

Behind the news: 1

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Reform and Revolution in the Communist National Park

On 7th June 1993 the miners of the Zasyad'ko mine in Donetsk in the Ukraine went on strike. Within days a general strike swept the region, with strikers in permanent occupation of the central square of the City of Donetsk. The strike had been precipitated by huge increases in the state-controlled prices of food, but the strikers immediately put forward political demands. Their main demand was for a referendum, to be followed by new elections if the result was a vote of no confidence in President Kravchuk and parliament. The strikers walked out of a meeting with the government commission sent to Donetsk on 8th June, on the grounds that they would not discuss economic demands until their political demands had been satisfied. The commission ended up holding a meeting with local mine and factory directors, who savaged the commission chairman Viktor Penzenik, author of the Ukrainian government's 'reform' programme.

At first the Ukrainian government tried to ignore the strike. The Supreme Soviet was convened on 14th June, one day earlier than planned, to discuss the strike, but parliament voted down the demand for a referendum. At 9 o'clock the next morning the co-Chairman

of the Donetsk Strike Committee, Mikhail Krilov, telephoned Kravchuk. As a result, that afternoon Kravchuk persuaded the Ukrainian parliament to adopt the referendum proposal. On 16th June 20,000 strikers surrounded the building in which the Pervomaïsk City Council was meeting to demand the dissolution of the Council, and would not allow the councillors to leave until they had submitted their resignation. Making the best of a difficult situation, the entire Council resigned 'in protest at the anti-popular policies of President Kravchuk'. On 18th June the strikers signed an agreement with the government negotiating commission, headed by Ukrainian First Vice-Premier Yefim Zvyagilski, who had at the beginning of the strike been Mayor of Donetsk, and only two months before had been Director of the Zasyad'ko mine in which the strike had begun.

The Donetsk strike has received little coverage in the Western media, but it also received little coverage in the Ukraine. Although the Donbass was paralysed by the general strike, much larger in scale than the strikes of 1989 and 1991 which undermined the soviet system, there was no mention of the strike on national television for the first week. The Ukrainian mass media persisted in portraying the strike as a miners' strike, although the miners had insisted from the beginning that they had no sectional demands, and the strike extended to all branches of industry by the second day. The mass media presented the strike as a struggle between the miners and the government, although it was not the workers but the enterprise directors who made the running in formulating the economic demands, and it was the directors who won the biggest concessions from the government. The strikers' demand for regional self-government was represented as a separatist demand, to divide the more Russified Donbass from Western Ukraine. The demand for the restoration of economic links with Russia

and the removal of customs barriers on the nearby border was represented as a demand for the restoration of the Soviet Union. Such distortions and misrepresentations are neither surprising nor unusual in the Ukraine. The Ukraine is the least changed of the former Soviet European Republics—Ukrainians describe their country as 'not a state, just a Communist National Park'. As the correspondent of Kiev TV said to Mikhail Krilov, 'we are independent, but only from ourselves'.

What did the workers want, and what did they get?

The Zasyad'ko mine was perhaps the least likely place for the strike to begin. Zasyad'ko had been under the authoritarian but paternalist rule of Zvyagilski for fifteen years, and wages and social and welfare facilities there are better than in other mines. The mine had not joined any of the strikes since 1989, and its workers were regarded as 'deaf and dumb scabs' by workers in other mines. But there were limits to what even the workers of Zasyad'ko would endure in the name of reform. The spark that ignited the workers of Zasyad'ko was the price increases introduced in the Donetsk region without notice on 7th June. The price of semi-smoked sausage, which is the staple food of miners, was increased overnight by almost four times to 20,000 coupons (£4), against the typical miners' wage of 120,000 a month.

The first many of the miners knew of the price increases was when their wives came home from the morning's shopping to buy food for their husbands' lunch packs, while others heard of it only on the trolleybus to work (and a few even when they went shopping for themselves). As miners of the second shift assembled before work the price rises were the single topic of conversation. As the workers attended their shift meetings, and changed into their hot and uncomfortable work clothes, the level of anger was steadily rising. The workers all came together at the pit head ready to take the lift down the shaft, chatting and having their last

smokes as usual. Workers were asking each other what is the point of working when you cannot afford to live, why should we risk our lives for a piece of sausage, and ranted against the government. Although the workers were agreed that there was no sense in working, nobody suggested that they should strike. Although the miners were angry there was no focus for their anger. The situation exploded when the new mine Director, the former chief engineer, arrived on the scene.

All the talk meant that the miners had been hanging around longer than usual. When the Director arrived he asked the miners why they were not going to work, and the very act of posing the question both raised the possibility of their not working and established the Director as the focus of the workers' anger. A crowd gathered around the Director explaining their problems, and asking what the mine could do to help them. The Director replied that the mine could do nothing to raise wages or subsidise food, because like the other Donbass mines it already owed colossal fines for overspending on wages, and was massively in debt as a result of non-payment by its customers, so that only the government could solve their economic problems. The last straw came when the Director clumsily tried to justify the government's price policy, at which the workers immediately took up the call of one of their number, 'do the work yourself', and walked out.

The workers, still in their work clothes, had no idea what to do or where to go. At first they planned to gather on the main road outside a neighbouring factory, but one said 'why should we stay here like dogs by the fence, let's go to the Kirov District Council office'. On the way to the council office they passed the offices of a local newspaper and told the journalists that they were on strike, while somebody phoned to the office of the City Strike Committee, established after the 1989 strike, to tell them what was happening.

When the miners arrived at the council office a few began to go in, but the two miners who had by now emerged as leaders of the group stopped them. 'The bloody chiefs can come down here themselves'. The chairman of the council came out to meet the strikers and asked them what they wanted. The workers vented their anger, but it was soon clear that they had no demands, and no idea what they wanted. The chairman of the council gave them pen and paper and asked them to make a list of demands.

Soon after this Mikhail Krilov, co-Chairman of the City Strike Committee, arrived and asked them what was going on. Krilov told them that they had jumped the gun, because the City Committee had been planning a strike for the following week, but now he took control of the meeting, picked up the demands shouted out from the crowd, and then read out the disparate items one by one for approval, before taking the list back to the Strike Committee office to be typed and submitted to the Council.

Meanwhile the offices of the City Strike Committee were buzzing as phone calls were made to all the mines in the region, and delegates came in to find out what was happening. The message came back that other mines were ready to strike, although many people were nervous about the consequences and nobody wanted to be the first. The leaders of the workers' movement decided that they had to call the other mines out if they were to keep control of the situation, because otherwise there was a risk of a spontaneous explosion. On the first day the other mines decided not to strike immediately, but to send representatives to a meeting in the central October Square. However, the following day most mines joined the strike, workers reporting by shift in their work clothes to what became a permanent meeting on October Square. The Strike Committee sent delegates to enterprises around the city, and workers from other industries began to join the strike,

although they were more nervous about striking and did not show the discipline and solidarity of the miners. However, the stoppage of coal deliveries soon led to a general slowdown in production.

Once the government was persuaded of the seriousness of the strike it moved rapidly towards a settlement. Zvyagilski, the former Director of the Zasyad'ko mine, who had advised the workers on the formulation of their demands at the beginning of the strike as Mayor of Donetsk, was by now First Vice-Premier of Ukraine. Two days after the acceptance of the demand for a referendum, which would have a moral but no constitutional status, Zvyagilski returned to Donetsk to negotiate an end to the strike, using his local contacts and trading on his reputation for honesty to sell a deal to the Strike Committee. The workers, elated by their political victory, were already drifting back to work in the expectation that their economic demands would be met, but in the event it was not so much the workers as the enterprise directors who were the victors.

The final settlement of the strike provided the miners with a doubling of their wages, but this was not a great victory since, as the miners themselves had said in rejecting economic negotiations, 'what is the point of getting bigger wages if prices only increase again next week?'. Other workers were promised comparable rises, although the government gave no details. Otherwise the workers had won little more than vague promises.

The enterprise directors won the cancelling of their fines, the resolution of their debt problems, tax concessions and greater freedom to trade. Many mine directors had actively supported the strike from the beginning, and none of them opposed it, although many managed to maintain some production under the cover of maintenance and safety. When the workers walked out of the negotiations with the first government commission it was the enterprise

directors (and one self-appointed representative of the official trade unions) who replaced them. When the final negotiations took place it was a former director who represented the government side. Many workers were saying by the end of the strike that this had been a directors' strike. Some were even making the completely unfounded allegation that the strike in Zasyad'ko, whose workers had a long-standing reputation as scabs who could easily be bought off, had been provoked deliberately.

Krilov decided to sign the final agreement because the strike was losing its momentum, with his hand being forced when Zvyagilski threatened that workers would only be paid for the period of the strike if they returned to work immediately. The workers themselves, however, were often reluctant to return to work, and many mines remained on strike, or came out again, but now coming under strong pressure from the enterprise administration. On the 19th the strike was officially called off. In place of the disciplined ranks of miners, the square was now occupied by small groups of political activists, including many in Donetsk for the Congress of the Communist Party of Ukraine (and including representatives of Militant and its Russian branch Workers' Democracy). The mood of the meeting was militant, even hysterical, but the strike movement was over in Donetsk as a positive force. The following day a few people stood around the edges of the square while street cleaners and grass cutters dominated the centre.

The 1993 strike had very much followed the pattern of the previous strike waves of 1989 and 1991, with workers showing a high degree of courage, solidarity and discipline. But as on the previous occasions, the strike had been a spontaneous eruption of anger. The political demands of the workers were purely negative, to remove all those individuals who had been responsible for previous policies, but the workers had no clear demands and no positive programme of

their own, so that it was easy for the movement to be co-opted and forced into established institutional channels, with the benefits falling to the directors and not to the workers. But although many felt that they had been sold-out by the Strike Committee, negative emotions do not provide a constructive basis for the development of a political movement.

The workers' frustration meant that they were reluctant to return to work, and the strike dragged on in Lugansk and Dnepropetrovsk, with a one day strike called by the official unions in Kharkov on 24th June. Tension remained high, so the strike could be resumed at any time, although the Donetsk Strike Committee called for the workers to await the outcome of the referendum in September before taking further action, although in the end the referendum was cancelled, without provoking a significant response from the workers. However, the Donbass strike does not provide much consolation for those looking for the emergence of a progressive workers' movement in the former Soviet Union. In

the absence of an institutional framework through which workers can formulate their demands spontaneity is not necessarily a progressive force, and neither the Strike Committees nor the Independent Miners' Union have been able to provide such a framework.

The dangers are well-illustrated by the previous spontaneous miners' strike in Donbass, a one-day strike in August 1992, in which the miners successfully demanded the expulsion from the city of all those from the Caucasian and Asian Republics who were not permanent residents, a demand that was enthusiastically implemented by the local mafia in a vigorous pogrom. The widespread suspicion of the workers of Zasyad'ko and of the settlement negotiated with Zvyagilski both had a strong anti-semitic element. Zasyad'ko is known locally as 'the Jewish mine' because Zvyagilski is a Jew. The dilemma for the workers' leaders is that while they have been able to achieve little within existing channels, if the strike movement moves outside those channels it can develop in very nasty directions.
