

Free Trade Unions in Russia

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Since the fall of the USSR, independent trade unions have sprung up all over Russia. These free trade unions, which support democratic and market reform, are battling with the descendants of the formerly state-run trade unions and their allies for influence in the Russian working class. However, the free trade unions face institutional, political, and social obstacles to their development, including ambiguous support from the Russian democratic leadership. Their present growth must continue in order to help the country transform into a democratic, market-oriented society. As the free unions constitute the necessary part of civil society without which democracy is not possible, democratic forces would benefit by supporting them.

Free trade unions emerged in Russia only at the very end of the 1980s, when Russia was still part of the Soviet Union. The best known of these trade unions—the Independent Union of Miners—will celebrate its fifth anniversary in October 1995. In comparison to the over 150-year-old history of the U.S. trade unions, the Russian unions are mere infants. Nevertheless, on the threshold of the third millennium, social processes are developing at a tremendous pace and Russian trade unions have already united approximately one million workers.

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A more significant difference than age separates the development of American and Russian free trade unions. Where American free trade unions developed to fill a vacuum of labor leadership, Russian unions are arising in a country where an all-embracing system of state-controlled trade unions has existed since the 1930s. Despite the fall of the Soviets, this system still maintains its structure, property, political and public connections, and experienced leadership. The heir to the Soviet trade unions—the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia (FITUR)—still counts approximately 50 million members. As such, FITUR is impeding the creation and development of free trade unions. Meanwhile, the management of enterprises and local authorities are using all available resources to resist the new free trade unions. Most importantly, however, the ambiguous support and attitude of federal authorities, including President Yeltsin, has hindered free trade union development.

In the past, the president and the free trade unions have constituted a close and powerful political combination. The free trade unions supported Yeltsin and his campaign during his intense struggle with Gorbachev. During this struggle he promised to accelerate economic reforms, to extend more rights to the republics, and to reduce their dependence on the center. In 1991, the Independent Union of Miners called for a massive strike demanding the resignation of Gorbachev. Nearly one million people, and not only miners, took part, significantly undermining Gorbachev’s position. Moreover, during the August coup of 1991, the free unions firmly supported the Russian government and Yeltsin, which made

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a substantial contribution to the failure of the coup. All in all, from 1991 to 1993, the free trade unions sided with President Yeltsin in all phases of confrontation between the president and the Russian Supreme Soviet, reflecting their orientation toward democracy and their support for the development of the free market.

In comparison, FITUR has opposed Yeltsin and his allies. In August 1991, the FITUR leadership adopted a wait-and-see policy, then sided with the Supreme Soviet against the president. In October 1993, FITUR called for a general strike in support of the Supreme Soviet and declared its dissolution by the president an unconstitutional act. The political position of both unions—the free ones and of FITUR—stems from their general orientation. The majority of the members of the free unions are highly skilled, young and healthy. They are confident in their ability to compete in free-labor market conditions. These professional and personal qualities predetermine their leaning toward freedom, democracy, and a market economy. Their work methods resemble those of the American trade unions. Negotiating a collective labor agreement between employees and employers is their primary goal. Managements of companies unfortunately resist this idea. However, trade unions do have means of forcing managements into such negotiations, since according to Russian legislation, in case of the presence of more than one union in a company, the employer should negotiate with each of them.

The leadership of FITUR determines its political position: a significant part of the Communist Party *nomenklatura* had found refuge in FITUR after the abolition of the CPSU. The fact that the majority of FITUR members do not identify themselves as such and keep their membership only by inertia helps the FITUR leadership maintain their political line. FITUR inherited membership of the former Soviet trade unions, and no new registration took place during transformation of these unions into FITUR. Since then, approximately one-third of all members have quit. Polls conducted by the All-Russia Center for Public Opinion in 1993 and 1994 showed that more than half of those who remain, when asked if they belong to a union, reply "I do not know" or "I am not a member of any union."

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Given this arrangement of trade unions on the political map, one would assume that the president and his supporters would unconditionally sympathize with the free trade unions. In reality, President Yeltsin, while willingly accepting support from free unions in critical moments, prefers to rely on FITUR. He tries to gain the favor of its leadership and does nothing to support the free unions in their unequal struggle against company managements, local authorities, and FITUR, itself.

Thus, only FITUR represents employees in the Russian Trilateral Commission for Social Partnership Between Company Managements, Workers and the Russian Federation, an organization established by presidential decree to work out labor issues. This omission denies a voice to reform movement more influential than its numbers; nationwide polls show that the influence of independent trade unions is comparable to that of FITUR, despite a much smaller membership. In polls, 15 percent of respondents indicated that they felt FITUR played an important role in labor issues, while 16 percent of respondents favored the free unions. The strikes organized by the free unions demonstrate these unions'

influence beyond their membership; quite often the number of participants is several times greater than the actual free union membership. Workers not belonging to any unions and even members of FITUR take part in strikes with the free unionists. However, all trade union assets still belong to FITUR. No legal provisions exist which would entitle the free unions to take their part of the Soviet trade unions' heritage within Russia. A presidential decree may make this possible. The inconsistent attitude of President Yeltsin toward the free unions probably stems from his political heritage. He understands the necessity of democratic reforms for Russia, but because of his ties to the *nomenklatura*, he feels more comfortable dealing with the *nomenklatura* types of the FITUR leadership. Yeltsin can understand the elite better than the reform-minded, independent leaders of the free trade unions.

Several obstacles block the development of free trade unions. Weak support from above and no legal substructure to support from below amplify the difficulties the free trade unions are encountering. Support from the intelligentsia is negligible. Company management and local political and local political authorities can be hostile, even violent. Disaffected workers are resistant to join. Altogether, these factors create a discouraging situation for free trade unions today. The complexity of the situation is aggravated by the fact that these unions are proponents of economic reform, and economic reform is not always beneficial to their members. As protectors of their members' interests they have insisted on an increase in wages, but realizing that such a pay raise would boost inflation and delay recovery from the economic crisis, the free unions are trying to avoid such demands. They do not insist on state support for industries not fit for a market economy, such as the military-industrial complex. On the other hand, the FITUR leadership easily forwards such demands to achieve its populist goals. It can do this because it feels no concern for the continuation or success of the reforms.

Even the segment of the intelligentsia that leans toward democracy does not actively support free trade unions. Until quite recently, the mass media ignored emerging free unions, confused them with FITUR and, without making an effort to analyze their situation, accused them of the same vices inherent in FITUR: populism and group egotism. Historically, a wide gulf separates the people from the intelligentsia in Russia. This gap widened in the Soviet period because totalitarian regimes often rupture the links between the peoples of a nation and atomize society. The distance between the "blue collar" workers and the intelligentsia is clear when

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comparing Russia with Poland. When Lech Walesa formed a free trade union after a strike in a shipbuilding yard in Gdansk, Poland's most prominent intellectuals approached the strikers' leader and offered support and assistance. Adam Michnik and Yacek Kuron became advisors to Walesa and organized a committee for the support of workers, and the mass media ensured national compassion for Walesa. Polish "Solidarity" was born.

Nothing of the kind took place in Russia. The mass media quite often publishes material hostile to trade unions, which demonstrates not only their prejudice, but also their ignorance of free trade unions. Cases where lawyers, economists, sociologists, journalists, and other

professionals cooperate with free trade unions, something which any public movement badly needs, are still exceptional.

The lackluster support within the intelligentsia indirectly encourages company management and local political authorities to retaliate against unions and union activists. Newly formed unions are at extra risk. Often, leaders and activists are greatly scrutinized by the media and other interested institutions. They and their families are threatened with violence and sometimes these threats are carried out. Rarely are the perpetrators found.

Part of the free unions' problem is to overcome the negative attitude of most employees toward the very words "trade union." They still perceive trade unions as traditional state-run bodies. This distrust, combined with the political apathy of the Russian population, spawns general skepticism toward any unions. In addition, the Russian working class lacks a tradition of self-organization for the protection of its own interests.

Despite these obstacles, in the early 1990s several industries, including miners, pilots, air traffic controllers, sailors, and dock workers, gave birth to free unions of their own. Later, locomotive drivers formed their own free trade union. The fact that all these professions are well-paying jobs involving high-risk work helped foster their development, as these circumstances strengthen the sense of professional identity and strengthen solidarity among the employees. In addition, two free trade unions are operating outside the framework of a specific professions—Association of Socialist Trade Unions (SOCPROF) counting 360,000 members and the Confederation of Free Trade Unions of Russia (CFTUR), which counts five thousand members. Any trade union formed within any company or organization may join these "umbrella" bodies. Such a blanket is important for emerging unions and their usually inexperienced leaders. Single trade unions are springing up all over Russia, although many of them eventually disappear because they are unable to survive. Nevertheless, a constant stream of unions is joining SOCPROF in many regions. It includes a variety of industries and the so-called "budget spheres" (teachers, physicians, etc.). These "budget spheres" have not formed any of their own nationwide associations of free unions in the past year.

The largest union not belonging to FITUR is the Union of Miners and Metallurgists which has a membership of over two million. This union often sides with the free unions, but can only be likened to them with reservation. Although it broke off its relationship with FITUR in October of 1992, it continues to resemble FITUR more than the free unions. For instance, management personnel (up to the level of company director) belong to the union along with the workers, one characteristic feature of state trade unions that free unions have dropped. Politically, however, the Union of Miners and Metallurgists leans toward democracy and a market economy, and for this reason left FITUR.

Recent disappointments may change the attitudes of the members of the free trade unions and their allies. Not long ago, the democratic orientation and support of reform characterized the free trade unions as much as their unwillingness to accept employers as members. But dissatisfaction with the course of reform—the same dissatisfaction manifested in the election results of 12 December 1993—combined with the heavy burden imposed on the bulk of the population, have affected the free unions.

CFTUR has unfortunately traded democratic slogans for fascist ones, declaring that its goal was the "introduction of a Russian national idea into the workers movement" and the creation of a "national-social" party together with Alexander Barkashov, the leader of Russian fascists. The unions in the Tyumen region quit the Confederation, as did several

unions in Yekaterinburg due to the introduction of these slogans. Meanwhile, the largest member-union of the CFTUR, a union from the Cherepovets metallurgical enterprise which accounts for two thousand members, split into two roughly equal parts; one segment stayed with the CFTUR and the other formed a new union that decided to adhere to its old democratic charter and retain its democratic orientation.

Meanwhile, in recent months the Communist union *Zashita* (“defense”), which orients its members away from purely legal methods and promotes the use of force—including the formation of workers squads intended for takeovers of enterprises—has grown. Such a takeover attempt already occurred at a paper plant in Kondorovo in the Kaluga region some 200 kilometers south of Moscow. The Communist union’s success gave them some degree of authority.

The situation in Kondorovo that resulted in the takeover of an enterprise is a typical one in Russia. During privatization, the workers became shareholders, each possessing a small number of shares. The enterprise’s autocratic director, accustomed to ignoring the laws, openly embezzled enterprise funds. He also treated the workers rudely and ignored their interests. Local authorities, including the court, supported the director and covered his illegal activities. Much of the public lacked a legal opportunity to protect their rights and succumbed to the propaganda of *Zashita* and its appeals to use force. The union formed a worker’s squad that chased the director from the factory and would not let him return until the shareholders convened a meeting that would elect a new director. The local authorities were frightened by the workers’ resolve and immediately ceased supporting the old director and accepted the election of the new one.

The whole Kondorovo event created a harmful example: the neglect authorities showed toward the rights of workers trying to achieve their rights through peaceful and legal means, and the authorities’ readiness to yield only to force may lead to a wave of such incidents in other regions of Russia. People have more than enough reasons to be dissatisfied with the authorities and the management of enterprises: production is falling, prices are rising, and unemployment is increasing, especially in its latent form. Companies force workers to take unpaid leaves, sometimes several months long, and systematically pay wages late. All these factors could have encouraged the swift growth of free trade unions, as people realized the need to unite their effort for self protection. However, while democratic unions are firmly devoted to legal and peaceful methods, the executive and judicial organs use loopholes in legislation to rule in favor of employers and against employees. For instance, management can declare that participation in a strike is absenteeism and fire the strikers for “absence without good reason,” although legislation enables firing employees for only systematic absenteeism. They sometimes even violate the law itself in order to repress the free unionists and consequently clear the road for the proponents of violence—Communists and fascists.

Only the inefficiency of legal methods pushes people toward the Communists, whose ideology is highly unattractive after decades of Communist rule. The problem with the fascists is even more dangerous. In a country with no democratic traditions, in a crisis where the standard of living is falling, and in light of the total loss of former ideological values, fascist ideology may be adopted as an alternative to the presently failing leadership which calls itself democratic.

The best way to organize the workers toward a democratic and market system is through free trade unions. Free trade unions are the only mass-scale organizations that act among

the workers, as the many political parties have an elitist character and confuse them. In the course of their short history, the free unions have already organized many mass political actions in support of freedom, democracy, and reforms. These include political strikes in March-May 1991, mass-scale rallies in many Russian cities in August 1991, and the rally to which the leadership of FITUR appealed, a frustrating demonstration in support of the Supreme Soviet in October 1993. Free trade unions are the only, or at least the most effective, structures in Russian society able to stand against the fascist threat on a grass-roots level.

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