

Behind the news: 1

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The Workers' Movement in Russia

The programme of perestroika initiated with Gorbachev's election in 1985 was essentially a programme which sought to restructure production relations from above, unleashing a factional struggle within the ruling stratum which increasingly centred on the transformation of class relations. As this factional struggle polarised, each party sought to secure the support of the working class.

Gorbachev himself initiated the process of working class mobilisation in 1987. In the first stages this involved the attempt to provide incentives for the transformation of production relations, and to open new channels for workers' self-determination, but still within the limits of the old system of enterprise and ministerial direction. The failure to make headway led Gorbachev to call for a more active response from the workers, to sweep away managerial and ministerial resistance to reform, in 1989. The immediate response was a massive strike wave, led by the miners, whose demands went far beyond anything that Gorbachev had anticipated, although he still sought to assimilate the workers movement to the movement for perestroika.

Despite substantial concessions to the miners, their Strike Committees remained in existence, and workers' unrest grew, culminating in the renewed strike wave of March and April 1991. This time the miners' demands had a predominantly political character, calling for the abolition of the administrative-command system, the resignation of Gorbachev and the Supreme soviet, and the effective abolition of the power of the Communist Party. Far from providing mass support for Gorbachev's programme, the working class proved to be the social force which precipitated the collapse of the system with Yeltsin's triumphant election to the Russian Presidency, followed by the coup and counter-coup of August 1991.

Yeltsin's triumph has fundamentally transformed the conditions of class struggle over the restructuring of the social relations of production. Although the Workers' Committees played the leading role in the struggle between 1989 and 1991, their association with Yeltsin's programme means that it is by no means certain that they will retain their leadership role. Meanwhile the official trade unions have instituted reforms, and have taken an increasingly independent and oppositional role. In this paper we want to ask what are the likely forms of class struggle in the new phase of the transition.

The Workers' Committee Movement

The leading role in the workers' movement between 1989 and 1991 was played by the miners' strike committees, which were organised at enterprise, local and regional levels. There was also a variety of small independent workers' organisations in other localities and other branches of production, from Workers' Clubs and Workers' (Strike) Committees to independent unions. In general all of

these organisations shared the characteristics of the miners' movement, in uniting a predominantly liberal democratic political leadership, which identified itself politically with the Yeltsin camp, and a rank-and-file base which was primarily concerned with immediate issues of wages and working conditions.

Despite the dramatic victories won by the miners in 1989 and 1991, repeated by many other workers on a smaller scale, and despite the enormous political impact which their movement has had, the movement is by no means as strong and united as might appear at first sight. The unity of the political leadership with its mass base has always been tenuous and contingent. There were few institutional links between different levels of the movement, and particularly between the organisation within the enterprise and the local and regional committees. Enterprise organisation was in general weak and transitory, springing up in response to specific grievances and disputes. The result was that, in general, although the workers' committees were increasingly oriented to political issues, they were able to elicit a popular response to strike calls if, and only if, such calls linked up with widespread economic grievances of the workers.

In 1989 the miners' grievances were long-standing, deriving from a steady deterioration in living standards and working conditions, and an extremely authoritarian, unresponsive and oppressive management. To an extent these grievances were specific to the miners, and other workers provided support in solidarity, although the miners' struggle was also exemplary, for all workers faced the same problems, if to a lesser degree.

The Workers' Committees performed a primarily political role between 1989 and 1991, as the informal movements were preoccupied with the local and republican elections in March 1990, and the

subsequent jostling for political position. There were increasingly frequent strikes in all branches of the economy, but attempts on the part of the miners' committees to call political strikes in July 1990 and January 1991 met with a very limited response.

The renewed strike call in March 1991, initially in the Donbass, also met with a patchy response. It was only when the government announced price increases in the middle of March that the strike escalated rapidly, and began to spread beyond the mines, most dramatically in Belorussia, hitherto the most quiescent region of the Union. Yeltsin and his associates played a major role in polarising the miners' strike by encouraging the leadership to press its political demands, undermining the government's attempts to separate the political leadership from the mass of the miners with limited economic concessions. The government's strategy eventually proved successful, when much more extensive concessions were granted, but the government's was a pyrrhic victory, for the struggle had provoked a political polarisation in the ruling stratum which culminated in the August coup. Although the coup was abortive, the very limited response of workers, even in the mines, to Yeltsin's call for a general strike showed once again the gulf which existed between the political leadership of the workers' movement and its rank and file.

The coup and counter-coup of August 1991 fundamentally transformed the situation in bringing Yeltsin to power, and giving new life to the programme of economic liberalisation. The first results of this programme were sharply rising prices, growing financial difficulties for enterprises and state bodies, and the expectation of a rapid rise in unemployment. Workers faced an unprecedented threat to their already reduced living standards, and levels of worker unrest

began to rise sharply at the beginning of 1992, as enterprises ran out of cash to pay wages.

In the new situation the Workers' Committees and independent trade unions were presented with a dilemma. On the one hand, if they did not express the grievances of the workers, and provide leadership to the demands for the indexation of wages and social protection, they risked losing their mass base. On the other hand, they were reluctant to sacrifice their political commitment to Yeltsin, and the access to political power which it had provided for them.

The independent workers' movement was now deeply divided. While pressing the workers' claims politically, the dominant position was one of support for the Yeltsin programme, opposing excessive wage claims as inflationary, and strike action as anti-government. In September 1991 the leader of the most militant Workers' Committee, that of the Vorkuta Miners, denounced a strike of surface workers for the restoration of differentials as 'anti-Yeltsin and anti-Russia'. The leaders of the Independent Miners' Union took a similar position in the run-up to its conference in December, opposing wage claims and strikes in the name of economic and political stabilisation. The leadership of the trade union federation Sotsprof was firmly committed to Yeltsin (and in Moscow to Popov), with its leaders having important advisory roles, and opposed Strike Committees and strike action in favour of peaceful collective bargaining, while its primary groups were moving in the opposite direction, taking an increasingly militant line and showing growing discontent with the centre. With the independent workers' movement still predominantly committed to Yeltsin, we have to ask whether the conditions are ripe for the official trade unions to take on the role of defending the workers' interests.

The official unions

The main opposition to the liberal democratic politics of the new workers' organisations since 1989 came from the neo-Stalinist United Workers' Front, which trumpeted its commitment to workers' self-determination and the defence of workers' interests, and which had strong links with parts of the trade union apparatus. However the UWF in reality represented no more than the attempt of the most discredited party apparatchiks to secure themselves an institutional base following their defeat in the democratic elections of 1989 and 1990. Even amongst Communist Party members the UFT secured a derisory level of support, and its successors since the coup have had little more success.

Although the neo-Stalinists have a foothold in the trade union apparatus, they by no means control it. Since the coup the official trade unions have been very active, holding regular demonstrations in Moscow and other cities to demand the indexation of wages and the social defence of workers. In Moscow members of the tiny Socialist Party, the Confederation of Anarcho-Syndicalists and a minority faction of the former Workers' Platform of the CPSU came together with the leadership of the Moscow Committee of the official unions to establish a Party of Labour, acclaimed in an article under the name of Ken Livingstone in the *New Statesman* as developing 'the most advanced political ideas in the world'. According to the article the 'radical democratic ideas of the socialist tradition are fusing with the social achievements of the Russian people since 1917', in the form of a synthesis linking small groups of intellectuals to 'large organisations in Russian Society', based on a 'shift in the trade unions'. Certainly the unions have adopted a workerist rhetoric,

but do they really provide the mass base for a renewal of socialism in Russia?

At first sight the official trade unions are well-equipped to defend workers in the transition to a market economy. Around 98% of the Soviet workforce belong to the official trade unions, organised in about two and a half million primary groups. Soviet workers have legal rights incomparably stronger than do workers in the West, and the unions have an obligation to defend those rights. Union membership has not declined significantly, nor has their legal position yet been undermined.

The unions would also appear to be in a strong position to resist sectionalism and defend the interests of the working class as a whole. On the one hand, the unions are concerned not only with issues of hours, wages and health and safety, but are also involved in negotiating and administering the provision of such things as child care, housing, education, public catering, municipal transport, and sporting and cultural facilities, along with the distribution of food and scarce consumer goods and the administration of a wide range of welfare and social insurance benefits. They therefore represent the young and the old, women and men, the employed and the unemployed, producers and consumers. On the other hand, Soviet unions are organised on a branch basis, not on the basis of trade or profession. Moreover, the union represents everybody working in the particular branch of production, from cleaner and storekeeper, through enterprise Director, right up to Ministerial level. With such comprehensive representation, the union should be able to resolve sectional differences within its own structure.

In practice, however, the trade union movement is by no means as healthy as it might appear at first sight. Russian workers did not see the trade unions as representing their own interests, but those

of the nomenclatura, management and the state. Thus the central unions' own Research Department found in 1989 that only 4% of workers respected their own unions.¹ Although the Soviet trade unions look at first sight like Western unions, and particularly British public service unions, they are really only a caricature of such forms of workers' organisation.

The official trade unions were constituted according to the principles of democratic centralism, so that the interests of all workers were subordinated to the interest of the working class as a whole, embodied in the policies of the Party. This meant that lower union bodies were subordinate to higher bodies, and the union at all levels was subordinate to the Party. The strictly hierarchical principles of union organisation meant that there were virtually no horizontal contacts between workers in different shops, or workers in different enterprises, and that workers were not able to represent their interests directly, but had to channel their grievances through bureaucratic procedures. Within the enterprise it meant that in practice the union was under the control of the enterprise administration, and under the supervision of local party bodies.

Soviet trade unions had very little involvement with questions of pay and hours. These were determined centrally by the state, or along with the terms and conditions of work, which were a matter of management prerogative and informal bargaining within work groups. Even now, when unions are taking up the question of pay at the political level, within the enterprise unions still regard pay as a matter of management prerogative. The main duty of the trade union was to encourage the workers to meet and overfulfill the plan, by organising socialist competition, holding production conferences and encouraging socialist work attitudes. Its main function was the

distribution of a wide range of welfare benefits, from health care and pensions to housing and holidays, and, increasingly, the distribution of food and scarce goods among the workforce. This distribution function gave the union considerable power of patronage, as well as providing enormous scope for corruption. As far as ordinary workers were concerned, these functions made union membership necessary, but the trade union was identified as a corrupt and repressive bastion of the Party-state. It should not be surprising that Soviet workers have never looked to the trade union for the defence of their interests. Whenever workers have tried to organise, they have done so independently, outside the official trade unions.

As the Soviet system moved into crisis and the problems faced by the workers' mounted, it seemed that the unions would have the chance to recover lost ground, and to assert their role as the authentic representatives of the working class. The unions certainly tried to do this at national and republican levels by presenting themselves as the defenders of the interests of the working class in the transition to the market economy. This involved declaring their independence from the Party and the state, and demanding the indexation of wages, improved welfare and social security benefits, generous unemployment pay, and retraining schemes.

The All Union Central Council of Trade Unions (AUCCTU) began to assert its 'independence' in 1987, not as a progressive but as a conservative force. The AUCCTU began calling in 1987 for trade unions to revive union democracy and to defend the workers' interests. It increasingly stood out against government plans to introduce market reforms, insisting on very substantial social guarantees and high levels of unemployment

pay etc., as preconditions to any agreement on new legislation. This rearguard action was extremely ineffective, and simply meant that for the past four years the unions have had very little impact on policy. The new commitment to democratic involvement of the members was certainly not reflected in the practice of the official unions, which happily accepted the restrictions imposed by the 1989 Law on Strikes, and constantly tailed behind the independent workers' movement, that is, when they did not actively oppose it.

The All-Union CCTU was replaced by a new General Confederation of Trades Unions (GCTU) in October 1990, its conservative leader, the now notorious plotter G. Yanayev, was replaced by Vladimir Shcherbakov. However the change of leadership and change of name had no real substantive implications, for the unions continued to be the constant ally of the conservative forces in the Soviet government.

In response to the 1991 strikes the central trade unions co-ordinated their activity closely with Pavlov's government, stressing the need for a new system of collective bargaining within a corporatist tripartite framework. In April the GCTU proposed a thoroughgoing restructuring of the wages system, with centralised bargaining and the monitoring of agreements. This demand was immediately echoed in Pavlov's April 22 anti-crisis programme, which called for a 'tripartite social partnership' of managers, trade unions and government to set basic wage and salary levels and determine social guarantees, based on the principle of limiting pay rises to productivity increases. The GCTU almost immediately announced a comprehensive but unpublished, Agreement on Labour and Socio-Economic Issues with the government, foreseeing wage indexation, an official

minimum wage, wage reform, changes in the taxation of many goods, a government unemployment programme, larger subsidies for school and works canteen meals, and an increase in social expenditure of 47.6 billion rubles for 1991, in exchange for which the trade unions offered a no-strike pledge.

There is no evidence that these moves had any impact on the standing of the unions, and the GCTU agreement with the government was not worth the paper it was written on, not only because the government was on its way out, but also because the programme presupposed the existence of a system which had already disappeared. Economic disintegration meant that, whatever the juridical status of enterprises, wages were no longer centrally determined but were being set locally. The unions themselves were disintegrating *pari passu* with the system itself. Thus the GCTU was reportedly facing growing financial difficulties at the beginning of 1991, as local and regional unions failed to renew their affiliations or send in fees. The locus of activity of the union movement, as of everything else, was shifting away from the centre.

From March 1990 the official unions had already begun to set up separate Republican organisations, such as the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia (FITUR), and revitalised their regional committees. The FITUR appears to be less conservative than the GCTU, and some of the regional committees, such as the Moscow Federation, have shown signs of a more radical and democratic orientation, and it is to these developments that a part of the Moscow intellectual left has sought to attach itself. However this democratic radicalism is no less rhetorical than is the workerist phraseology of the conservatives. The fact of the matter is that, with the collapse of the centralised administrative-command system, the

official unions have virtually collapsed at regional and national level as much as they have collapsed at All-Union level.

The regional and republican bodies are now essentially political organisations, which rhetorically espouse the interests of the working class in the attempt to defend the official unions from political or legislative attack, but which have no trade union functions left to perform.²

The mobilisation of the rank and file

The key to the development of the trade unions, as of the independent workers' movement, must now lie at the grass roots. The liberalisation of prices and the dismantling of the apparatus of the administrative command system means that wages and prices are now set locally, by the enterprise administration. The immediate link between the workers' economic and political demands, which existed until 1991, has been broken, so that the focus of workers' demands is now the enterprise administration or local authorities. The limited relevance of political demands is best indicated by the activity of the FITUR, which managed to persuade the Russian parliament to pass laws raising the minimum wage and guaranteeing full indexation of wages and pensions at the end of 1991, laws which had no more than a rhetorical significance without the money to pay the increases.

The collapse of the centre raises the question of the possibility of a reconstruction of the unions from the bottom-up. In the wake of workers' growing activism over the past few years a new generation has moved into many trade union offices at enterprise and local level, motivated by a commitment to perestroika and democracy. Until 1991 such new activists found their aspirations thwarted by the higher levels of the

bureaucracy, but with these effectively removed it might seem that there is a chance of an effective reform of the official unions, to make them genuinely responsive to workers' aspirations at enterprise level.

On the other hand, two considerations would tend to weigh against such an optimistic conclusion. First, the perspectives with which such activists entered the trade unions were predominantly those of perestroika, which continue to be based on a presumed common interest of progressive management and workers in the restructuring of production within the administrative-command system. Many of the new generation of local activists are progressive in comparison with those they have replaced, but they are as out of touch with the mood of workers today as their predecessors were five years ago. In the new context of a market economy such perspectives will at best be divisive, pursuing the interests of skilled male workers and technicians against those of unskilled and women workers, and at worst will lead to collaboration with management against the workforce.

Second, and more fundamental, the structure of the union at enterprise level is unchanged, and this is still a structure adapted to monitoring, regulating and controlling the workers through the network of patronage and inspection, which has thoroughly discredited the union in the eyes of its members. Trade union leaders are aware of this dilemma, and many of them express a desire to restructure the union so that it can function as a 'real' trade union, rather than as a welfare and distribution agency, handing the latter functions over to the administration or to state authorities. However, such a restructuring is easier said than done. The problem the union faces is that if it gives up its welfare and distribution functions it gives up the patronage network which is the only basis

of its existence, for without those functions it has no usefulness either for the administration, or for its own members.³

The fundamental problem is that the union is structurally incapable of separating itself from enterprise management. First, the union is completely dependent on the enterprise administration, which means that the administration can simply cut the ground from under a union committee which opposes it. Second, the collapse of the Party has driven the union even more firmly into the arms of management because the trade union no longer has any higher authority to which to appeal. Third, the union is unable to appeal to its members for support, because in their eyes it is simply an arm of the administration, which they do not trust, and to which they owe no allegiance. Indeed, a major problem which the independent unions face is that the official unions are so discredited that most workers do not see any need for a union at all.

In practice the crisis of the past three years has forced the unions into an even greater subordination to management, as they have lost the support of higher political and union bodies which in the past gave them some basis for independence from management. A number of informants have told us that the unions do sometimes support the workers in opposition to management, but none has been able to quote an example of such action, outside the mining industry.⁴ In our own research we have found only two recent examples of a union opposing the enterprise Director, and in both cases the union was supporting the majority faction of a divided administration. In one case the Director is resisting a union-backed demand that the enterprise sack 30% of its workforce, targeted primarily at unskilled women workers, in order to raise the wages of the remaining workers. In the other case, in 1990, the union backed a move to

remove the Director and elect another. However the labour collective voted in their own candidate, against both the old Director and the union-administration nominee. In response, the union and the supporters of the old Director went to the Ministry in Moscow, which refused to confirm the elected Director, and installed its own nominee. Elsewhere are cases in which the administration or, in the mines, the workers' committees have taken over welfare and distribution functions and the official union has collapsed.

More typically, we have found union committees identifying themselves completely with the enterprise administration, operating as a branch of the administration, in complete subservience to the enterprise Directorate. We find the union collaborating with the administration in attempts to prevent the emergence of any democratic workers' organisation within the enterprise, and to subvert any independent organisations which arise.⁵ Far from democratising themselves, we have found two cases in which the official union has just switched to a five-yearly cycle of elections, to avert the danger of democratisation.

The unions will certainly come under increasing pressure from below, as workers demand compensation for price increases, as they demand improved social security guarantees, and as they resist (union-backed) management attempts to impose a 'nomenclatura privatisation'. However these demands are not being channelled through the official unions, but through unofficial groups of workers which, if they are oriented to official channels at all, look to the shop, factory and enterprise meetings of the Labour Collective Council or Council of the Association to provide a forum. All the evidence suggests that the official unions at enterprise level will continue to look to management for their support, and will continue to resist the

development of independent workers' organisation which they rightly see as the main threat to their own survival.

Independent workers organisation at enterprise level is still very small scale, fragmented, and operates with minimal resources. Nevertheless, at least in the major industrial centres, virtually every enterprise has a Workers' Committee, Strike Committee or independent trade union, even if it comprises no more than two or three individuals. Despite their small size and limited resources these committees are made up of active and influential workers, and have repeatedly shown that in a confrontation they enjoy substantial support.

Many of these Committees and their activists are affiliated to independent trade union or political bodies outside the enterprise, to which they look for political and financial support and for advice, particularly on the establishment of a legal constitution which can protect them from victimisation by management.⁶ However the independent workers' organisations are constituted on the basis of local autonomy, which means that the relationship between primary groups and wider organisation is essentially a servicing relationship, rather than a political one. The reason why the liberal democratic workers' organisations were able to attain their hegemony over the independent workers' movement during 1991 was primarily that they were able to provide the legal and financial support and political protection which met the needs of primary groups. However, our interviews have shown repeatedly that this link is weakening as the political leadership is absorbed into the state apparatus, so that primary groups are increasingly looking to their own resources.

With the dismantling of the centralised administrative apparatuses, the liberalisation of wages and prices, and moves towards privatisation, the locus of struggle

is shifting firmly to the enterprise. There is little doubt that the nucleus of this struggle will be provided by the unofficial organisation which has developed over the past three years, and not by a revitalised trade union apparatus. The strike actions which have broken out in 1992 seem to conform to this diagnosis, in that they have been localised and directed against enterprise management or local authorities, rather than at central government, and that they have been initiated not by the official unions, but by Strike Committees.⁷

The implication is that in the short-run the workers will look neither to the official trade unions, nor to the liberal-democratic leadership of the independent workers' movement, but to an individual leadership which emerges at enterprise level, comprising people whom the workers know and trust on the basis of their past activities and past reputation. Precisely what form the wider organisation of the working class takes remains to be seen.

It is possible that the Workers' Committees and independent trade unions will detach themselves from their political affiliations and identify themselves with the aspirations of the rank and file, providing the basis for a renewal of the workers' movement, but this is not likely to be achieved without divisions and internal conflict. Alternatively, they may attempt to use their political leverage to displace the official unions by administrative or legal means. We can see both these processes in play in the miners' movement. On the one hand, the Kuzbass miners' committee headed off a general strike call at the end of December 1991, but with a growing number of mines calling for strikes it pressed increasingly militant demands against the government, and declared a pre-strike situation in the middle of January. On the other hand, the Yeltsin government in January

recognised the Independent Miners Union as the representative of the miners, and negotiated an agreement on wage indexation and subsidisation of the mines with the IMU.

Whether the existing unions will be democratised under the impact of rank-and-file pressure remains to be seen, although the failure to democratise even the official Miners' Union and the structural dependence of the unions on management makes us sceptical of this outcome. This is particularly the case under the present union laws, which are pluralistic, so that any legally established union enjoys full union rights, while future laws are likely to advantage the independent against the official unions. In these circumstances there is no reason for activists to try to take over the official union, except to destroy it, unless it is to take over its patronage network and remake themselves in the old union's image.⁸

In our view the most likely path of development is a pluralistic one. In some enterprises the administration will take over the welfare and distribution functions of the official union, and the union will collapse. In others the official union will retain those functions, and will remain in existence, but as little more than a branch of the enterprise administration. The independent representation of workers' interests will not develop through the official unions, but on the basis of

informal and unofficial workers-organisations which will be fragile and unstable, and will tend to be dominated by syndicalist ideologies, with aspirations towards self-management.

The fragmentation of the Russian working class means that the development of effective collective organisation will be a very difficult task. The discrediting of trade unionism, the lack of horizontal links between workers in different shops, let alone different enterprises, repressive managerial styles, backed by the official unions, make even the most elementary forms of organisation very difficult to achieve and maintain. In this context much depends on whether the independent workers' organisations will be able to establish a secure foundation by retaining and exploiting the very extensive legal rights which trade unions have enjoyed in the past. The basis for divisions within the working class in the transition to the market economy is clear to see, as women workers, concentrated in the lower grades of both manual and clerical work, look set to bear the brunt of the first waves of redundancy, while male and skilled workers support cuts in employment as the means of raising their own wages. Even under the most optimistic assumptions the development of effective workers' organisation will be a slow and long-drawn out process. The history of the workers' movement in Russia is only just beginning.

Notes

1. Unpublished poll data provided by Eugene Mokov, Head of the Research Centre at the Trade Union Institute. This was a fall from 16% in 1988. The same poll showed that in 1988 almost 20%, but in 1989 only 8%, believed that the unions would defend workers against administrative violation of work rules; 33% in 1988, and only 19% in 1989 believed that the local trade union would defend their rights. Almost two-thirds believed that the local structure of the union was dependent on management, and one-third believed that the unions did not even have any real mechanism to defend workers' rights. 95% thought that some structural reorganisation of the unions was necessary, with 31% (1988) and 41% (1989) looking for radical reforms. Only 3% thought their trade union membership gave them an influence over management decisions. 89% would leave the unions if they failed to meet the workers' needs. A 1990 poll gave the trade unions a popularity rating of 5%.
 2. The official unions are very anxious about the anticipated new Russian trade union legislation, which is being drafted by the neo-liberal leaders of some of the independent unions. The latter hope to undermine the patronage of the official unions by transferring their welfare, social insurance and distribution functions to enterprise administration and/or state bodies.
 3. We know of two enterprises in which the administration has taken over the welfare and distribution functions. In one the union has simply disappeared, in the other it has been reduced to an empty shell.
 4. In our interviews we have found that workers react with incredulity to the suggestion that the official union could be anything other than subordinate to the administration.
 5. This includes setting up 'Strike Committees' under union-administration control.
 6. Soviet trade union legislation was pluralistic, since it never anticipated that there would be competing unions. This means that any group can register as a trade union and enjoy full union rights and protection.
 7. The strikes of teachers and medical workers in early 1992 tended to be initiated by informal organisation, and then backed by the official unions for political reasons, and often by local administration, which wanted to get money from Moscow.
 8. Although we have encountered a handful of radical individuals still working within the official union structures, we have found only one Workers' Committee which has any aspiration to capture the union apparatus. The primary organisation of the IMU mirrors that of the official unions, down to its preoccupation with distribution.
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