

Workers' councils in Russia

INDUSTRIAL output in Russia has dropped to less than half its 1991 level. Even the government says that one quarter of the population has been pushed below the poverty line.

While a tiny minority — ex-bureaucrats and gangsters — have got very rich very quickly, the transition to a capitalist market economy, has, paradoxically, led to the breakdown of ordinary market relations.

Companies are not paid by their customers, and don't pay their suppliers, and no-one pays taxes. With a continuing collapse of industrial production, if the government tries to break the trap by printing more rubles to cover wages and pensions, then it risks restarting the destructive super-inflation of 1992.

About 80% of the workforce is now in the private sector, but capitalist normality is still a long way off.

According to the latest survey, only about a quarter of the workforce are being paid their wages on time and in full. Millions of workers — and pensioners, and soldiers — have received no money for up to six months.

The economic disruption in Russia is qualitatively greater than in other ex-Stalinist economies in Eastern Europe, where some, like Hungary and Poland, are even showing respectable growth (industrial production up 5.8% in Hungary, and 13.9% in Poland, over the last year). Society was more thoroughly pulverised and atomised in Russia — for fifty years, the only individual initiative fostered or even permitted was that of the spiv, the wide-boy and the nark — and military production commanded maybe 40% of the whole economy.

Russia also has a bigger workers' movement than the East European states. There is a big independent miners' union, and the former state-stooge unions have shown more life than elsewhere. The unions are still highly bureaucratised, and they have been dragged into dubious alliances — with Yeltsin, with the revived Communist Party of Gennady Zyuganov, and (in a formal electoral alliance) with the managers of big industrial enterprises, with whom trade unionists were supposed to share a common interest in stopping those enterprises being shut down.

Yet new reports — still fragmentary



— indicate a new turn.

A report by Fred Weir in the *Hindustan Times* (4 December) told of "spontaneously-organised workers' councils which are taking over local government functions and posing a direct challenge to regional authorities and trade union leaders alike.

"The 'salvation committees' are essentially the same idea as the 'soviets' of workers and soldiers that spread throughout Russia during the revolutions of 1905 and 1917... [They] have spread to every major community of the Kuzbass region... and are growing increasingly confident..."

The miners have called for the removal of the government, but without being able to propose any clear alternative. The workers' councils control mining towns and cities in remote Siberia, far from the centres of power: information about them is hard to get in Moscow as well as in London.

The workers' councils emerged together with a strike by miners, teachers and other workers demanding payment of wage arrears. The government seems to have bought off that strike, for now, but that does not necessarily mean that the workers' councils have disappeared.

Valery Zuyev, a mine electrician who heads the committee in the 250,000-population town of Prokopyevsk, told the *Guardian* (18 December): "It's like Lenin said: if the authorities can't govern in a

new way, and the masses do no want to live in the old way, a third force appears". The report by James Meek in the *Guardian* continues: "There have been calls to buy weapons... the committees unite workers from all sectors. 'If they drive you into a corner, if your children are hungry, if the constitution isn't respected, the only thing is to demand the government be changed', said Mr Zuyev. 'If you can't achieve that peacefully, you do it by force'."

Russia's Federation of Independent Trade Unions held its congress on 5-7 December and, according to Renfrey Clarke, Moscow correspondent for Australia's *Green Left Weekly*, "The congress had an atmosphere quite different from previous top-level gatherings of the union federation. While the delegates were still overwhelmingly full-time union officials, many of them were new figures, freshly elected and in much closer touch with rank and file unionists than the people they had replaced. For the first time, the sense was present that the participants in the congress were under pressure from the mass of union members. The dominant view among delegates to the Federation's congress was that Russian labour needed to build its own political structures". Only by such structures being built, and winning political power, can Russia be saved from mass pauperism and barbarism.

Alan Gilbert

Free jailed Indonesian activists!

ON 12 December the trial began in Indonesia of SBSI union leader Muchtar Pakpahan, jailed by the strong-arm Suharto dictatorship following the strikes and demonstrations in July last year. Starting on 12 December, about 20 members of the People's Democratic Party (PRD), including Dita Sari, president of the other main independent union organisation, the PPBI, were also brought to court.

Both Pakpahan and the PRD members are charged with "subversion", which can carry the death penalty. The indictment against the PRD members

charges that they "undermined the ideology of the state", made "political speeches which criticised the government", and conducted "demonstrations demanding an improvement in the political system".

A tremendous lead in international working-class solidarity for the Indonesian labour activists has been given by Australian dockers, who have taken industrial action on several occasions since September to delay Indonesian shipping and cargoes. Thirteen ships have been affected to date, and the latest action was in the port of Newcastle

on 14 December. Now that the Australian government has pushed through a new labour law outlawing "secondary" action, the dockers' boycotts are illegal, but union National Secretary John Coombs declares: "The Suharto government is using the subversion laws to crush, imprison, and possibly even execute any of its opponents engaged in peaceful, legitimate political and labour activity".

Wilson, one of the PRD activists on trial, has managed to get a letter "to the workers of Indonesia" out of jail. In it he declares:

"Our worker friends are also in a prison like us. You are imprisoned by a wage system that is unjust... you are imprisoned because you are not allowed to establish a free trade union!

"It is the rulers and businessmen that have created this situation. And it is the rulers who have imprisoned us too. And all so that business's profits expand, oblivious of the misery of the workers... The factories are like prisons, with their own grim-faced security forces and great high walls...

"Workers of Indonesia whom we love, when we were first arrested we were gripped by fear. But after months of interrogation, we have come to understand that it is the rulers who are afraid of us... the rulers are afraid when they see the workers increasingly confident in the PPBI and SBSI...

"We know we are present in the hearts of the workers. And in these fearful and uncertain times, what is in our hearts can be the light of our life...

"We pray this will not be our last letter. While workers suffer, there will always be in the prisons those who have defended the workers. Here inside the prison, we know that as long as we struggle together, the workers will win their prosperity..."

It is up to the labour movement internationally to make sure that this is indeed not the jailed Indonesian labour activists' last letter. Fax letters of protest to the Indonesian Minister of Justice, Uahi Utoyo Usman S.H., on 00 62 21 525 3095, and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ali Alatas S.H., on 00 62 21 380 5511. Send copies to the Indonesian Embassy, 38 Grosvenor Square, London W1, and to Action in Solidarity with Indonesia and East Timor, 00 612 9690 1381.

Serbian protests continue

AS we go to press, the streets of Serbia's capital, Belgrade, have been filled for over 40 days running by demonstrators protesting against the vicious regime of Slobodan Milosevic. Despite often freezing weather, the protests have continued without a break since late November, when the opposition won the elections for 17 major local authorities, including Belgrade, and the regime cancelled the results.

On 3 January Milosevic signalled the beginnings of a climbdown, acknowledging that nine of the 17 local authorities had indeed been won by the opposition. The protests, however, continue.

Since 1991 Milosevic has taken imperialistic war to the rest of former Yugoslavia, whipping up Serbian chauvinism. The result for the Serbian people has been little but defeat, brutality against minorities within Serbia, economic ruin, and a political regime little looser than the old Stalinist system, with independent and dissident media regularly suppressed.

Much of the opposition is right-wing. Some, for example, denounce Milosevic for not being Serbian-chauvinist enough, and "selling out" in Kosovo, where Serbian rules colonial-style over a 90% Albanian population.

The students of Belgrade University, however, have declared: "We are not taking sides between the party in power and the opposition — what we insist upon is the rule of the law. Any government which is not willing to acknowledge its own electoral defeat does not deserve our support and we overtly oppose it".

They demand the establishment of a

new electoral authority and the resignation of the Chancellor and student vice-chancellor of the university. Unfortunately they have also approached the Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church to bless the students' cause. The Orthodox Church, the backbone of Serbian chauvinism, has mostly supported Milosevic, but is now backing the opposition.

According to Belgrade journalist Branka Kaljevic: "This is the third time in Milosevic's ten-year rule that students have come out in the streets to protest. They first protested in March 1991. The authorities welcomed them with tanks, tear gas and brutal police repression... The students booed down both the then highly popular Radovan Karadzic [the Bosnian-Serb warlord] and the Serb Patriarch Pavle who had called on them to disperse..."

Many students then left the country to avoid being called up for Milosevic's war. Another round of protest in June 1992 again failed to topple Milosevic, and again many students went abroad. "Now, four years later", writes Branka Kaljevic, "a new generation is in the streets".

Whether a section of this new generation can spearhead a powerful and consistently democratic opposition, and link up with the workers, we cannot tell. But only that outcome offers hope for a liveable new settlement among the peoples of ex-Yugoslavia, especially in Bosnia-Herzegovina, where partition into three hostile and chauvinist "ethnic" statelets remains the reality under the surface of the Dayton agreement.

Chris Reynolds

General Strike in Israel

WITH a general strike movement from 26 December to 1 January, Israeli workers have forced the right-wing government to back down on a cut in tax credits for women workers.

The strikes reached their peak after Histadrut union leader Shlomo Shani was arrested. He was seized by police on 29 December at a Haifa chemicals workers' demonstration, on the grounds that earlier strikes had breached a court order. On 30 December strikes hit the ports, the railways, Israel's aircraft and military industries, the Post Office, TV, radio, banks, gas and electric companies, government offices, and many others. Shani was released; then on 1 January Parliament voted down the tax-credit cut.

For decades, left and right in Israel have been defined more by attitudes to the Palestinians than by direct class issues. The majority of the Jewish working class have supported the right-wing parties, while the middle class voted for the Labour Party. But the structures have begun to shift.

The Histadrut used to be a very odd trade union movement, closely tied to the state. Alongside its trade-union "department" it had other departments which owned enterprises, thus making it also Israel's biggest employer, and ran a large part of the social welfare system. Enforced transfer of its industrial assets to private owners, the erosion of the Labour establishment's grip on the state machine, alongside a decline in the Labour Party's control in the Histadrut, have made the Histadrut more like a normal trade union.

Now the Netanyahu government has committed itself to what Netanyahu called "a Thatcherite revolution" in Israel. The tax credit cut



Netanyahu goes Thatcherite

was a fallback proposal after Netanyahu's first favourite for budget cuts, a charge for all visits to the doctor, had been defeated in Parliament.

The government is pressing for extensive privatisations, and the employers — happy though they are to be "liberal" when it's a matter of measures which might open Arab markets to them — are driving for the replacement of collective bargaining by individual contracts, and threatening to abolish check-off for union dues. Chamber of Commerce Danny Gillerman frantically denounced the general strike as "a Bolshevik move".

Some socialists in the West have written off the Israeli-Jewish working class as an imperialist-minded elite hopelessly tied to their bosses, but plainly it is now time for them to reconsider.

The path to Arab-Jewish workers' unity, based on recognising the self-determination of both Palestinians and Israeli Jews and joint struggle against the bosses on both sides, will still be long; but it is possible.

Rhodri Evans

A new workers' party in Israel?

LOUIS Roth, the chairman of the workers' council at Bank Leumi (one of the two largest banks) and Chaim Katz, chairman of the workers' council at Israel Military Industries, have begun talking up the idea of an independent workers' party in Israel. Israel already has a Labor Party, but many Labor Party leaders are estranged from the trade union movement in this country. Some of Israel's top industrialists are identified closely with that party, and yet they openly denounced the recent general strike and sided with Netanyahu.

Strangely, Histadrut chairman Amir Peretz, a Labor Party member himself, responded to the Roth-Katz proposal without condemning it: "The workers' leaders feel that a new situation has emerged . . . maybe it's best to build ourselves up as a 'balance of power' in the Knesset to protect our interests. I'm hearing about this direction [building a workers' party] not only at the level of the workers' leaders, but also out in the field. There are the first buds, there's the chemistry, but sometimes one shouldn't translate Utopian ideas into reality . . . In spite of that, I can't promise that this won't happen. I'm divided myself.

There's no doubt that today the workers don't have enough allies in the Knesset."

Militant workers at Haifa Chemicals booed Labor Party politicians like Yosi Beilin — while cheering the Communist union leader Binyamin Gonen. And the growing rift between Labor Party industrialists like Benny Gaon and trade unionists like Amir Peretz seems to make their continued co-existence in a single party impossible.

Likud supporters in the workers' councils were among the strike leaders last week, and some of them rejected personal appeals coming from their party's leadership to call off what Netanyahu was labelling a "political" strike. In some sectors, Likud unionists were more militant than their Labor party counterparts.

We are seeing signs in both major parties of a break-up along class lines.

Whether an independent workers' party will emerge is presently unclear. But the very fact that the idea has been proposed marks a sea-change in Israeli politics.

Eric Lee [From BibiWatch, <http://www.ariga.com/bibiwatch/>]