

Interview with Soviet Syndicalists

Translated and edited by Mike Hargis from *Le Monde Libertaire*

Radio Libertaire, Alexandre Tchoukaev, Vladimir Naoumov

Summer, 1991

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The following is an excerpt from an interview conducted on Radio Libertaire (RL, the radio station operated by the French Anarchist Federation) with Alexandre Tchoukaev (Sacha) and Vladimir Naoumov, representatives respectively of the free union SMOT and of the Anarcho-syndicalist Confederation (KAS). In the interview they discuss the recent miners' strikes and workers' attitudes towards the conflict between Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin.

RL: Sacha, have you any information on the strikes in the Russian mining areas?

Sacha: One could classify the recent strikes as political strikes, even though they began for economic reasons. After the strikes of 1989, one could expect new actions by the summer of 1990; but unfortunately the workers were unable to pull off a small strike even for a single day. Beginning in December 1990, a new attempt failed, but in January 1991 a resolution of the strike committees (that had survived from the strikes of 1989) said that this time the Party apparatus had won because the workers were not able to unite, that it was not their day to win, but that "tomorrow belongs to the workers."

March 1 the strike began in the Donbass, soon supported by the miners of Kousbass and Vorkhouta (these are the USSR's three big mining centers, locales of the 1989 strikes). It was not a General Strike as in 1989—60 percent of the mines stopped production—but this strike was more flexible in the sense that certain mines continued to work but assisted the miners on strike; there were "quickie" strikes of two hours dispersed throughout the country, notably in enterprises that have never struck before.

For a month the government did not react, then on March 27 the Council of Ministers of the Soviet Union declared the strikes illegal and liable to criminal prosecution. On April 2 the new Prime Minister met with the strike committees, but without result because the strikers demanded the resignation of Gorbachev and radical economic reforms.

RL: Here the press said that the radicals are close to Boris Yeltsin.

Vladimir: It's true that, if one looks at the history of Russia, it appears that we're always looking for a savior, for a boss, beginning with "Saint Vladimir Ilich [Lenin]..." but all of these struggles between Gorbachev and Yeltsin I don't take too seriously. Upon gaining power Yeltsin would be the new Gorbachev.

If some miners listen to Yeltsin it's to oppose Gorbachev, but those who're radicals know that they have no choice. They could go the other way, in hopes of getting support from the other sectors such as the railroads or steel, for example.

In any case, a very important demand is getting the communists out of the mine management. After 50 years, there is the same Party discipline, the same obligatory Party meetings, working for free on Saturdays and holidays, obligatory participation in demonstrations, and more importantly it cannot be forgotten that Party officials are tied to the KGB. The workers see no difference between the KGB and the Communists.

RL: In the West, the only solution presented is that of liberal capitalism with Yeltsin. What are the perspectives for the miners?

Sacha: For a long time Yeltsin was part of the nomenklatura, but last summer, in spectacular fashion, he tore up his Party card. One could describe his positions as a sort of liberal capitalism with strong nationalist overtones.

For sure he wants to represent the alternative, but many miners' strike committees say "Neither Yeltsin nor Gorbachev, The people want to manage." Yeltsin has given no concrete aid to the miners. I think that the strikes have achieved one result, they are a step closer to liberation. But there are very strong pressures on the independent workers' movement. On January 1 a new labor law was presented that could make the independent unions register themselves with the government, which the administration could refuse to do—notably if there are less than 5,000 members. Now the Soviet Constitution says that the unions, being independent, cannot be registered!

In general, despite the pressure of the KGB and the attempts of the Communist Party to control workers' reactions, the workers' movement continues to develop, slowly but surely.

RL: Is their solidarity with the workers from other sectors?

Sacha: In 1989 it was above all a miners' strike, but this time other trades, other neighboring industries joined the strike. In the case of transport, strikes are very difficult to organize; in that branch of industry Stalin constituted a quasi-military order which has never been abolished. Nevertheless, in the Moscow and Leningrad Metro, strikes of from two hours to a day took place on March 27.

Despite the authorities' declaration that the strike committee leaders had been arrested, support for the strikers developed in all the large towns in the USSR; collections of food and clothing, for example, particularly in the Baltic countries.

Vladimir: The USSR, today, is a country that resembles a volcano...

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