

Stephen Crowley, Hot Coal, Cold Steel: Russian and Ukrainian Workers from the End of the Soviet Union to the Post-Communist Transformations. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997, x + 273 pp., £29.95.

Stephen Crowley has written an important book which addresses one of the central issues thrown up by the 'transition': why have workers accepted their fate so quiescently? As Crowley notes at the beginning of his book, the failure of workers to engage in protest and collective action undermines both the totalitarian and social contract theories through which the social peace of the Communist period has traditionally been explained, yet the issue has been very little researched.

Crowley addresses this problem through a comparative study of miners and steelworkers in Russian Kuzbass and Ukrainian Donbass between 1989 and 1995. The comparison is apposite because in both regions steelworkers and miners live and work alongside one another but, while steelworkers have displayed very little activism, the miners have been the most prominent exception to the rule of quiescence. The problem is therefore to explain, on the one hand, why Soviet and post-Soviet workers have been so passive but, on the other hand, why the miners have not.

Crowley explains the passivity of Soviet workers by their multi-faceted dependence on the workplace, but he reduces this to a matter of individual instrumental rationality: workers do not protest because they fear losing the benefits selectively distributed by management. Miners received fewer non-monetary benefits than steelworkers so had less to lose by protesting. But on this argument women workers would be more militant than men, workers in light industry than miners, workers in small enterprises than in large enterprises, and surface mineworkers more militant than faceworkers. It is always difficult to explain the militancy or strike-proneness of particular groups of workers, but this explanation will not work, and although Crowley repeats it regularly, he does not make much serious effort to put it to the test. Crowley is right that workers were integrated into the

Soviet system through the workplace, but this was not so much a matter of the scale of dependence as of its form, as Sarah Ashwin shows in her research on Kuzbass miners, where she also shows that it is this specific form of 'alienated collectivism' that has structured workers' actions in the transition.

The more effectively we explain the social integration of workers, the more incumbent on us it becomes to explain the exceptional cases of workers' protest, in this case the miners' movement. Here I have to declare an interest, since in his footnotes Crowley is dismissive of my own attempt, with Vadim Borisov and Peter Fairbrother, to explain this in relation to Kuzbass in our book, *The Workers' Movement in Russia*. Although Crowley describes our account of the 1989 strike in Kuzbass as 'exhaustive', the key point is that the significance and resonance of the 1989 strike lies in the detail. In July 1989 all the contradictions of perestroika came to a head in the everyday experience of the faceworkers of section 5 of Shevyakova mine in Mezhdurechensk, which was why the strike spread so fast and met with such a sympathetic response across Russia. Crowley, on the other hand, explains the strike in narrowly economic terms, as a result of the sad state of the Soviet mining industry, with the miners' militancy being explained by their limited dependence.

The miners' demands centred on their everyday lives but, as Crowley rightly notes, in the Soviet system they could not but be political. But political demands can only be pressed through political channels. In our book we tried to show how the structural particularities of local administration and management structure in the coal industry underlay a limited coincidence of interests between local political and management structures and the workers, which allowed the local industrial and political leadership to harness the miners' demands to their own aspirations and to confine the miners' struggle within particular political channels. There was no such coincidence of interests in other branches, which was why the strike was largely confined to coal-mining, an isolation reinforced by the miners' own self-definition as the vanguard of the workers' movement, which has led them

consistently to reject offers of support. The outcome of these factors was the demobilisation of the miners' movement, the isolation of the miners and the marginalisation of the workers' committees. Having marginalised the committees, the local Party hoped to eradicate them by co-opting their members, but in this they failed as the leaders of the workers' committees linked up with the 'democrats' in Moscow.

Crowley explains the politicisation of the miners' movement after 1989 no longer in terms of instrumentalism, but in terms of ideology, well characterising the contradictory ideas of a labour theory of value and a liberal critique of the state which underlay the miners' leaders' support for the market. However, he tends to lump all miners together in the 'miners' movement' (as we did too much in our book), neglecting the fact that the leaders of the workers' committees and NPG had only very shallow roots in the mines, despite their resumption of a leadership role in the 1991 strikes, after which leadership moved back to the official union and the miners' movement slowly disintegrated.

It is important not to exaggerate the distinctiveness of the miners in an attempt to make a comparative argument. There are certainly distinctive features of coal-mining, but the decisive factor lying behind the continuing militancy of the miners has been the financing of the industry, which makes wages directly dependent on subsidies from Moscow, in which workers and directors have a common interest, as is shown by the fact that teachers have now moved ahead of miners in the militancy league. These features are well brought out by Robert Ferguson's comparative study of teachers, steelworkers and coal miners in Kuzbass.

I have focused on my criticism of Crowley's analytical arguments in this review, but this should not detract from an appreciation of the substantial amount of rich material to be found in his detailed, if episodic, accounts of miners and steelworkers, particularly in Donbass. The book is worth reading for this material alone.

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