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Strikes and Perestroika:
The Working-Class Call to the Dissolution of the Soviet Union

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Leading up to the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991, an emerging labor movement intertwined with resurfacing nationalism challenged not only the Union's stability but the Communist Party's hold on the Soviet peoples as well. Detailing this separatist character towards the end of the Soviet Union's life, Mikhail Gorbachev's report to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) Central Committee during its plenary session on 19 September 1989, the General Secretary of the Soviet Union addresses this issue and states,

The present situation in relations between nationalities can only be viewed as extremely complicated. Unresolved issues have surfaced one after another, the errors and deformations of many decades are now making themselves felt, and conflicts between nationalities that have been smoldering for years have flared up. Social and economic problems, state and legal problems, environmental and demographic problems, and problems involving the development of language and culture and the preservation of national traditions are all bound up together in a tight knot... This is also the goal of expanded rights for autonomous provinces and regions, and the possibility of creating national districts in areas where one or another nationality is concentrated, and of establishing Union-wide councils of citizens who are members of ethnic groups with a large population but who do not have their own territorial autonomy.²

These movements for autonomy Gorbachev references were a result of the economic and social problems plaguing Soviet citizens looking towards nationalist organizers for solutions as early as 1989. In large part, these were due to Gorbachev's *perestroika* economic reforms which caused unintentional damage to Soviet communities, increasing inter-ethnic tensions, and dissatisfaction with the party bureaucracy.

In Ukraine, for example, anti-Russian sentiments against the Russian-majority bureaucracy led to calls for the resignation of Soviet officials and the implementation of regional bosses. Although ethnicity did not play a divisive role in Russia as in Ukraine, it did procure a pro-Russian independence movement against the Soviet apparatus. Gorbachev's *perestroika*-era labor and *glasnost* policies introduced a variety of economic reforms, including information liberalization in 1985, cost-accounting in 1987, and elected work-collective councils in 1988, setting the stage for mass mobilizations throughout the Soviet Union. These reforms allowed nationalists to mobilize movements for autonomy in Ukraine and Russia through a budding labor movement leading to the Union's dissolution in 1991.

A grand precedent to Gorbachev's *perestroika* was Lenin's 1921 New Economic Policy which consolidated revolutionary workers within the Soviet apparatus by weaponizing market reforms to quell insurrections within the budding socialist state. Due to worker uprisings, the NEP legalized private enterprises and created a surging trading market within the Soviet Union. This led to an emerging class of private profiteers coined as NEP-men consisting of wealthy peasants, creating a contradiction between the communist's promise to institute pure egalitarianism.³ Similar to *perestroika* millionaires later borne from the establishment of co-operatives in 1987, these NEP-men preceded a stratified class system in the Soviet Union, causing political distrust amongst the peasantry and working class against their new leaders.⁴ Much like Lenin, however, Gorbachev strategically surrendered to labor's demands to avoid disunification in the late 1980s, as mounting working strikes often co-opted with or naturally evolved into nationalist separatist movements—threatening the center's powers over its periphery's.⁵ And in the words of the Soviet *Pravda* newspaper, "We have a working people's state here, and who would ever dream of striking against himself?"⁶ By appeasing strikers throughout the *perestroika* era, and giving the illusion of self-autonomy to many, Gorbachev inadvertently doomed the future of the Soviet Union as strikes increasingly grew a nationalist, separatist character, only strengthened by pacifism and concessions to regional actors.

Elected by the Politburo with grand applause in 1985, Gorbachev ran directly counter to Brezhnev's legacy of revitalizing Stalinist economic strategy. Instead, Gorbachev understood and acted upon the mishaps of a streamlined economy by pushing *perestroika*, a form of policy "ideology" meant to reintroduce NEP-style market liberalization reforms to reinvigorate production and end Brezhnev's Period of Stagnation. More importantly, Gorbachev observed the necessity of actively involving workers' enterprise participation by reducing the gap between the bureaucracies in charge with the Soviet people.⁷ He believed that the inefficiencies stemming from the corrupt bureaucracy endangered the political stability of the Soviet Union and its egalitarian ideals. Brezhnev's return to a streamlined but failed economy decisively inspired Gorbachev's *perestroika* reforms to incentivize increased participation in the workplace through democratically elected workplace councils. He assumed that democratic accountability and a worker's sense of ownership within the enterprise directly affected productivity. Success, in his mind, could only happen from "below," and existing only within what the system allowed.⁸

In an interview by the Moscow Television Service on 20 February 1989 near the tail-end of *perestroika*, Gorbachev praised individual enterprise, stating, "In the first place, we are restructuring these relations, so that if someone wants to do lease-contracting, then let him do it; if he wants to form a cooperative, family then let him; if he wants to work individually, as a peasant family, then let him...so all forms, so to speak, including firms, should be used in an enterprising way so that people are engaged in them."⁹ At the center of *perestroika*, Gorbachev imagined individual autonomy within the collective: above all, an individual's agency to choose their own line of work. Autonomy and

individual agency within the constraints of Marxist-Leninism, therefore, were the two pillars of *perestroika* whereby Gorbachev hoped to achieve productive economic success within the Soviet Union. By allowing autonomy and agency, Gorbachev assumed that workers would remain satisfied with their democratic decisions and consolidate themselves within the newfound democratic Union. *Glasnost*, and the liberalization of state information, would supplement *perestroika* by allowing workers to hold inefficient and corrupt bureaucrats accountable. In practice, Gorbachev weaponized *glasnost* to retain political power and releases of information which were often arbitrary to weaken political opponents. What Gorbachev did not understand, however, was that *perestroika* and *glasnost* would unleash decades of suppressed demands by workers and nationalists, thereby giving rise to new “nationalist possibilities.”¹⁰

To give workers a tangible interest in their production, and move away from imagined participation to real results, Gorbachev legalized free co-operatives in 1985 through the Law on Cooperatives to incentivize workers to meet foreign market needs and inadequately catered domestic demands. Theoretically, co-operatives were meant to emphasize socialist public ownership of collective labor by groups of people. According to author A.G. Aganbegyan, “All members of a co-operative are economically equal, there are no masters and servants. And there is no exploitation of labor.”¹¹ Workers eventually grew hostile to these cooperatives due to the rise of an emerging Soviet millionaire class from market privileges granted to them by the state, including access to private market access abroad and monopoly over product.¹² Initially, co-operatives made little headway within the Soviet economy, despite appearing philosophically sound within the socialist context. They first began within agricultural and fishing sectors due to the absence of wholesale trade, failing to provide credit for newer co-operatives, and a lack of the necessary equipment and materials for many years.¹³ As time went on, however, co-operatives came at odds with public consumption to the dissatisfaction of the many underpaid and overworked Soviet workers. By 1989, for example, consumer co-operatives accounted for approximately twenty-seven percent of total commodity circulation, and in public catering, they accounted for twenty percent of the market, both significant shares of their respective economies.¹⁴ This led to growing resentment among the working class against co-operative ownership. As Soviet workers strove for egalitarian wages, they found competing amongst themselves for access to private ownership, causing apparent wealth disparity in the Soviet Union.

In 1988, the cooperative movement made substantial economic progress by redrawing the Law on Cooperatives to encourage activity in the private sector, resulting in 150,000 people working in their own co-operatives.¹⁵ The re-introduction of private enterprise through the co-operatives created many wealthy individuals and “*perestroika* millionaires,” threatening egalitarianism within the Soviet Union. According to mail in a 1988 *Izvestiya* article, Yu. Chekmenev of Ulan-Ude asks, “What do you think I, a sovkhos tractor driver earning R2-3 per day during repairs, feel like when I read that somewhere a dealer who makes bra fasteners makes R100 a day?”¹⁶ While the consumer goods industry

greatly benefitted from the 1988 Law on Cooperatives, many workers in industrial enterprises felt little benefit from the reforms. Instead, workers experienced higher prices for consumer goods while cooperative workers made substantial gains from selling in the private market. Cooperatives increasingly became a part of Soviet life, such as operating within the construction industry, the procurement of agricultural produce, and even household repairs.¹⁷ Nepotism was widespread in the enterprises, however, many saw it as creating a rift between the working-class and in contradiction with conservative socialist values.

The benefactors of the cooperatives, however, defended their self-interest, proclaiming that their high earnings were legally sound, socially productive, and economically proficient. Soviet millionaire Artyom Tarasov exemplified this outlook in an interview with *Moscow News* in a 1989 article,

The state monopoly on foreign trade has meant that our vast and very rich country has been selling only a few billion currency roubles' worth a year of manufacturing industry goods on the world market. But our exports, products worthless here, could reach 50 or 60 million dollars by the end of 1989 if we are allowed to spend our millions... What have we done to shock society? We have transferred a tiny fraction of our profits into wages. If we hadn't done this, we would have been without ready cash and unable to go on operating. The cooperatives' quarterly profit is 70 or 80 million roubles, which are deposited in a bank account... A little over 7 million roubles we have earmarked for ourselves.¹⁸

Indeed, the cooperatives were productive, profitable, and beneficial to the Soviet economy; in short, they were a success. An unintended consequence of the cooperatives, however, was the introduction of a class reminiscent of NEP-men during Lenin's NEP era. The massive wealth accumulated by the cooperatives and autonomous control by its individual workers meant these cooperatives grew counter to Soviet state enterprises. Many industrial workers grew fearful of these perestroika-era millionaires, warning their growing economic influence over political actors threatened Soviet egalitarian principles and a revival of the bourgeoisie class.¹⁹ This growing tension between the wealthy benefactors of *perestroika* and the working class became critical in the numerous strikes defining the 1980s, and a contradiction to the egalitarian principles promised by the CPSU for its governing powers.

Additionally, the 1987 State Enterprise Act introduced cost-accounting links (*Khozraschyot*) to industrial enterprises, creating a profit-motive for workers meant to generate for themselves higher productivity, less wastefulness, and a higher wage. As the late 1980s continued marching on, however, the profit-motive reforms proved disastrous to inflexible enterprises— more importantly, the mines. Cost-accounting links worked by paying wages according to a predetermined rate after costs and profits. Profits from the enterprise were then divided into three funds: material incentives, or wages (usually making up 8-15% of the fund), and a fund shared by the enterprise and state. Effectively, the

material incentives fund existed only as a limited subsidiary stimulus.²⁰ Furthermore, enterprises were allocated supplies and quotas by the state, meaning that self-financing existed only as a profit-motive, and one restricted in resources. Regardless of their level of profitability, enterprises under the Act had to continue contributing half of their profits to the state, essentially lowering their investment capability.²¹ By lowering investment capability and restricting resources, the CPSU lowered the standard of living around unprofitable enterprises, angering workers in the process.

The freedom to self-finance was a politically double-edged sword in a communist society with zero unemployment. In resource-extraction industries where profits depended on ideal natural conditions, enterprise autonomy meant unequal competition between profitable and unprofitable enterprises based on market prices. Effectively, cost-accounting links were detrimental to naturally less-productive workplaces dependent on limited, or more difficult to refine resources.²² By applying free-market principles, Gorbachev endorsed enterprise closure, thus displacing whole communities and breaching the communist social contract between workers and the state, consequently undermining the Party's hold on enterprise. While cost-accounting links and the freedom to self-finance were innovative *perestroika*-era labor reforms to tie productivity to wages, the CPSU's zero-unemployment promise contradicts liberal market-principles. Self-financing ensured workers were dependent on their profits, and in turn, profits determined their employability.

Alongside cost-accounting, the 1987 State Enterprise Act also introduced a revolutionary democratization principle in creating workers' councils (STK's) and managerial elections within self-financing enterprises. Gorbachev believed these workers' councils would serve as an accountability check for corrupt directors and managers, increasing manager-worker relations and productivity in the workplace. According to Gorbachev, "the well-being of the worker will depend upon the abilities of the managers. The workers should, therefore, have real means of influencing the choice of director and controlling his activity."²³ Unfortunately, these elections were largely fraudulent and held nearly no representative weight for the workers involved. The directors still had to be confirmed from above and the STKs remained subservient to management. As a result, workers remained disillusioned by their effectiveness and did not place trust in their representative power.²⁴ Additionally, these elections had the opposite effect: they united workers against the larger bureaucratic apparatus, viewing it as illegitimate and a colonizing power existing against the workers' interests. Consequently, workers began to increasingly distrust and question the CPSU's grip on their workplaces, creating a rift between the party and the workers they relied on to continue production.

Manager elections were nevertheless held in thousands of enterprises. In 1987, 36,000 managers were elected into industries, with many becoming a national event celebrating the movement towards democracy.²⁵ Most notably, the manager elections had a subversive effect of shifting blame from systemic issues (such as failing to procure materials on the CPSU's behalf or the power structures within the enterprises themselves) to the individual director. 1988's *Soviet Scene*, a compilation of

works translated from Russian into English explains the ousting process in this colorful example celebrating the new managerial elections;

The Elektronmash works in Leningrad were heading for bankruptcy. The Factory failed to meet its targets and cut back on social amenities. There was pressure for a change. And then Pavel Kravchenko, a new general manager was appointed, a leader full of vitality and with organization capability... but success was not apparent. Surprise... surprise. Perhaps the people were at fault? But it turned out it was the leader. Instead of working together with the staff... He introduced 6,000 norms for measuring the performance of workshops and individuals... Things became so bad that the workforce demanded a general meeting at which they expressed lack of confidence in their general manager. Kravchenko was forced to resign.²⁶

While *Soviet Scene* paints a successful picture of *perestroika* workplace democracy, riggings were commonly reported in newspapers for elections of workers' councils, as well as "the dominance of administrators at their meetings" nullifying their electoral power.²⁷

For many Soviets, paternalism trumped workplace democracy. Paternalism in enterprise had certain benefits attached for the Soviet workers by allowing them to court material benefits from their managers, often when wages were insufficient to provide a decent living standard. Managers at the Taldym coal mine near Siberia, for example, would direct their workers to a "surgery" on Monday mornings whereby they would lay down their grievances and ask for favors. In one case, a worker asked for topsoil for her personal garden from the enterprise, emphasizing the personal connections many felt with their managers and directors.²⁸ Worker's reliance on this paternalistic bartering system meant that they were less likely to challenge the existing power structure within their enterprises, especially when they risked losing their benefits and established connections. Furthermore, some workers would use managerial connections to grant nepotistic favors, creating a system wherein workers depended on an obsequious relationship with their managers, subverting workplace democracy.

In a 1988 survey from *Izvestiya* about a strike in a Yaroslavl motor plant in Russia, eighty-two percent of respondents declared they would yield to the administration.²⁹ Local authorities and enterprise bosses nevertheless staged manager and workers council elections by preselecting candidates and using workers' meetings for "rubber-stamp operations" to secure electoral victories.³⁰ In a Rostov plant, for example, workers were forced to vote for "a list of members of the workers' council which was prepared by the party committee."³¹ This failure of implementing democratization within Soviet enterprises greatly challenged Gorbachev's legitimacy in the eyes of the workers of the Kuzbass and Donbass regions, who increasingly relied on regional actors to obtain benefits or support.

Gorbachev's attempt to establish workplace democracy and increase production by adopting liberal-market principles had disastrous, yet unforeseen consequences to the stability of the Soviet Union. By 1989, the 1987's State Enterprise Act damaged whatever connection workers might have

felt with the party bureaucracy. As workers suffered from inflation, long queues, and empty shops in their communities, co-operatives enabled a new class of wealthy individuals to emerge from the successes of free marketeering at odds with the working class.³² Furthermore, market-oriented reforms such as cost-accounting links introduced price rises, enterprise bankruptcies, and lay-offs to the Soviet workforce. This was disastrous, and nearly incomprehensible, to workers accustomed to a zero-unemployment economy. By endangering the traditional egalitarian rhetoric promoted by the CPSU, Soviet society stratified into an emerging working class, party bureaucrats, and co-operative millionaires. As a result, strikes became increasingly common throughout the late 1980s, as workers began calling for the end of co-operatives, *perestroika*, and the resignation of party bureaucrats within their enterprises. The workers blamed Gorbachev and the CPSU for the enterprise's failings, and regional actors later used this to their advantage to call for separatist movements against the party, utilizing local allegiances and worker's reliance on their support.

Initially, worker strikes did not begin as demands for autonomy—oftentimes they would demand more tangible benefits, such as higher wages, increased investment by the state into their communities, or ecological cleanups.³³ Concepts like self-autonomy and workplace democracy did not become critical issues in the labor movement until they grew a national character or experienced repression from the state itself. Workers felt as if *perestroika* reforms had passed over them, as economic issues still plagued their communities while reaping none of the democratic or productive benefits. Gorbachev's "revolution from above" in pursuing workplace democracy only widened the gap between Party bureaucrats and the workers themselves despite Gorbachev's need to consolidate them within his coalition of power. A low standard of living and little resources available to workers in unprofitable enterprises only increased allegiance to regional actors and enterprise managers who could provide material benefits. As such, workers became distant from the party bureaucracy and regional strikes became a reasonable tool to defend against *perestroika* reforms. The strikes in Donbass and Kuzbass beginning in June 1989 signaled the end of the Soviet Union, a result of workers' dissatisfaction with the CPSU and strong allegiance to regional actors bent on procuring nationalist power.

A warning shot to CPSU's hold on total political power granted by Article Six of the 1977 constitution was challenged by an emergently conscious working class after a wave of strikes took the Union by storm in July 1989. Beginning in the Kuzbass region of Western Siberia and quickly spreading to Ukraine and other borderline states, the strikes focused on attacking *perestroika* reforms and party involvement in enterprise management due to lower living standards from profit-motive reforms. Gorbachev's *glasnost* liberalization of information allowed the Soviet intelligentsia to criticize the Soviet apparatus for economic failures, rallying workers around a common enemy and policy, weakening regional party control.³⁴

Small scale strikes throughout the Soviet Union gained public attention leading up to the 1989 Kuzbass strikes, further strengthening the strikers' resolve in believing they could successfully win their demands in greater numbers.³⁵ According to Soviet historian David Mandel, "the miners' strike was fundamentally a protest against bureaucratic mismanagement of the economy and the system's inherent tendency to treat the population not as the goal of production, but as a residual factor whose needs can be ignored so long as the social peace is not threatened."³⁶ Citing the 1958 shift from coal to oil and gas, Mandel references how labor was viewed by the party as a commodity rather than political power, ignoring the adverse effects of lowering investment in enterprises when entire communities depended on their support. By lowering investment in coal, the workers in the Kuzbass lost social infrastructure, housing, and wages due to market reforms. This sowed distrust against party bureaucrats.

Furthermore, the coal mines were severely limited in their ability to capitalize on their only product: coal. The mine's inability to diversify production meant that they could not increase their prices to the state, their sole client. According to Mandel, "Wages in coal mining have risen at only half the national rate during the current five-year plan (1986-1990). The industry has lost 34,000 workers over the past three years."³⁷ *Perestroika* had failed the miners, as wages and state investment plummeted, ruining their communities in the process. Additionally, working conditions fared no better as ecological problems also plagued their communities. Life expectancy for the miners held under fifty years while water grew increasingly polluted.³⁸ As a result, ecological demands also became a galvanizing force for workers who saw the open-pit mines of the Kuzbass diminish their life expectancy by dirtying their water and scarce lands.

Alongside pollution affecting the miners' health, inflation on goods and services crippled the miners' ability to pay for products due to their lowered wages and unpaid hours; whatever increases in pay the workers might have felt from cost-accounting links were neutralized by an increase in prices. Holidays likewise became an area of contention when trade unions pushed to eliminate Sunday as a day off for the workers, even though they rarely had days off.³⁹ While the miners suffered from overworking, little pay, and reduced vacation time, one miner complained that bureaucrats enjoyed "Saunas, summer vacation trips, the chance to rest in the summer."⁴⁰ To many miners in the Kuzbass the party bureaucracy was a parasite they were forced to rely on for wages and social investment, directing their anger directly to the committees themselves. Where workplace democracy might have alleviated tensions between workers and the bureaucracy, riggings, and palm-greasing left these *perestroika* institutions ineffective on the ground level.

Tired and weary of supporting the CPSU, miners finally resorted to challenging the levers of power by taking their rare chance to strike. After failing to reach a suitable negotiation with management on 4 July, miners of the Shevyakov mine in Mezhdurechensk, Russia began their strike on 10 July and their demands to the director of the mine, the city party committee, and the coal

miners union.⁴¹ By targeting these specific levers, the miners directly challenged the party's influence over enterprise matters, a significant change from the non-political status quo of the workforce. As a result, 12,000 miners and five mines went on strike and elected a powerful city strike committee that presented a list of demands involving wage increases and ecological cleanups. The miners demanded suitable wages through a forty percent increase for night work, payment for traveling to work (which often took four hours to travel to the mines and back), and a day off on Sundays.⁴² More politically prominent, however, was their demand for mine collectives to determine their own "work and rest regimes," allowing their elected strike committees to have significant influence over mine affairs and even enterprise matters.

Threatening a general strike, the strike committee forced Moscow's hand to arrive quickly in the Kuzbass to negotiate a deal meeting their demands. While Mezhdurechensk stopped striking on 14 July, the committee's push towards a general strike in the Kuzbass made it the *de facto* controller of production of the region. According to Mandel, the committees organized what the mines produced and to where, shipping resources to enterprises dependent on their products and keeping them in business.⁴³ Additionally, the strike committees held direct communication with the workers, with the workers often turning to the committees for social work, such as construction and housing repair, food supply, and labor disputes.⁴⁴ Most notably, they organized which enterprises or mines went on strike and when—effectively taking control of production in the entire region away from the CPSU during the general strike.

By 15 July, the general strike sharply increased from five mines and 12,000 workers to 158 mines and 177,000 workers with an interesting development: the committee now demanded the presence of Gorbachev himself, arguing that it would be their only guarantee to have their demands met. While Gorbachev never made plans to arrive in the Kuzbass, the General Secretary sent a telegram on the 16th advising the miners to return to work, and that their demands would be met.⁴⁵ An incredible victory for the miners and workers of the Kuzbass, the committee recommended a return to work on the 18th. Ninety-one mines, however, remained on strike until the 21st, displaying their autonomous capabilities from the CPSU. The Kuzbass regional strike was a strike against the party bureaucracy while nevertheless remaining apolitical— as demands were for material benefits, wage increases, and social infrastructure investment, not the dismantling of the bureaucracy itself. While not realized at the time, the establishment of strike committees granted great regional control to local officials, who held the capability to organize production around their interests—later becoming essential to the autonomy movements throughout the Union.

Furthermore, the regional strike was a strike against *perestroika* market reforms, especially those retaining state control of enterprise and mine production, effectively lowering Gorbachev's political clout and the CPSU's influence in the industries. In particular, Gorbachev's concessions to the strikes set a party precedent for future strikes whereby, to reduce criticisms and uphold the

pro-worker doctrine, the CPSU was forced to meet demands in most of the other strikes. The Kuzbass regional strike set a variety of precedents for future strikes, including those in the Donbass region in Ukraine. In particular, the regional strike set up striking worker's committees offering regional autonomy as a result of failing workplace democracy and profit-motive *perestroika* reforms.

What separated the Kuzbass strikes in Russia and the Donbass strikes in Ukraine was the political angle Ukrainians chose to incorporate into their strike, most notably the reduction of managerial personnel and regional self-financing. Whereas Kuzbass strikers opted for only material benefits, the Donbass strikers utilized the striking opportunity and a "softer" CPSU to obtain both material and political ones. Considering communist party members held stronger associations with the Russian national identity, it is likely that the Kuzbass strikers felt little need to consider more political autonomy. Ukrainians, however, saw this as their chance to move further away from the Russian center to cement their control over their enterprises.

Spurred by the Kuzbass agreement on 18 July 1989, the Donbass strike began in Makiivka, Ukraine to meet a different set of political and economic demands from the CPSU, eventually transforming the strike into a separatist, self-autonomy movement in Ukraine. A regional strike committee formed in Donetsk organized 110 mines to strike with up to 90,000 miners striking on a single day.⁴⁶ By 20 July, the strike spread from Donbass to other mining centers within the province. During this time, Gorbachev and Prime Minister Ryzhkov took the matter seriously, calling them to return alongside the Kuzbass miners. Despite what may have led to solidarity between the Kuzbass and Donbass miners, Donbass miners decidedly chose to pursue a more regional path, insisting that the party negotiate directly with them and apart from the Kuzbass negotiation. The party claimed that the Kuzbass agreement applied to the entire mining industry, but Donbass miners continued marching forward, distancing themselves from Kuzbass issues.

Donbass miners in Ukraine nevertheless took inspiration from their fellow strikers by forming a regional committee demanding increased wages and benefits, improved work conditions, and most importantly – political-economic demands. These demands included, according to Mandel, "reduction of managerial personnel, payment of wages from union funds during the strike, regional self-financing (*khozraschet*), prohibition of the establishment of new cooperatives and the disbandment of existing medical and food cooperatives."⁴⁷ Fundamentally, the Donbass strike was a political strike against both the party apparatus and Gorbachev's *perestroika* reforms establishing the co-operatives and cost-accounting links, inflating prices on goods while cutting wages in natural-resource extraction industries. Additionally, the strikers demanded they reduce managerial personnel within the mines and enterprises, as well as regional self-financing to reduce the party influences in local operations.

As attempts to establish workplace democracy failed, the strikers used this opportunity to eliminate party officials who had taken advantage of the system and nevertheless remained in power

despite appeals to democracy. Contrasting the Kuzbass strike, the Donbass strike differed in its political tone, giving the movement not only a political character but also a separatist one. To curb administrative privileges and promote the egalitarianism espoused by bureaucrats, the miners demanded they “remove any privileges enjoyed by officials of the administrative and party apparatuses.”⁴⁸ After years of falling wages and inflating prices due to market liberalization under *perestroika* and intelligentsia attacks on Gorbachev and the party apparatus due to *glasnost*, the workers utilized the strike weapon to attack administrative privileges as they lost most of their own. Soviet workers were initially hopeful for *perestroika*, but its detrimental effects on their employment, wages, and livelihoods proved too disparate for the workers. From what initially began as a strike in the Kuzbass for material benefits, the Donbass strike took an increasingly pro-autonomy character, endangering the political hold Article Six of the 1977 constitution had bestowed on the CPSU for so long.

Although Gorbachev often proclaimed the Soviet Union solved the nationalist question, the labor movements in Ukraine and Russia were nevertheless greatly bolstered by their respective nationalist supporters. While the Donbass miners themselves were multi-ethnic, clear rifts between the ethnic Ukrainians and the often-Russian management appointed by the party bureaucracy played a critical role in demands for self-management and political autonomy. During negotiations with the Party, for example, Ukrainians pushed to replace “local soviet [*sic*], party, and trade-union officials... with their own [Ukrainian] leaders from the strike committees.”⁴⁹ The Ukrainians viewed the Russian bureaucracy as a colonizing force extracting both their labor and resources yet offering little investment in return, convincing many workers to push for self-autonomy.⁵⁰

Likewise, the Russian-dominated management showed favoritism to Russian workers when wage-cuts became a factor during profitization. As one Ukrainian railroad worker explains:

[The] secretaries were themselves recruited from among the [Russian] directors... At that time, you could observe among the middle management... a growing indifference towards production. They let things slide. And the higher-ups began to understand they couldn't force them to work. So they started to offer the workers an extra carrot, explaining that because the Russian worker is smarter than any [Ukrainian] engineer... they didn't have to pay the engineer anything.⁵¹

The disdain many Ukrainian workers felt with the party management came from a variety of different problems, which many recognized as socioeconomic. However, the feeling of colonial subjugation by the Russian Soviet center was nevertheless a driving force for the separatist movement in 1990. Despite Gorbachev's attempt to bring workers to his side, *perestroika* and *glasnost* proved disastrous for his reputation as a reformer and as a unifier of the Soviet people. In the Donbass, for example, only sixteen percent favored cost-accounting – but more dramatically, only thirty-three percent considered leasing

the enterprises to the collective.⁵² Miners did not explicitly want radical market reforms. Instead, Ukrainians focused on self-management.

On 10 Oct 1989, the miners called for the end of the Soviet apparatus, declaring in their “Appeal to the Toilers of the Soviet Union” arguing that, “[t]he experience of economic strikes shows that without a decisive scrapping of the totalitarian-bureaucratic system, it makes no sense to put forth economic demands.”⁵³ In the Donbass, miners recognized Gorbachev’s reforms as not only harmful but only beneficial to the majority Russian Soviet bureaucracy, further radicalizing the movement away from reform and towards national autonomy and self-management. As a result, Gorbachev’s *perestroika* reforms were consequential in pushing the borderlands away from the center, as market and information liberalization revealed the Soviet’s totalitarian weakness under a democratic reformist.

A conservative spin on Ukraine’s situation, Russian nationalism likewise played a vital role in supplementing the labor movement to pursue an independence route away from Soviet control—more prominently, from Gorbachev’s reforms. In September 1989, one month before the call to independent action by the United Council of Russia (UCR), it successfully organized strikes to force republican authorities to suspend “controversial language and citizenship laws.”⁵⁴ In response, the Supreme Soviet approved price freezes on consumer products, which resulted in a detectable conservative backlash and a postponement of the freezes.⁵⁵ Although the UCR had no base, they effectively utilized worker activism and the strike weapon to postpone economic reform. This ultimately conveyed the strength of the strike weapon against the Supreme Soviet under Gorbachev and represented worker dissatisfaction with the Party’s reforms. One of these reforms included a “special economic zone” which historian Elizabeth Teague describes as “a ‘red-green’ alliance between the conservative UCR and local ecological groups preventing the adoption of a plan, which, [UCR] alleged, would flood the ancient Russian city with ‘foreign speculators and prostitutes.’”⁵⁶ Effectively, the UCR was a nationalist organization that took advantage of the strike weapon to pursue economic reforms as well as the opportunity to exercise influence on the Soviet Party. In the end, the UCR boasted larger organization support than the Party itself.

It is important to note that the Kuzbass miners while appealing for the democratization of the state and free-market relations, supported regional and enterprise autonomy with self-management and planning while simultaneously rejecting capitalist private property and unemployment. Much like the UCR, the Kuzbass miners rejected the Soviet’s reform plan towards profit-motive incentives and “special-economic zones” wherein traditional Soviet economic plans no longer existed to benefit specific enterprises, usually co-operatives.⁵⁷ Like the Ukrainians, the Russians called for the end of Soviet control over their enterprises, mines, and elections. The Vorkuta miners, for example, called for the removal of the coal minister and chairman of the Union of Workers of the Coal Industry and demanded the repeal of Article Six and election of the Congress of People’s Deputies, a legislated body instituted by Gorbachev, by universal suffrage. Effectively, these were calls to the end of Soviet

bureaucratic power, with the Kuzbass miners demanding a national discussion over a new constitution.⁵⁸

Unlike the Ukrainians, however, the Russians did not suffer from inter-ethnic disputes to launch an anti-Soviet, pro-separatist campaign, nor did they have to rely on a multi-ethnic coalition to successfully strike. As the ethnic majority in the Supreme Soviet, Russian nationalists used cultural issues, such as language and citizenship to organize their base and offer a conservative alternative to Gorbachev's reforms. In the Kuzbass, miners wanted greater democratic freedoms and higher wages, but national divisions played no visible role in their movement, nor did they represent demands of a democratic union. According to Mandel, it "was a massive expression of nonconfidence in bureaucratic power."⁵⁹ While Russian nationalism certainly played a role in the drafting of demands, separatism was a bureaucratic issue, not an ethnic one.

Gorbachev's push towards democratization through the 1989 and 1990 elections coincided with the Donbass and Kuzbass strikes in Russia and Ukraine, resulting in the emerging anti-Soviet, nationalist elite culpable for the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Beginning with the September 1989 Politburo meeting, forty-six provinces remained on strike as angry workers ousted their managers and local officials, leading to ethnic clashes throughout the Union.⁶⁰ Reduced subsidies to constituent republics in the 1980s began a Union-wide recession, creating rising ethnic tension as multi-candidate elections assisted local, professional, and regional interests fragmenting the CPSU into various parties and movements. The Ukrainian People's Movement, or Rukh, was one of these parties which challenged the CPSU's hold on the Ukrainian economy, and thereby the working class. As author S. Tsikora, of *The Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, writes, "USSR People's Deputy S. Konev from Dnepropetrovsk gave a very critical assessment of the government's plan. He set forth the basic points of the way members of Rukh, the Ukrainian People's Movement for Restructuring, see the future development of Ukraine's economy. This alternative plan mentioned a good many sore points in the republic's economy and offered ways of dealing with them. In essence, this was an announcement of the Rukh candidates' program for the elections to Soviets at all levels in the republic. And although the Deputies did not endorse the proposals "not to approve" the draft of the government's plan for 1990, it was the unanimous opinion of those with whom I spoke that candidates from other organizations will have a difficult time campaigning against Rukh's aggressive alternative program."⁶¹ Utilizing Gorbachev's push towards democracy, Rukh campaigned on a platform at odds with the CPSU's actions, introducing regional autonomy through elections by arguing for ecological reform and economic development. Rukh's campaign was emblematic of the separatist process throughout the Soviet Union, as democracy opened the door for labor movement organizations to push for independence.

The Soviet and governmental dual-power system with these elected officials eventually ousted Soviets from administrative control. Ukraine, for example, voted for independence on 1 December

1990, electing the former leader of the Ukrainian Communist Party, Leonid Kravchuk as its president. Such action was a direct result of the Donbass strikes and demands in 1989 who demanded Ukrainian replacement of ethnically-Russian officials.⁶² In the 1990 Congress of People's Deputies' elections, Boris Yeltsin, a political opponent to Gorbachev ran on an anti-Soviet, pro-separatist campaign using nationalist rhetoric and promoting economic reform. Once elected, Yeltsin banned the CPSU from Russia in 1991, negotiating with the other democratically elected presidents to Balkanize the Soviet Union. In this sense, Gorbachev was directly responsible for the dismantling of the Party through democratization reforms involving information, market, and political liberalization leading to the emerging opposition labor movement.

Ethnic nationalism and a disgruntled labor force ravaged by free-market reforms resulted in the pro-separatist movements in Ukraine and Russia. Furthermore, as the State Enterprise Act of 1987 lowered the standard of living for unprofitable enterprises and outdated facilities, workers felt increasingly left behind by the Party, which had guaranteed employment and little inflation. Emerging Soviet millionaires stratified society into workers, the party bureaucracy, and a newfound wealthy elite reminiscent of the New Economic Plan (NEP). As V.S. Chicherov, a brigade leader at a Leningrad Metal Plant describes,

I think the Party has forgotten about the assistance it was supposed to give the working class in this respect. That is why apathy toward public activity is developing among workers. For example, representatives of the People's Front are already presenting their programs on television, but we are silent. The unofficials have money, paper, and good printing presses so they can promote their programs, but sometimes it takes months for workers to get on the television screen or to get an article published in a newspaper.⁶³

According to Chicherov, the reason why individual workers failed to campaign over control of the People's Deputy is due to the almost unlimited resources granted to these Soviet millionaires from the co-operatives. To the workers, this was a betrayal by the Party to challenge wealth when it came to the communist ideology. The workers now viewed the Party in contempt and as a bastardization of Marxist-Leninism. As we saw in the Donbass and Kuzbass, workers did not want to abandon socialism but replace the ineffective and unresponsive Party bureaucracy with regional control.

Gorbachev's attempt to return to Leninist NEP marketization failed due to the decades of Soviet oppression and centralization of power. As workers failed to receive the democratizing and egalitarian principles guaranteed by the Soviet apparatus, the strike weapon, as seen by the Donbass and Kuzbass strikes in 1989, became the best method by which workers could hold their officials accountable without resorting to violence. Gorbachev's *perestroika* reforms then, beginning with *glasnost* and the State Enterprise Act of 1987, opened the door for separatism to take root in the labor movements, as the movements evolved from obtaining material benefits to the resignation of the entire apparatus itself.

Notes

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