

RUSSIAN MINERS BOW TO THE ANGEL OF HISTORY

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[The angel of history's] face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*

Since 1989 the storm from Paradise has become a hurricane, sweeping up into its path the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. The wreckage seems to pile up, whether progress brings revolution or disintegration, socialism or capitalism, Bolsheviks or Shock Therapists. Twice now the angel of history has looked down on Russian soil to see the grave diggers of the old order buried under the debris of the new. Just as in the October Revolution so in the collapse of communism, key sectors of the industrial working class – metal workers in 1917 and coal miners in 1989 and 1991 – challenged the old order in the name of progress. Each time their vision of freedom was turned against them in new forms of oppression. The Soviet working class was victimized by the socialist principles it had espoused in 1917, just as its descendants are sacrificed to the capitalist principles they championed in 1989.¹ In the first episode they became prey to the party state, in the second to the tyranny of the market.

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If socialism brought land expropriation, starvation, shock labor, forced mobilizations and the Gulag and, later, a more routinized shortage economy with its waste, its queues, its corruption and its own distinctive poverty, so capitalism has brought declining living standards that have left most scrambling for survival, inflation that has wiped out life-long savings, enterprise debt and closures that have begun to eliminate jobs and social services. But where socialism exacted enormous sacrifices for a better future, now, with investment continuing its steep decline, the outlook for the future looks ever more bleak. In pursuit of "market equilibrium" the government, egged on by Western advisors, accelerates the already precipitous decline in GDP so that it will "bottom out" more quickly. Thus, the World Bank proposed to cut coal production – already down from 428 million tons in 1988 to 325 million tons in 1992 – to 230 million tons by 1996. This would mean closing 100 of the 300 mines, and reducing the labor force by 40 percent (World Bank, 1993a). As before, the radiant future can only be built on the debris of past.

The Bolsheviks never thought they could make the transition to socialism on their own. They counted on proletarian revolutions in advanced countries of the West, particularly Germany, coming to their aid. When these revolutions failed to materialize, and instead the Soviet Union found itself surrounded by hostile nations, the Bolsheviks were forced back into self-reliance. They began by experimenting with market forces under NEP but when these failed to bear their expected fruits the party state turned to draconian methods of primitive accumulation through "central planning."² Just as the Bolsheviks banked on external support, so the new Russian government of today expected that the country would be awash with Western economic aid and investment after it embraced markets and democracy and then shock therapy.³ The opposite has transpired. Western capitalism has reneged on its promises, and presided over the dismantling of the Soviet economy. Wealth is flowing out of and not into Russia. Once more Russia is thrown back on its own resources. As market forces continue to destroy the economy and intensify inequalities, more repressive, state-led solutions could again become attractive. In either case, the laboring classes will continue to be sacrificed on the altar of progress.

Just as the Bolsheviks promised democracy but delivered party despotism so Yeltsin promised democracy but delivered the rule of decree, corruption and extortion and the reinstatement of the old nomenklatura. Where planning created a privileged class of apparatchiks the market has created a parasitic class of "entrepreneurchiks"⁴ – traders, merchants, bankers and racketeers whose profits come at the expense of production. Whereas before the nomenklatura was restrained by popular expectations of material improvement, now profiteering is regulated only by the mafia. Workers have lost the security vouchsafed by the old order and have

gained but empty freedoms. Even if they don't contemplate returning, the past looks rosier every day.

How was it that coal miners were the dynamite that brought the Soviet order to its knees? Why did they fight for a new order based on markets and democracy rather than for the renewal of socialism? How did the capitalist principles they proclaimed turn into new bonds of affliction? What has been their response to the tyranny of market and democracy? We try to answer these questions, based on our studies of the remote arctic city of Vorkuta – curiously, home to the most radical struggles of the working class in 1989 and 1991.

I: Voice of Vorkuta: Climax of the Working Class Challenge to Communism

Social movements, whether new or old, cannot be studied in isolation. They appear, gather momentum, run out of steam, decline and disappear within specific political and economic contexts and within an evolving history of protest.⁵ The struggles of the miners of Vorkuta, Donbass and Kuzbass are the culmination of a movement that spread from the periphery of the Soviet empire back to its center.⁶

If social movements are stamped by features of the order they challenge, we must first describe the features of state socialism that gave rise to working class struggles. State socialism's organizing principle is the transparent appropriation and redistribution of surplus by a central apparatus. As agents of visible exploitation and domination, management, trade union and party require an ideology to justify their expropriating activities. The party state and specifically its planning apparatus claim to act in the interests of all, in the interests of communism's "two and a half classes" but particularly in the interests of its "leading class," the toiling proletariat. Ideology propagates the virtues of socialism – equality, justice and efficiency – through the mass media it monopolizes, through the educational apparatus it controls and through the public rituals it orchestrates. Legitimation backfires when, rather than closing, the gap widens between promise and reality – between promised justice and actual oppression, between promised equality and actual inequality, between promised efficiency and actual waste. As subject and object of ideology the working class is particularly sensitive to the regime's pretense, inciting it to play a pivotal role in opposition movements.⁷

Communism has turned its heros into its antagonists time and again. In 1956 the Hungarian workers exploded onto the international scene when they staged a spontaneous revolution, taking over "their" enterprises and momentarily launching a council socialism from below. It was crushed by Soviet tanks. Twelve years later, pursuing reform rather than

revolution, Czechs campaigned for socialism with a human face and for the relaxation of central direction of the economy. The Prague Spring developed into a mass movement with workers once more key participants. Again the Soviet army rolled in and squashed opposition. Twelve years later in 1980, having learned the lesson of previous uprisings, Polish workers staged a self-limiting revolution, which sought to avoid an irreversible confrontation with the state while at the same time carving out a new civil society. After more than a year of turmoil, meetings, and finally paralysis which embraced ever-wider circles of society, the military, unable to contain itself, launched a counter-offensive and snuffed out the movement. Solidarity went underground, only to be highjacked seven years later when its leaders were invited to take political power.

No sooner had Solidarity resurfaced in Poland than the torch of the workers' movement was carried into the Soviet Union, where it ignited the entire social fabric first in 1989 and then in 1991. Coal miners across the Soviet Union brought the ascending arc of Eastern Europe's workers' movement to a climax and then to its final demise. Miners no longer championed a true socialism, a government that lived up to its socialist promises. Instead they despaired of the order that governed in their name but only served the interests of their overlords. Miners demanded the dismantling of bureaucratic tutelage, central planning, the party state, and called for financial independence of their mines, political autonomy for their movement and democratically elected officials.⁸ Here lie two puzzles: why were the miners so isolated in their struggles against communism and why were they so radical as to forsake socialism for the utopian promise of capitalism?

Living in secluded communities, subject to horrific working conditions but with considerable workplace autonomy, miners throughout the world are renowned for their radicalism and militance. Vorkuta is but an extreme case – an internal colony within the Soviet Gulag. Cut out of the frozen tundra, beyond the Arctic Circle, just west of the Polar Urals, lies this city of over 200,000, dedicated to coal production. Storms, blizzards and freezing temperatures make it a most inhospitable place to live. Only two months are snow free. Nothing grows here but mushrooms and berries. With its rich deposits of coal, it was an ideal place for labor camps, so cut off from the world that none but the most foolhardy could imagine escaping. In the 1930s prisoners built the city of Vorkuta and its first coal pits. When the Donbass area of the Ukraine was occupied during World War II, Vorkuta's coal became a lifeline for the Soviet economy.

After the war Vorkuta expanded. The labor camps were dismantled in the late 1950s to be replaced by settlements around the mines. Although ex-prisoners continued to work there, many new workers arrived from the South, particularly from the coal regions of the Ukraine, some in search of adventure, others out of political enthusiasm, but most drawn

by high wages. The tough life has bred a hardy, self-confident, ebullient people who can weather any adversity. Vorkuta is proud of its cultural heritage, created with the talents of camp inmates, particularly intellectuals. During the 1950s and 1960s its theatre was famous throughout the Soviet Union. For party bureaucrats, a stint in Vorkuta was a typical stop on the road to apparatchik power in Moscow. As a result, the city's elite was always well connected to the national nomenklatura.

For workers who had made Vorkuta their home, on the other hand, the city cultivated a certain fearlessness. After all they could not be banished to anywhere worse. Long before 1989, there had been a history of strikes and prison revolts, the most famous of which began on July 26, 1953 and ended six days later with a massacre that left 64 prisoners dead and 200 wounded. Strikers demanded the reduction or commutation of prison sentences, and more freedom and dignity for those who remained – the removal of locks on huts, bars on windows, and the stigmatizing numbers on prison uniforms. The circumstances of 1953 are reminiscent of 1989. The strike took place in summer when organization is more feasible; it exploited the political relaxation that followed the death of Stalin; it was in part stimulated by reports of the June 17 uprising in Berlin; the strike committee would only negotiate with top ranking officials from Moscow and refused to deal with local powers.⁹

Although the strike of 1953 would mark the beginning of the dismantling of the labor camps, the industrial regime continued to be no less harsh than the weather. Miners were still bonded to their mines by a feudal disciplinary code, *krepnestoe pravo*. Loss of job, whether voluntary or involuntary, entailed losing all their benefits. Even in 1989, they had few exit options and so they collectively exploited the openings provided by glasnost and perestroika. As in 1953 they voiced their grievances when the Soviet state appeared to open up political opportunities.¹⁰

If their *militance* was a product of a community of fate which created the grounds of solidarity against a hostile outside world, what was the basis of their *radicalism*? Why did the miners choose capitalism over the renewal of socialism? Why did they so wholeheartedly reject the communist order? Why were the miners of Vorkuta more radical than those of the Ukraine?

Isolated in the North, having known only communism, they could fantasize about capitalism and its virtues. Vorkuta, after all, is the true communist city – its history is the history of the most austere face of the old system. Even today, when other cities have had their face lifts, Vorkuta looks much as it always did. The thirteen mines that ring the city have their own bleak apartment complexes, reminiscent of run-down housing projects of American cities. But here possession of an apartment is a privilege. Many live in wooden "barrack" housing without running water or central heating. Construction has now come to a standstill as the city

is frozen to its past. All the trappings of communism remain – the slogans, the monuments, the street names which other cities have quietly removed. Buildings display their hammer and sickles, unmistakable even through the dust and smoke. Amidst peeling paint and broken cement factory walls call out for “greater coal production for the motherland” – ironic in the circumstances of downsizing and impending closure. Metallic sentences over the roofs congratulate workers on their heroic efforts, spurring them on to even greater achievements. The monument to fifty years of the Stakhanovite movement (1935–1985) was recently repainted.

The city’s main thoroughfare – Lenin Street – still wends its way from the Square of the Metal-Workers through the city center, past the Center for Young Pioneers and out to the deserted Hotel Vorkuta and to the headquarters of the coal conglomerate – Vorkuta Ugol’. At the city’s center, weather permitting, local artists sometimes hawk their work at the Square of Peace. On one side rises the massive concrete tribute to Stalin – Vorkuta’s Palace of Culture, closed down indefinitely for repairs. Emblazoned on its facade, above its huge columns, “Coal – the Actual Bread of Industry.” On the other side of the Square, Lenin looks down wearily from his pedestal, his eyes closed to the turmoil that has swept through this city in the last five years.

Vanguard in 1989 and 1991, the voice of Vorkuta is now sadly anachronistic, immobilized between a past it detests and a future it fears. Isolation and oppression fired a combustion of militancy and radicalism which others then exploited for their own ends. From pro-active challenge to the old order Vorkuta now closes ranks to defend its very existence. After amplifying Vorkuta’s voice, democracy drowned it in a cacophony of competing interests. With the exit from socialism turning into a stampede, miners lost the initial advantages markets brought. Independence and autonomy, once held as panacea, have run amok causing all to suffer. Mobilizing loyalty, the community seeks to overcome fragmentation and stem the debilitating tide of exit. In so doing, unintentionally or not, it rehabilitates the past.

II: Strike Committee: Returning to Political Opposition

At the hub of the workers’ movement in 1989 and again in 1991 was the City Workers’ Strike Committee. Artists, teachers, poets, business men, journalists as well as miners passionately engaged issues of the day in the dilapidated quarters of what, in 1954, had been the seat of the all-powerful Vorkuta Party Committee. Dissidents of all stripes and colors, from monarchists to populists, from liberal democrats to anarchists, from free marketeers to council communists, were drawn together by a single obsession: opposition to the regime. They came and went as they pleased,

twenty four hours a day, revelling in their challenge to an order that had oppressed them for seventy years.

In 1989 the strike committee demanded the restoration of the Northern and regional coefficients (monetary compensation for living and working in the far North), improved and earlier pensions, longer vacations, Sunday a holiday for all, better housing and guaranteed supplies of basic food stuffs and the termination of the feudal disciplinary code (*krepnestoe pravo*) which bound miners in bondage to a single mine. The second set of demands called for independence of the mines, the right to dispose of 25% of their foreign exchange earnings, and the call for the introduction of a market economy. Indeed one of their demands was to bring the economist Leontief back to Russia to explain how a market economy works! The third set of demands were political – for dismantling the bureaucratic command economy and for revoking Article 6 of the constitution that guaranteed the party's monopoly of power. They called for free elections to all positions of power, the right to form independent trade unions and parties, rights of free press, and recognition of the strike committee.

Assembled together and codified in the famous resolution 608 of the USSR Council of Ministers, some of the demands were realized but many were not. Spurred on by worsening economic conditions the miners resumed their strikes during the first months of 1991.¹¹ In April they were settled by Yeltsin's promises and his peace-making diplomacy which established him as leader of the Russian Federation and opponent of the Soviet regime. As the miners saw it, they were responsible for Yeltsin's ascendancy to power in 1991. Less than a year later the strike committee wondered whether Yeltsin would be able to deliver on his promises and improve conditions for the miners. The "miners' last hope," as Yeltsin was called in 1992, faced severe opposition from ex-communists in government and the Supreme Soviet and from a powerful lobby of industrial directors. It seemed that he had limited control over the regions. The workers' movement found itself increasingly on the defensive. Miners were exhausted from three years of turmoil and found their early "success" to be quickly souring. Disoriented by the new political and economic context it had helped to create, the movement lost sense of direction and began to splinter.

Fragmentation

The economic reforms, starting in January 1992 with price liberalization, had generated inflation rates of 30% a month – quite a shock to workers who were accustomed to decades of price stability. To be sure miners' wages had increased as rapidly as any group of workers. But they were not being paid because, the government claimed, it could not print

enough ruble notes to keep up with inflation. It seemed as though the collapse of communism had extended the shortage economy from goods and services to money itself. This was a short-term problem. More serious for the workers' movement was its internal fragmentation. With price liberalization, mines were given autonomy to sell 17 percent of their coal at any price either on the domestic market or on lucrative foreign markets. Suddenly Vorkuta was flooded with Western consumer goods – televisions, refrigerators, clothes, videos – imported on a barter basis and sold at nominal prices to employees at the mines. Each mine strategized on its own behalf to maximize returns to trade. The legacy of central control and the surge of market forces encouraged mine managers to hold up “exit” as the road to riches. Not satisfied with the way the coal conglomerate, Vorkuta Ugol', distributed export quotas and subsidies, a number of mines tried to break away and set up their own conglomerate.¹² Directors used hostility to the conglomerate and “the authorities” to elicit employee support for the strategy of independence. The mine's labor council (STK) or trade union branch focused first on the retention and then on the distribution of profits at individual mines. Vorkuta's once united workers' movement would be irrevocably fragmented.

The pattern had been set by Vorgashor, by far the largest and richest mine in Vorkuta. A long, solo strike in the fall of 1989 successfully achieved its main objective – unilateral independence from the conglomerate. Workers and managers had a common interest in opting out of a system in which the rich subsidized the poor. Accordingly, the miners at Vorgashor set up their own union, autonomous from both the old official union and the new “independent” union (NPG). Struggles concentrated on mine management rather than the conglomerate. At the end of 1992 they took a dramatic turn. According to reports, the General Director had bought Volga cars with the mine's profits and handed them out to Ministry officials, to the Moscow-based national coal association, Ross Ugol', as well as to local officials. Guridov, the indomitable union leader, publicly demanded the resignation of management. There followed two months of strikes in December and January and a further month of bitter dispute. The local administration took Guridov to court on trumped-up charges of libel. His supporters went down the mine and stayed underground until he was released on bail. Twice the workers' leader was voted into position of director by conferences of the labor collective. Indeed, for a time he was actually ensconced in the director's office. But the Ministry refused to recognize him. The struggle subsided when the chief engineer assumed the position of director and the struggle turned to privatization. The anticipated fruits of “independence” were hard to find.

Even the strike committee had been tempted by the mirages of economic independence. An infamous cooperative, TAN, from Southern Russia, had proposed to create lateral ties between industries that would

circumvent central government. Vorkuta coal would be channelled to the metallurgical complex at Cherepovets so as to maintain the supply of steel to the machine building industry which, in turn, would upgrade capital investment in farming. Vorkuta miners would benefit with a plentiful supply of food. This was not the first time the workers movement had attempted to forge an alliance with "traders" and "speculators." The strike committee had accepted financial support from the National Union of Cooperatives during the strikes of 1989 and 1991, as part of joint political agitation against the regime.¹³ Even in 1992, when the reforms were creating such havoc, defending market forces was still a political act designed to galvanize the workers' movement. But scandals circulated about TAN and the strike committee voted to maintain its independence from all outside forces.

The new economic and political order not only dispersed the targets of struggle but created new opportunities for the movement's leadership. Many of the first generation strike committee members used their position for personal enrichment. They saw no contradiction between their commitment to the workers' movement and running their own businesses. Others used their contacts to move into positions of political power, either locally or in Moscow. The independent trade union (NPG) that had emerged on an all-Union basis in the fall of 1990 was even more besmirched by its close connection to commercial structures and to the coal conglomerate.¹⁴ In this corrosive environment, defending working class interests called for new strategies.

Groping Toward a New Political Project

Despite divisive tendencies, in the summer of 1992 the strike committee, although no longer the center of bustling political activity that it had been in the previous year, was nevertheless still organizing in the mines and trying to coordinate strike activity.¹⁵ But by the summer of 1993 the mood had already changed. In July the government announced it was going to deregulate coal prices. The strike committee was furious since only a few months earlier, while campaigning on the referendum for the endorsement of his presidency, Yeltsin had promised that this would not happen. In the mind of Vorkuta freeing coal prices would mean the end of subsidies. Already Cherepovets, the main buyer of Vorkuta coal, was selling steel at world prices and would not be able to pay more for coal. So the withdrawal of subsidies would spell economic disaster for most of the mines.

The strike committee called an emergency meeting to discuss the impending economic crisis and layoffs at one of the high cost mines, Yun Yaga. About 25 representatives assembled from the old and new trade unions as well as the strike committee. It was summer and so attendance

was poor. There was a strong show of solidarity toward the 310 workers laid off at Yun Yaga. "We must refuse to accept layoffs until there is a government program in place," declared one. Another endorsed this position by summarizing the social protection German miners receive when made redundant. Others chimed in that violence and crime in the townships, already at high levels, would intensify with unemployment. They wanted to take strike action against layoffs without social guarantees. But there was an ominous reaction to this show of solidarity from the representative from Yun Yaga who feared that it would only make the situation worse. He seemed to accept layoffs as inevitable if wages – already among the lowest among the mines – were to be safeguarded. He was thinking of the future of the workers he represented, not the mining community as a whole.

From an issue that concerned the poorest mines, the meeting turned to one that concerned the richest mine, Vorgashor. After the strikes from December 1992 to February 1993 (see above) failed to install Guridov, the union leader, as director, workers demanded ownership of "their" mine. As in most privatization plans the enterprise was evaluated at a giveaway price. With a capacity of 5 million tons a year Vorgashor was valued at 250 million rubles, equivalent to a quarter of a million dollars in the summer of 1993. If each worker invested a quarter of one month's income, then employees could buy up the enterprise in one go! The struggle, therefore, turned on who had the right to buy the shares. The government had decreed that mines were to be privatized according to "the first option," which would leave the bulk of the shares in the hands of the state, while the union demanded a specific variant of the second option which would give employees 78 percent of the stock.¹⁶ Guridov and his union elicited little sympathy in the strike committee since it had too often pursued its own interests at the expense of mine-wide solidarity. Most mines, after all, were losing enterprises so that privatization could mean the end of subsidies and economic suicide. The issue was tabled in favor of the more popular idea of privatizing the conglomerate. How Vorkuta Ugol' distributed export quotas and state subsidies had always been veiled in secrecy. The strike committee saw privatization as offering miners' representatives more information and greater control over decisions that were determining the future of Vorkuta.

Tareev, the militant leader from the STK of Severnaya – the most radical mine – read out a manifesto addressed to Yeltsin. The demands recalled the pastiche of market adventurism and state protection that distinguished the proclamation of 1989 when Tareev was chair of Vorkuta's first strike committee. On the one hand, the mines should be made profitable – not the present miserly rate of 2 percent but a Western rate of 35 percent(!). It was not clear how, but he was known as a staunch advocate of TAN's strategy of building horizontal ties with other industries. Then

the mines should be privatized with 68 percent of the shares being offered to the labor collective. On the other hand, he called for guarantees of the conditions of the miners of the North: to improve pensions so that the miners can leave Vorkuta, to double the miners monthly income (which was already ten times the national average). Instead of the 10,000 ruble privatization vouchers which amount to no more than small change, miners should be given land in the South where they could retire after their gruelling lives in the North. There should be a program of layoffs and mine closures which guarantee miners material security and alternative employment. Although quite utopian in the Russian context, this was a social democratic manifesto that would allow market forces to bloom while offering social guarantees to their victims.

Although market forces were directly responsible for the plight of the mining industry and the demise of their own movement, few miners saw it that way. As Roman, twenty years an underground miner and now acting chair of the strike committee, told us, the real trouble is with the old system not the new. Communism is still the bane of the country. All around he saw ex-communists in power and he recounted conspiracy theories of communist infiltration of the workers' movement. To buttress his faith in the market, on the other hand, he believed that America – the land of the free market – is paved with gold.¹⁷

The emergency meeting called by the strike committee ended on a climactic note, presaging new directions. Kostya – a young representative from Vorgashor who was chairing the meeting – suggested inviting Vice-President Rutskoi to Vorkuta. For some time Rutskoi had been opposing the speed of economic reforms, now he was entering into open political combat with Yeltsin and heading toward the final showdown in October. Kostya's move reflected mounting disillusionment with Yeltsin but the assembled were not yet ready for such a drastic shift in political allegiance. He was immediately shouted down with a chorus: "All these politicians are the same." However, his proposal foreshadowed what would happen in the coming months. Yeltsin's October (1993) suspension of parliament, followed by the military siege of the White House (scene of his own triumphal resistance to the coup plotters in August 1991), and the subsequent imprisonment of Rutskoi and Khasbulatov drew the wrath of Vorkuta. In the December (1993) elections to the new parliament Gaidar's party, Russia's Choice, made a strong showing with 31 percent of the vote, but Zhirinovskii's party did almost as well with 26 percent of the vote. In this heartland of anti-communism, even Zyuganov, the leader of the Communist Party drew a huge crowd of listeners, although he received only 4.4 percent of the final vote.¹⁸ These were clear voices of protest, rising from the coal pits of Vorkuta.

When we returned to Vorkuta in the summer of 1994, we found the workers' committee had dropped the word "strike" from its official name.

It was no longer clear what role a strike committee could play – apart from a memorial to past glories. Sensing its irrelevance, some mines had ceased to sponsor the committee. Striking miners no longer posed a threat to the government – there was no shortage of coal and miners had no special political leverage. Indeed, the government may have welcomed strikes to avoid paying the still subsidized wages. The market had effectively neutralized the workers' movement and its leaders responded by seeking a new political voice, trying to build alliances with opposition parties in the new parliament and seeking new allies in other Northern industries.

The movement has come full circle – returning to its oppositional role of 1989. What bound the strike committee together then was opposition to the old regime. Now it is bound together in opposition to the new regime. However, in 1994 it is a latecomer to the democratic process where five years before it had been the vanguard. Having nothing to offer but its expensive and unwanted coal and tainted by its staunch support for Yeltsin, the workers' committee reenters the political arena from a position of weakness rather than strength. Laggards today, they may become leaders tomorrow. As the old order recedes, as conditions worsen, and as nostalgia for the past increases, so pressures for a labor party or even a socialist party will mount.¹⁹ In this project miners could find a new outlet for their militance and radicalism.

III: Trade Union: From Movement Back to Organization

July 11 is miners' solidarity day, commemorating the strike movement of 1989, and in the first years after 1989 was celebrated with symbolic strikes and carnivals. This year (1994) instead of celebration, gloom and despair hung over the city – its future cast in doubt by the very movement that was supposed to have been its liberation. Mines were operating at a loss while miners worked without pay.²⁰

In March the official and independent trade unions joined forces to declare a one day national strike to protest the late payment of wages. It had brought only temporary alleviation. Miners at Severnaya, always a hotbed of militancy, had prolonged the strike by remaining underground for a further two weeks. Facing closure of the mine for safety reasons, management bribed the workers to end their protest with promises of pay for the entire period they had spent underground.

On July 11 a group of Severnaya miners called for another strike. The issue was the same. They had not been paid for two months and they were now desperate for cash to send their families on their customary holidays in the South. Sasha, the chair of the local NPG – the strongest union at Severnaya – had called a meeting and was there together with

the acting director to address about 100 workers. NPG's leader arrived from the city and he began with a short calm speech, reminding everyone that today is July 11. "Certainly, the situation is very different now than it was five years ago but we shouldn't forget that it was here at Severnaya that the first strikes began in 1989." With this ambiguous statement he was trying to appease workers without endorsing their strike. The well-suited acting director told the assembled about the plight of the mine, reeled off figures detailing its enormous debts, described the problem of realizing money from delinquent customers and offered hope in the form of promises from government and conglomerate.

No one was interested in figures, excuses or promises. The leaders of the threatened strike had just come off shift. They stood there at the front, black as the coal face they had been hewing, looking menacing in their work clothes and hard hats. They quickly lost patience and came straight to the point, interrupting the acting director. Where were their wages – the money they were owed for the work they had done? After twenty five years working underground were they going to accept the lame excuses of management? Sasha tried to defuse the situation by diverting the blame away from management and toward the Savings Bank which distributed their wages. This hardly mollified the leaders who demanded to know why administrators were paid before workers. Again to deflect the wrath of the miners the acting director offered to talk privately to any workers with specific financial problems. In the event, the second shift did not go down but there was no mass enthusiasm for a strike. It was probably no coincidence that management would be distributing wages that day. Having received advance notice the strikers hoped that their threats would take them to the front of the queue.

Wildcat strikes, working to rule, slowdowns, absenteeism were daily occurrences all over the mines. These were not coordinated industrial actions, aimed at the government, but acts of despair aimed at local management. The unions, both the official trade union and NPG, found themselves working with management to quell the unrest. As Sasha himself admitted, he was working much more closely with management than before. He was caught in the middle and the brunt of much hostility from his members. No matter what he did, it was no good. From being a popular leader they now call him a "kozël".²¹ He defended his actions by arguing that industrial action might bring temporary relief for a few workers, but in the longer run everyone suffers. He knew that the time for leveraging support from the government was over. No one cared about the miners, they would have to fend for themselves. NPG, which not so long ago enjoyed access to the President, had lost its political influence in Moscow. Its fate would be decided here in Vorkuta.

In the Kuzbass NPG was much weaker than the official trade union,²² while in Vorkuta it had begun to work closely with its erstwhile nemesis.

Both unions concentrated on trying to obtain and defend the wages and benefits of their members. They had signed a tariff agreement as well as local collective agreements that linked wages to output. At each mine the union was only too aware that the competitive world of a market economy and closures would not be long in coming to Vorkuta. The unions had closed ranks with management. Indeed, NPG's collaboration with the conglomerate Vorkuta Ugol' was an open secret.

If the strike committee returned to opposition by forging ties to opposition parties, the trade unions turned away from movement politics toward greater focus on its welfare role, defending the material interests of its membership. But here the official trade union was more experienced. Were it not for support from the conglomerate, Vorkuta's NPG would have followed its decline in the Kuzbass. Markets and democracy effectively fragmented the once united movement, channelling it toward an anemic parliament on the one side and collaboration with management on the other. Within Vorkuta, the balance of power had always favored Vorkuta Ugol' but it now swung even further in its direction.

IV: Regrouping Behind the Conglomerate

Alexander Sergeevich is Director of the Vorkuta Water and Sewage Works and Chair of the Board of Directors of Vorkuta Ugol', and a long standing, highly respected and articulate political leader of Vorkuta. Alternately avuncular and tough in style, he has survived perestroika and the turmoil of 1989 and 1991. In fact he and his partners in Vorkuta Ugol' rode the wave of protest, channeling it to their own advantage. Resources had indeed flowed to Vorkuta, and usually through the conglomerate. In the summer of 1992, amidst all the proclamation of price liberalization, privatization and a barrage of governmental decrees, he could confidently assure us that "the more things change the more they remain the same" (Burawoy and Krotov, 1993:50). Reforms may create a big splash in Moscow but by the time they reached the Arctic Circle they are only a ripple.

Two years later, sitting in the same office with Lenin still hanging behind him, Alexander Sergeevich had changed his tune, slightly: "Slowly but surely we are moving toward a civilized society." Where before he was threatening the government with the closure of one mine, now he was resigned to the government plans to close five of the twelve mines.²³ We have no alternative, he says, but to adjust to the realities of the new era. Optimist to the end, he said the money saved in subsidies would be redirected to the richer mines which would absorb workers made redundant. During the last three years the demand for coal had fallen and production had declined from 15 million to 11 million tons.²⁴ But he thought that output could be maintained at the present level. He was more worried about the ten thousand construction workers who would

be without employment than he was about the miners. Indeed, with the exodus from Vorkuta the mines claimed to be as short of labor as ever.²⁵

"As state subsidies diminish," he continues, "we not only have to close down the high cost mines but drastically cut our social services. We will have to hand over responsibility for housing, the local dairy farm, and kindergartens to the municipality." Again, he shrugs his shoulders, "There's simply no alternative."²⁶ The city in turn will have to seek funds in Syktyvkar, capital of the Komi Republic. In the past Vorkuta has always gone straight to Moscow for special dispensations. No longer the important city it was, it will have to swallow its pride and send deputations to the regional capital. But there they will receive a cool reception, for Syktyvkar's power elite has always resented Vorkuta's claims to special treatment.²⁷

But there are also diversions along the road to civilization. Although he favors privatization in principle, Alexander Sergeevich thinks it ridiculous to privatize loss-making enterprises. Among the mines only Vorkashor is profitable but even here privatization will not bring economic success. Commenting on the continuing battle for control, he likens Vorkashor to a ship in rough seas which everyone on board is trying to steer. So long as the mines are owned by the government it can demand state subsidies. Indeed, he'd just returned from discussions with the Prime Minister who had signed an eleven point proclamation to support Vorkuta. Most important among the items was the reduction in railroad tariffs for coal destined for abroad. But most mine managers are skeptical. This is after all just a bit of paper and they'd seen many of those before.

A sense of fatalism has descended on Vorkuta. Alexander Sergeevich is happy to tell us that there have been fewer strikes. "People understand there is no point in striking." Those that do occur, he says, are about non-payment of wages and that's only a temporary problem. Everyone is aware of the differences between the mines. They know that strikes eat away at profits and threaten wages. It will take time for a new generation to emerge, accustomed to the market, but already there is widespread resignation to the new realities. "Vorkuta exists only by virtue of historical accident and so the adjustment is bound to be painful." Since we last met him, Alexander Sergeevich had done his homework on closures in other countries. He compared the situation in Russia with England where closures proceed together with the creation of new industry. "But who wants to start a new industry in Vorkuta? Would you? It's not realistic. We have to use our funds to relocate the population."

If workers are more wary of striking, mine managers no longer think of declaring autonomy. Two years ago there was much talk about certain mines breaking away from the conglomerate to form a new one of their own. Even then Alexander Sergeevich had been very blasé. "Let them go, they'll be back." He was right. Those who struck out on their own, opening their own bank accounts or exploring new markets, quickly

discovered that independence was hard to sustain in a market glutted with coal and handicapped by soaring freight charges. At every link of the export chain stand sentries who extort their percentages, turning potentially profitable sales into a loss-making business. The only chance for survival, as the new director at Vorkutinskaya made clear, is through the conglomerate. But he's fortunate in that the chief executive of the conglomerate is the previous director of his mine. Others don't have the same influence in the conglomerate. The chief engineer at Yu-Shor, one of the five mines scheduled for closure, hoped that his director would be able to convince the conglomerate that the mine was worth saving, that it had rich reserves and they could bring down the costs of production. Of course, managers have more to fear from closures than workers who can more easily find work at others mines. So, suddenly, everyone is coming to Vorkuta Ugol' with their begging bowls. From being bane of their life, it has become their only chance.

Alexander Sergeevich even hinted that Vorgashor would rejoin the conglomerate. But management told us they could not see any reason for returning to the fold. To be sure, relations with the conglomerate were much better than before and they were using the conglomerate's new refinery. But to return would mean sharing their profits with poorer mines. So, Vorgashor's chief economist assured us, they were much better working directly with the national coal association in Moscow – Ross Ugol' and the Ministry of Fuel and Energy. They have already received huge low interests loans – effectively subsidies – to get the mine back on its feet after the 1993 strike. The conglomerate could never have been so generous. What he didn't tell us was how much Ross Ugol' and the Ministry extracted in return for their generosity.²⁸

Certainly one mine is leaving Vorkuta Ugol', but not of its own free will. When we first visited Vorkuta in 1992, Alexander Sergeevich was retaliating against the government threats to reduce subsidies with threats to close down Halmer-Yu, an isolated mine forty kilometers to the north of Vorkuta. In the language of the northern Nenets people, Halmer-Yu, fittingly means "The Valley of Death." Wooden crosses still mark the graveyards of the old labor camp. Halmer-Yu's only connection to the rest of the world, apart from helicopter, is the single gauge railroad to Vorkuta. Six thousand people live here, the majority having migrated from the Donetsk in search of higher pay. Even though the coal was of the highest quality, when it comes to the calculus of profits, it is simply too expensive to mine and then transport, not too mention the costs of maintaining a community in such an inhospitable climate. In 1992 Halmer-Yu's leaders were searching around for some miracle that would save their community – a pipe line that would carry coal to the north, or investors to excavate local deposits of bauxite. By 1994 the community had given up the struggle for survival. Instead it was preparing to relocate.

Vorkuta Ugol' put in an early bid to the government to compensate displaced miners and their families from Halmer-Yu. They were reputed to be the first mine to receive such compensation in Russia. Production would stop in August, 1994 and by November 1995 the mine would be sealed and the village evacuated. That was the plan. Each employee would receive a severance package – four months pay directly from the mine and two months once they had relocated – which could range from 8 million to 12 million rubles (\$4,000 to \$6,000) for underground workers.²⁹ When we arrived in July, 1994, Halmer-Yu was swimming in money, outsiders had begun to move in and crime had increased. We arrived with a brigade from Omon, the security police, which had been hired to patrol the village.

Even more attractive to the residents was the relocation offer: the government would set aside funds for employees to purchase apartments in any part of Russia they might choose to live. This was an extraordinary offer which, by itself, would cost the government an estimated 27.3 billion rubles (\$14 million). The funds were being released in installments. By the time we visited in July, about 300 of the 1600 families, those with the longest residence in Halmer-Yu, had received housing, but a cloud of uncertainty hovered over future disbursements. A government commission had arrived to investigate the way the community was using these funds, who was paying whom for what. The cost of the apartments was suspiciously high. Ever the propagandist, Alexander Sergeevich wanted to make this first relocation a model for future removals. Given the costs, it is more likely the first will also be the last.

At the end of our 1994 visit, we called on the Director of the Pechora Institute of Mining, another long-standing resident of Vorkuta. We'd met two years before and he asked us about our impressions. When we told him that Vorkuta's fate lay in forces beyond the city, he laughed and said we had become true Soviet citizens, expecting the state to solve all problems. He was despondent about the fatalism that had overtaken the city – the refusal of Vorkuta to take its destiny into its own hands. He was working on a ten-year development plan that would locate Vorkuta's future within a regional context – a plan that would involve the growth of industry and the construction of a railroad to send exports to Archangel. Of course, he realized that plans make little sense in times of weak government and unfettered markets but his purpose was political, to turn Vorkuta from a Soviet city into a regional one. Komi, after all, is a republic rich in resources, coal, timber, gas, oil as well as a variety of precious minerals if only it were to deploy those resources for economic development rather than plunder them for short-term private economic gain. Komi needs to pursue its own economic plan and keep the bankrupt Russian state at bay.

When it comes to regional development, however, the gap between

potential and reality widens everyday. With only a 25 percent drop in output the coal industry is doing well. The timber industry has taken a much steeper nose dive – production of raw timber fell by 44 percent between 1990 and 1993, and comparing the first five months of 1994 with the same period in 1993, it had fallen by a further 42 percent. Output is falling at the region's huge paper mill, while sawmills, processing plants and furniture factories stand idle. Oil production is down – the industry can't even pay its own employees, let alone find money for investment. At the same time the financial sector expands by leaps and bounds. Human, monetary, and physical resources flow out of industry and into finance. In Syktyvkar, new banks appear almost daily. If they last, and succeed in accumulating resources, they look for investment opportunities in the West, not in Komi. In return, only the hardest and most unscrupulous foreign businesses dare set foot on this treacherous terrain.

V: Returning to the Past

When in 1989 miners challenged the old regime in the name of markets and democracy, they did not anticipate just how successful they would be nor how quickly their dreams would turn to ashes. Their leaders have hung up their hard hats to join the new class of *entrepreneurtchiks* or, like Sasha and Tareev, have hung around to be vilified by their followers. Still, if truth be told, the miners have not suffered the worst ravages of the market. Compared to other industrial workers they have fared relatively well. True to its historic resilience, Vorkuta has managed to shore up socialist organizations with capitalist content. The strike committee, a pale shadow of its former self, returns to democratic opposition, exploring alliances in parliament. The independent trade union joins forces with the official trade union to defend management in the name of productivity and profits. In return, and for now, they still disburse social benefits. Above all, mine managers quickly lost any illusions they may have had that independence will bring untold fruits. They have regrouped behind the conglomerate as the last line of defence. With its renewed city-wide hegemony, the conglomerate still has access to Yeltsin's government, to bargain for its share of ever-diminishing subsidies.

Vorkuta hangs by a fraying rope. Its hostile classes have locked themselves into a holding pattern before the storm from paradise piles more debris over the frozen tundra. It is hard to tell what twists and turns await the angel of history as he is carried backwards into the future. Alexander Sergeevich wearily assures us: "Slowly but surely we are moving toward a civilized society. There's simply no alternative." However, one shouldn't forget that Vorkuta, and the Gulag of which it was a part, arose from an unexpected turn in Soviet history. The collapse of the Soviet union was another unexpected turn but we shouldn't think it is the last. Market

failure has provided fertile ground for authoritarianism in the past; there is no reason why it shouldn't in the future.

Acknowledgments

This study is based on our visits to Vorkuta in 1992 (six weeks), 1993 (one week) and 1994 (two weeks). In between Krotov kept up with events from Syktyvkar. We would like to thank many people for their hospitality, and their willingness to talk to us, often at great length, about the distressing situation of the mining industry. Robert Argenbright and a second anonymous referee supplied excellent comments that helped us rewrite the original draft and gave us the time to incorporate recent developments. Peter Fairbrother and Simon Clarke generously shared their own research findings with us. Thanks to David Joravsky for calling attention to the angel of history. Finally, the National Science Foundation and the John D. MacArthur Foundation provided funds to make the research possible.

Notes

1. The "new social history" of the October Revolution argues that the success of the Bolshevik Party lay in its flexibility and its responsiveness to the militancy and radicalism of workers in Petrograd and to a lesser extent Moscow. See, for example, Rabinowitch (1976), Service (1979), Suny (1983), Smith (1983), Sirianni (1983), Mandel (1984). Only after the revolution did the Bolsheviks develop an effective top down organizational form.
2. See, for example, Lewin (1985, chapter 4). Chaudhry (1993) makes the more general argument that central planning was not the product of ideological and political commitment to socialism but was a response to market failure. She extends the argument from Russia to China. Naturally, once central planning was adopted as an economic expedient it was justified as quintessentially socialist.
3. Jeffrey Sachs, prophet of shock therapy and erstwhile advisor to the Yeltsin government, blamed the failure of his policies on the West, and particularly the IMF, for not releasing funds that had been ear-marked for Russia. See Sachs (1994).
4. We take this apt term from Przeworski (1983:136), who in turn borrowed it from Tarkowski.
5. This is the central contribution of the new "political process" models of social movements. See, for example, Tilly, Tilly and Tilly (1975), McAdam (1982), Tarrow (1991).
6. See Touraine et al. (1983) for one of the few attempts to tie together the workers' movements in post-WWII Eastern Europe.
7. These themes are developed in Burawoy and Lukács (1992).
8. For accounts of the miners' strikes and their demands see Friedgut and Siegelbaum (1990); Mandel (1990); Rutland (1990); Cook (1991); Clark et al. (1993, chapters 5-8).
9. Life in Vorkuta labor camps is described in the books of two ex-prisoners (Buca, 1976; Scholmer, 1954) from which we have drawn this interpretation of the 1953 strike. Buca was the leader of the strike at Mine 29.
10. Trying to explain why miners and not steelworkers struck in 1989 and 1991 Crowley (1994) argues that miners were not bound into such strong dependence on management. The cash nexus rather than benefits in kind attached miners to management. In other words, "voice" is strengthened by the op-

portunity for "exit." (Hirschman, 1970) We argue the opposite: in the late Gorbachev period, voice was stronger in the *absence* of exit possibilities. That is to say, first, the Soviet workers' movement was so weak because of the high levels of labor turnover (Bergsten and Bova, 1990). Second, exit was more difficult and mutual loyalty greater for miners. Miners faced greater restraints on labor turnover and had built greater class solidarity. As a result they were more likely to strike when the state created the possibility.

11. Conventionally, these strikes have been seen as the politicization of the miners' movement. Clarke and Fairbrother contest this interpretation, claiming that the striking miners embraced economic demands while their leadership in the strike committee presented them in political terms. While the leadership supported the neo-liberal opposition to the Soviet regime, rank and file were more concerned with reversing the worsening economic conditions. They cite the low level of support for many of the explicitly political strikes, such as the protest against Soviet military action in Lithuania in January, 1991 or even support for Yeltsin during the attempted putsch of August, 1991. See Clarke, et al. (1993, chapter 7). While we agree that the strikes were political from the beginning and that the position of the strike committee has to be distinguished from that of the followers, still the line between political and economic struggles is hard to draw in the Soviet context.
12. We describe this period in detail in an earlier article, Burawoy and Krotov (1993).
13. Jones and Moskoff (1991:116) discuss the efforts of the USSR Union of Amalgamated Cooperatives to support the striking miners in 1989.
14. According to Clarke and Fairbrother (Clarke et al., 1993: chapter 8) the NPG became more like "a trading association" because it was marginalized politically by the new government which favored the reconstituted old official unions. The latter had actively supported Yeltsin in his battle with Gorbachev when the NPG was still a fledgling organization. This dim view of NPG is probably more appropriate to the Kuzbass than Vorkuta where, as we will see, the NPG did have a considerable following in some of the mines.
15. Marking its historic role in bringing the old regime to its knees, the strike committee was given official status and each mine elected and sponsored one member on the committee.
16. In the summer of 1994 the matter was in the courts. The union was still demanding 78 percent of the shares to go to employees, management was proposing 68 percent and the government was sticking to privatization according to the first variant which would leave at most 40 percent in the hands of employees. It was widely assumed that the government would win the case.
17. A fascinating example of blindness to market failure was the popular response to the collapse of the investment company MMM, which had attracted some 10 million shareholders. It had run a sophisticated and effective advertising campaign and opened thousands of offices across the country. However, it was a typical pyramid scheme in which new investors financed the returns for old investors. When the bubble burst in August 1994 many lost millions of rubles overnight. But the population turned their fury against the government for casting doubt on the solidity of the company while Sergei Mavrodi, the president of the company, became a national hero! Unlike the government which didn't even pay wages owed to its employees, MMM always honored its obligations to shareholders – at least until the state intervened.
18. Results for Russia as a whole were: Russia's Choice – 14.8%; Liberal Democratic Party (Zhirinovskiy's party) – 23.5%; Russian Communist Party – 13.3%

19. Of course, such parties as the Socialist Workers Party, the Communist Party of Bolsheviks, Working Russia already exist, but with the exception of the Communist Party of Russia they don't have significant popular support.
20. This phenomenon was not unique to the mining industry. It was widespread throughout Russian industry. Enterprises could not obtain working capital but neither would they declare themselves bankrupt. Management couldn't lay off workers because it couldn't afford severance pay but neither could it afford to pay them their full wages.
21. "Kozël," meaning goat, is a term of abuse and here means a "traitor".
22. Personal communication from Simon Clarke and Peter Fairbrother, July, 1994. From the beginning NPG was much weaker in the Kuzbass where it was established as an arm of the strike committees (Clarke et al., 1993:155-56, 177-78). In Vorkuta it managed to gain majority representation of underground workers in a number of mines. Location of its head offices in the building of the coal conglomerate gave it greater independence of the city strike committee.
23. The World Bank Report (1993b) for Vorkuta proposes three variants: maintaining existing levels of output, 25 percent reduction in output which would mean closing four mines; or a 50 percent reduction which would entail closing eight mines. The World Bank favored the last scenario; Vorkuta Ugol' seems to be working with the second.
24. All figures are for the mines of Vorkuta Ugol'. They, therefore, exclude Vorkashor which seceded from the conglomerate in late 1989.
25. We were told that 18,000 people had left Vorkuta and only 4,000 entered. According to the World Bank (1993b:26) many of those migrating to Vorkuta were pensioners – an estimated 2,000 in the first seven months of 1993. Unemployment in Vorkuta is still relatively low. In June 1994 there were 1,854 officially unemployed, about 2% of the labor force, as compared to 1,542 in the previous June.
26. Again he is echoing the World Bank Report on Vorkuta which also calls for stripping the mines of responsibility for social services and turning this function over to government. In a market economy enterprises are in the business of making profit while the state should provide the social safety net. Of course, it is one thing for the mines to divest themselves of these costly services, it is quite another for the municipality to take them over.
27. In 1991, flush with victory, the story in Syktyvkar was that Vorkuta was now preparing to declare independence and become its own republic.
28. In its report the World Bank (1993a:27) is particularly critical of Ross Ugol' for the multiple functions it performs. At one and the same time it charges mines a fee for services which include control over exports and foreign procurement; it is a private holding and investment company; and it is the sole conduit of state subsidies to its membership. Such privatization of the state leaves plenty of room for rent seeking, corruption and politically shaped priorities!
29. The average monthly income in Komi at the same time was 400,000 rubles a month or \$200.

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