to the letter. At the time of perestroika they did their best to stifle independent workers' political activity. And now they are sticking together to enrol into the new “yellow and blue” system of oppression [i.e. under the colours of the new Ukrainian flag].

Appendix 2 – WHEN UKRAINIAN WORKERS SHOOK THE GOVERNMENT

This report of the June 1993 strike wave that began in the Donbass coalfield and swept through Ukraine is by Alexeii Gusev, a member of the Socialist Workers Union based in Moscow who travelled to Donetsk at the height of the strike. It first appeared in *Workers Press*, newspaper of the Workers Revolutionary Party in Britain (no.365, 3 July 1993).

A mighty strike, on an even greater scale than the historic walkout of 1989, began in Ukraine on the night of 7-8 June. It followed the government's implementation of a five- to six-fold increase in the prices of consumer goods.

The first to stop work were miners at the Zasyadko pit in the Donbass region. Alexeii Yevtushenko, a worker at that mine, said: "At the shift change on the evening of 7 June, the workers were chatting, as they always do, at the mine exit. They asked each other how life could go on with these prices.

"The average monthly wage of a miner is 60,000 *karbovantsi* (equivalent in 1993 to 20,000 rubles or £12). True, wages are increasing, but how will they ever catch up with prices! I, for example, work all month in the mine, up to the waist in water, for 130,000 kv (£26). And look at it – the price of a kilogramme of ordinary boiled sausage is on its way to 8,000 kv (£1.60).

Miners, have families, and children, you know. And, even now, the payment of wages at the mine is delayed. The director's explanations didn't please the workers here. So they decided not to go on shift, but to go into town, on strike."

That night in Donetsk, a column of miners went to the square in front of the regional Soviet [local council] building, where they organised a picket. The next morning a meeting began, which then turned itself into a permanent gathering. The speeches of the Zasyadko miners worked like a spark that set off an explosion of social discontent.

Significantly, this pit was previously thought of as "quiet, and hesitant to protest but now, even there, people couldn't take any more. The newspaper of the Donetsk city strike committee and the Donetsk independent union of miners had good reason to state: Already, with things being what they are, the "safe" pit has, of its own accord, stopped in its tracks. In this way, great forces are taking the country into their own hands."

By 8 June other mines in the Donetsk region had joined the strike. With the active support of the local independent miners' union, strike committees were formed, then strike demands emerged - first of all, political ones: give regional self-government to the Donetsk region, hold a vote of confidence (or no confidence) in the president and the Soviets at all levels.

Where did these particular demands originate?

On the one hand, they reflected general hostility to Ukraine's political leaders. Working people understand, of course, that the crisis is deepening and that everyone faces impoverishment; on top of this, that the price increases have thrown the vast majority of the population below the poverty line; that the industrial enterprises, which because they have no cash cannot buy products from each other, have been forced into an extremely difficult situation.

The independent miners' union of Donetsk and Makeyevka addressed Ukraine's powers in a

declaration which said: “Today it is absolutely clear that the president and the cabinet are carrying out a policy which will lead to the closure of the Donbass industrial enterprises. But at the same time, no preparation has been made for new workplaces to be opened.

“President Kravchuk and his circle hope that mass unemployment and the social explosion, in which an unemployed person will steal scraps of bread from his working neighbour, will happen only in Donbass and that they will sit it out in Kiev. And the Supreme Soviet [of Ukraine] has absolutely no means to withstand this anti-popular policy of the president and his circle.

“The mines have been forced to break off supplies of coal to customers, who on 1 June 1993 owed 39.9 billion kv (£8 million) to the Donetskugol [Donetsk Coal] production association, since the miners could not see any other means of collecting the debts for our coal. At the same time we understand that if the coking ovens stop this would be the beginning of a crude destruction of the coking, engineering and coal industries.

“Therefore, in connection with the growing threat of massive unemployment, we demand from the administration of the mines and industrial enterprises, the local presidential administration and banks, that they stop all cutbacks in state financing of enterprises in the Donetsk region; we demand that they order the payment of unpaid debts; and we call for the reconstruction of mines and the preparation of new workplaces”

On the other hand, the leaders of the independent miners' union and strike committees formulate demands with which to satisfy both the discontented Donbass enterprises and the local authorities.

With the demand for regional self-government, the directors and bureaucrats in the Soviets saw the possibility of fortifying their own positions and expanding their own power at the expense of the “centre” [i.e. the government in Kiev]. It was for these reasons that the strike was supported by the industrial and political bureaucracies of the Donetsk region.

On 14 June the Donetsk regional Soviet expressed its distrust of the president, government and parliament of Ukraine and officially declared its agreement with the strikers' demands. That position was also taken by a general meeting of directors of the regional coal corporation, who refused to enter into a dialogue with the government.

The efforts of the coal company management and the local bureaucrats were all directed to strengthening illusions among the masses that, in order to solve the problems of the working people, it would be enough to cut free from the “dictates of Kiev”, to create a free economic zone in Donbass, and to organise unrestricted trade with Russia.

However it can be said with certainty that the underlying motives which pushed people into striking were not aspirations for “regional independence”, but the clear feeling that “it's impossible to go on living like this”. “It's not us who thought up these slogans” [for regional independence, etc.], said many of the workers gathered at the meeting in central Donetsk.

Having started at the mines, the strike spread like wildfire. On the morning of 9 June the builders, engineers, car workers, and others in Donetsk walked out. Then the strike widened to the Lugansk and Dnepropetrovsk regions. [This is unconfirmed: Oleg Dubrovskii's account States that despite individual efforts, to strike did not spread to Dnepropetrovsk. See above]. Four mines at Novovolynsk, western Ukraine, came to a standstill, as did the tractor works and 34 other enterprises in the solidly industrial city of Kharkov.

On 14 June in Donetsk a meeting took place, more than 30,000-strong, with the participation of representatives of striking workers from other towns. The basic demands of this vast gathering were for the resignation of the president and for the guarantee of a reasonable standard of living for working people. By 16 June, more than 230 of Ukraine's 250 mines were on strike, around 40 mine-driving projects, 17 mineral enrichment plants, and nearly 400 plants in the engineering, vehicle assembly, chemical, light construction and other sectors.

Such a tremendous uprising by the workers' movement frightened the government in Kiev. Yefim Zvyadgilsii, mayor of Donetsk and the former director of the Zasyadko mine, was working away urgently with the Ukrainian vice-president. In an emergency order president Kravchuk issued a string of decrees, with the purpose of "stabilising the situation" and providing, in particular, for miners' wages to be increased to 400,000 kv (£80) a month and for an "improvement in the supply of goods to the [Donetsk] region".

But this did not succeed in bringing the strike to an end. The miners said that they would not accept the charity of the regime, and that they would stay out until the end of the month with the other workers, to make sure of driving out the government which was responsible for the people's suffering.

The strike committee newspaper wrote: "The supreme power is not able to provide even a little improvement in our lives, but they have managed to considerably improve their own... but the people, who every, single day pour in greater numbers into the squares of every Ukrainian city, have no intention of tolerating this bunch any longer.

"The people have formed themselves into one single fist, the blow from which, we think, this impudent government will not be able to withstand. You miserable people can no longer make us live on our knees."

The crowd in the square in central Donetsk did not break up. Shoulder to shoulder stood Ukrainians and Russians, miners in overalls and helmets, women workers in blue smocks and headscarves, factory workers and pensioners who have to live on a monthly pension of 9,000 kv (£1.80).

In spite of the fact that exams were taking place, there were students present at the meeting, whose monthly grant would hardly buy three lunches in the college canteen. The general mood: acute dissatisfaction with the ruling regime and hostility to its politics. Alongside this, the majority had no clear idea of the possibility of an alternative way of living.

Many hoped for capitalism and private ownership, as a means of escape from the clutches of ex-Communist officialdom, saying: "We need a system like that of the west." Only a few people understood that only the working people themselves, by means of their own organisations, could solve working people's problems.

The miner Alexeii Yevtushenko said: "I could, of course, work in the conditions we work in now, and even with these wages, if the situation was changing for the better. But the way things stand, it's exactly the opposite.

"Our position is continually deteriorating. And at the same time there's an increase in the wealth of a small group who are drowning in luxury and going about in imported cars. Where are they getting the money from, if it's not from our pockets? You can see: the poorer people's lives become, the fancier the cars in the street. The new rulers are no better than the old. And now the most openly-acknowledged Mafiosi are getting the power.

“What do we have to do, in my view? First, to get the worth of the work we do in our wages and not settle for anything less, and to establish a proper wages, in dollars for example. Let's say that we received the equivalent of 350 US dollars — and that inflation wasn't too terrible. That would be its own kind of indexation.

“Secondly, we need to take social control into our hands — in the first place with unarmed workers' detachments to deal with the speculators, thieves and corrupt politicians. That's the only way anything will change. It's said, that hardly anybody understands this now. For this, we need to raise the working class up, we need organisation maybe, a workers' party. Only right now, nobody trusts any party. In a word, the whole system needs to change!”

On 17 June the Supreme Soviet of Ukraine, after three days' discussion, took a decision to hold an all-Ukraine referendum on 26 September, which will be a vote of confidence in the president and the parliament of the republic.

From 18 June, a joint commission of the government and strike committee representatives, formed to examine economic questions, set to work. The strike leaders set a course of bringing the action to an end.

In the best case, the strike has shown that the workers are in a decisive frame of mind, and that they have recognised the connection between their miserable living standards and the policies of the highest rulers.

It's certain that no kind of compromise or concession can solve the problems of the Ukrainian working class. And so we ought to expect new, even more radical workers' actions, especially in the run-up to the September referendum.

Glossary of names, organisations and Russian words

Brezhnev, Leonid. CPSU general secretary and ruler of the USSR from 1964 to his death in 1982. Began his career in eastern Ukraine, as deputy chairman of the Dneprodzerzhinsk soviet in 1937, and then deputy chairman of the CPSU Dnepropetrovsk oblast committee from 1939. Under his rule, this resulted in privileges for the area, which was controlled by his protégés.

Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). Until the late 1980s, the USSR's only legal political party. It included the Communist Party of Ukraine as one of its constituent parts. Banned in August 1991. Took its name in 1952; before that, from 1924, it was called the All-Union Communist Party (Bolshevik) and, under Lenin, the Russian Communist Party (Bolshevik).

Fourth International. Formed in 1938 Lev Trotsky and his supporters. Trotsky called for the new International, and declared Stalin's Communist (Third) International “counter-revolutionary”, in 1933.

Glasnost. Literally “publicity” or “openness”. Policy introduced by Gorbachev in 1987 allowing greater freedom of expression, publication and eventually political organisation.

Gorbachev, Mikhail. CPSU general secretary from 1985. President of the USSR from 1988 until its dissolution in 1991.

GKChP. *Gosudarstvenii komitet chrezvichainogo polozenia*, or State Committee for the Emergency Situation. Led by Gennady Yanayev and other “hard liners”, it organised the Moscow coup of August 19-21, 1991, a failed attempt to prevent the collapse of the Soviet Union and its bureaucracy.

Karbovanets (kv). The currency coupon issued after Ukraine's declaration of independence in 1991. Supposedly worth one Russian ruble, it plummeted in value. By 1996 it was exchanged at 34 for one ruble and about 185,000 for one US dollar. Replaced in 1996 by a new national currency, the *hryvnia*.

KGB. Committee on State Security, i.e. the Soviet secret police.

Komsomol. Communist Union of Youth. CPSU's official youth organisation and at the height of its dictatorship an important means of controlling young people. In the 1970s 70 per cent of the relevant age group (14-28 years) were members.

Kravchuk, Leonid. CPSU member since 1958. In 1990 elected chairman of the Ukrainian Supreme Soviet. In 1991 he turned himself overnight from Stalinist centraliser to fervent nationalist and was elected Ukraine's first president. Lost presidency in 1994.

Kuchma, Leonid. Former manager of the Soviet missile factory at Dnepropetrovsk. Appointed prime minister of Ukraine by Kravchuk in 1992. Resigned 1993. Elected president 1994.

Labour book or *trudovaya knizhka*. Introduced in 1938 for factory discipline. Recorded the worker's employment history and reasons for discharge from a previous job, and had to be presented when starting a new job. Still used in many large state-owned enterprises.

Labour Collective Council or *Soviet trudovogo kollektiva*. Introduced in Soviet enterprises by

the State Enterprise Law of 1987, which stated that the sovereign body in each workplace was the labour collective, i.e. an assembly of all employees from the manager to the new apprentice. Between assemblies, power was to reside in the elected Labour Collective Council. Theoretically only 20 per cent of the council could be management. In most, but not all, cases, the presence of CPSU and trade union bureaucrats, and plain management stooges, ensured the councils were tame.

Moroz, Oleksandr. Leader of Stalinist “conservatives” in the Ukraine parliament. After the Communist Party of Ukraine was banned in August 1991, Moroz formed the Socialist Party of Ukraine.

Oblast. A region of the USSR. One of several types of administrative units, at the level under Republican governments.

Okrug. A national area of the USSR, an administrative unit on the same level as the *oblasts*. Perestroika. Literally “rebuilding”. The wide-ranging economic reforms introduced by Gorbachev from 1986.

Putevka. A pass. In the Soviet context, usually a ticket for a worker and members of his family to go on holiday.

Raion. An administrative sub-unit, at the next level down from the *oblast*.

Right Opposition. The last major group within the CPSU to oppose Stalin, led by Nikolai Bukharin, Aleksei Rykov and Mikhail Tomsky. Suppressed in 1930 after having opposed the policy of forced industrialisation and collectivisation, arguing for of compromise with the peasantry and with capitalist enterprise.

SMOT. Free Interprofessional Association of Labourers. A trade union organisation set up by Vladimir Klebanov, a Donetsk mining engineer, in 1978, and immediately outlawed. Klebanov, who had actively protested against labour conditions since the 1960s, was punished by incarceration in a mental hospital.

Socialist Party of Ukraine. Formed by hardline Stalinists in 1991, after the Communist Party of Ukraine was banned. Today a small parliamentary party (27 seats), allied with the refounded Communist Party (97 seats).

Socialist Workers Union. Russian Trotskyist group formed in 1991, part of the Workers International to Rebuild the Fourth International.

Solidarność. Workers' organisation formed in Poland in 1980 which led a mass movement against the Stalinist regime. Banned in 1981 and legalised again in 1988, it became increasingly right wing under Lech Wałęsa's leadership.

Soviet. Literally, council. In the USSR, all administrative bodies were called Soviets, from the USSR Supreme Soviet down to bodies at oblast and *raion* level. The original soviets, formed by workers in the struggle against tsarism were democratic organisations for discussion and action. Stalin, Joseph. Succeeded Lenin as Communist Party leader in 1924, remaining dictator of the USSR until his death in 1953.

Supreme Soviet of Ukraine. The Ukrainian parliament. Renamed *Verkhovna Rada* (Supreme Council) in 1991.

Trotsky, Lev Davidovich. One of the leaders of the Russian revolution. Founder of the Red army. Headed the opposition to Stalin inside the CPSU from 1924 until being exiled in 1929. Murdered by a Stalinist agent in Mexico in 1940, Trotsky left a huge body of writings which analysed Stalinism and counterposed to it a theory and programme of Marxist internationalism.

Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Formed in 1922 to unite the states controlled by the Bolsheviks at the end of the civil war of 1919-21. Consisted of 15 republics. Dissolved in 1991.

Workers Opposition (1920). Grouping within the Bolshevik party, led by the Leningrad communist workers Aleksandr Shlyapnikov and the communist feminist Aleksandra Kollontai. It denounced bureaucratisation and called for changes in the organisation of labour and greater power for the trade unions. Dissolved when the party forbade factions in 1921.



Ukrainian miners on strike in 1996. The banner says 'We'll pick up the shovels when you pay our wages'