

# Anarcho-Syndicalist Tendencies in Russian Labor

by Sam Dolgoff

## Background

A quotation from Paul Avrich's *The Russian Anarchists* (pages 140-41) sums up the situation at the time of the Russian Revolution:

The working class uprisings which in a few months in 1917 spread all over Russia were a spontaneous product of the Revolution; as noted by *Golos Truda*, organ of the anarcho-syndicalist groups... 'It was anti-statist in its method of struggle, syndicalist in economic content and federalist in its political tasks.' The revolutionary libertarian character of the Russian workers arose spontaneously as a protest against the pro-capitalist February 1917 Revolution. In the midst of the Petrograd strikes and demonstrations workers gathered in dining rooms and workshops, in labor exchanges... with the aim of creating local organizations to represent their interests. Throughout the capital, under various names, factory committees, shop committees, workers councils, committees of workers were organized on the workshop and factory level. It was not long before they were functioning in every industrial center in European Russia, arising first in the larger establishments and within a few months taking hold in the smallest.... During 1917 and 1918 the industrial workers had put into practice the syndicalist slogan of workers control over production. The local factory and shop committees took over administration.

Even Lenin himself deplored the anarcho-syndicalist 'deviation' of the Russian labor movement... In a letter to a comrade (October 17, 1918), Lenin conceded that "in nearly unanimous opinion of all, the prevailing mood of the masses favors the growth of anarchism—the rank and file of Russian labor stood a thousand times more to the left than the Mensheviks, the right wing Social Revolutionary party, and a hundred times more to the left than even the Bolsheviks." In discussing the impact of the revolutionary wildcat strikes, Maximoff quotes Lenin's fears that his regime was about to be supplanted: "We came across the biggest internal political crisis of the Soviet Union, brought to the surface by the wide dissatisfaction pervading not only layers of the peasants, but also workers. (see Maximoff, *The Guillotine at Work*)

There is, of course, a vast literature concerning dissident movements in and out of the Communist party who were persecuted for even implying partial relaxation of the dictatorship now published for the first time in Russia. Writings from the anarchist, anarchosyndicalist and left revolutionary press written in 1917, 1918 and the 1920s confirm their accurate analysis of historic events. Well over half a century ago, they recognized that the architects of the Russian Revolution—

Lenin and his fellow conspirators—had, as Paul Avrich puts it, "ridden to power on the spontaneous tide from below." Today the conviction that this totalitarian regime must be replaced by a true libertarian society is growing.

A statement by Nicolai Engven, born in a concentration camp and a Communist Party member elected to the First Congress of People's Deputies, illustrates this feeling: "As long as freedom is given to you you are not free, because whoever gives it will decide whether you are free or not... Nationalization of economic, political and social life, the monopoly of power by the state, is fascism." (*New York Times*, 8/27/1989)

### **Anarcho-Syndicalist Tendencies Today**

The outstanding significance of the vast illegal miners' strike, involving—with other strikes—at least half a million workers, was that the strikes were conducted in accordance with the syndicalist principle of **direct economic action**: not only for improvements within the system, but for putting into effect the principle of "Building the new society within the shell of the old." (IWW Preamble) This movement actually constitutes a mass rebellion against the Russian regime and its repressive agencies, the Communist Party and its enormous oppressive apparatus.

The strikers are spontaneously putting into effect anarcho-syndicalist principles. Dissolving the bureaucracy at all levels, now immeasurably rejuvenated and reenforced by its alliance with the new class of capitalist profiteers and parasites who are amassing huge fortunes and immense privileges at the expense of the workers. Both the Communist Party bureaucracy and its partnership with the capitalists, which constitutes the essence of Gorbachev's "Perestroika" capitalism, must be scrapped in favor of free labor.

Gorbachev's policies closely resemble what could be called Lenin's capitalist "Perestroika," formulated in his pamphlet *The New Tasks of Soviet Power* (Spring, 1921):

It is necessary to halt right now the offensive against capitalism—halt seizure of industrial enterprises by the workers and halt workers management who, for the first time, introduced industrial democracy in the factories and the point of production... We must raise the productivity of labor by introducing piece work... vigorously carry out labor discipline in industry and transport, with unquestioning obedience to one person....

Workers employed in the Tula ammunition plants were required to sign a no-strike pledge reading,

I shall discharge my duties at the factory in the most conscientious manner, trying to obtain the best and utmost results in production... I pledge in good faith not to participate in any attempt to begin or carry on a strike movement... [or] to take part in any rally or meeting which may lead to a strike or the lowering of productivity...

(G.P. Maximoff, *The Guillotine at Work*, pp 212-13)

Gorbachev is determined to regulate the unions, and openly warns that the demands of the rebellious workers would result in the collapse of his regime. He is trying to crush the revolutionary upsurge by forbidding under severe penalties all illegal strikes. The workers will not surrender. They are determined to continue their struggles. They are now organizing independent unions, and demanding real workers self-management at the point of production. The economy must be conducted not by politicians, but by the producers. The coordination of factory and workers committees federated locally, regionally and nationally under a decentralized system of autonomous units, and the calling and settlement of strikes by strike committees in factory and workshop, will be

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retained, and the government has been warned that if there are any violations of the agreements rank-and-file strike action will be immediately resumed.

The following excerpts from a dispatch in the *New York Times* (11/3/89) illustrates the attitude of the militant rank and file workers: "Moscow, Nov. 2—An illegal wildcat strike has spread through most of the coal mines in the Arctic city of Vorkuta, confronting Soviet authorities with their most serious test of a new law restricting labor walkouts... The acting chairman of the strike committee said that this is not just a warning strike. 'It will continue until we get results' (fulfillment of the earlier settlement)... The 26,000 miners in the Vorkuta region... are regarded as the most defiant in the country... Workers in the country's two largest coalfields... the Donesk Basin of the Ukraine and the Kuznetz Basin in Siberia have expressed sympathy with the Vorkuta strikers and staged sporadic two-hour job protests.... In the renewed strike, workers are demanding some basic political changes as well... elimination of the Communist Party as pre-eminent in the nation,... an end to 'serfdom' practices that deprive miners of accrued pension benefits when they choose to work for a different mine... The militancy of the Vorkuta strikers recalls their history as an icy penal colony—one of the largest and most nefarious of the forced labor camps of the Stalin era... desperate laborers, they were among the first to rise up in protest of their misery once the news of Stalin's death arrived..."

The glorious struggles of the Russian workers and their fellow workers in other lands should renew our faith in the creative, revolutionary capacity of the rebels, and inspire all of us to follow their example.