

Economic ills heat up Soviet succession fight

by Konstantin George

On July 18, President Mikhail Gorbachov called for a sweeping purge, at a Moscow meeting attended by the Politburo and most of the Central Committee, represented by republic and regional party leaders. "The ranks of party officials need renewal, a flow of fresh blood. And they need to be renewed at the level of the workplace, the district, the city, the region, the republic, the CC and the Politburo," he demanded, as regional leaders rose to blast the failures of *perestroika* and denounce the economy's breakdown into primitive barter arrangements.

Thus Gorbachov, at this stormy meeting held while 500,000 Soviet coal miners were on strike, chose to finally formally propose what he has allowed to be "leaked" since January: that the next party congress be moved forward to the autumn of 1990 from its March 1991 scheduled date. This was a very significant move, in that he has now defined the maximum time frame (15 months) for the power struggle of the Soviet leadership to be settled.

The Moscow meeting had been called on short notice by Gorbachov at a Leningrad speech of July 12, a day that ended with the purge's first big victim, Leningrad region party boss, Yuri Solovyov, a candidate member of the Soviet Politburo. Gorbachov has chosen to launch an all-out offensive now, before an opposition majority of party and military could coalesce behind a viable replacement for him.

The Soviet boss's greatest advantage up to the present has been the lack of such a viable figure. He is exploiting this advantage to begin the greatest purge since the Stalin years, and to try to establish the case that he, Gorbachov, can restore order as the new Stalin. While his personal future is totally up in the air, the steps toward open Stalinist brutality, along the lines of the nerve gas and sharpened-shovel attacks on

unarmed civilians in Soviet Georgia in April, point toward a policy-shift that bears all the bestial marks of the recent murderous crackdown by Communist China's party leadership.

The succession fight, generated by the systemic crisis wracking the Soviet Union and East bloc, has been unfolding in earnest since the spring of 1988. The July strike wave, with its twin epicenters in the Ukraine, the most populous of the non-Russian republics, and in Great Russia itself, has brought that power struggle to a head. The strike wave—above all, the likelihood that the next phase of it, in August, will feature a railway strike—threatens to shatter the Soviet industrial economy, and create new, potentially uncontrollable dimensions of anti-Russian national revolts.

Coal strikes

The strike begun by the Ukrainian and Russian coal miners reveals the depth of the systemic disease of the Russian Empire, which adds up to a far deeper problem than the sum of its three component parts: the devastating shortages of food and basic consumer goods; exploding national unrest; and a total breakdown of public confidence in the economy, and hence in the system and leadership.

The shortages touched off, as early as March, pervasive public disbelief in the availability of *any* goods. Overnight, ruble savings accounts were emptied, and the panic hoarding of anything and everything still available in shops began. All of this naturally made the economic problem worse.

The strike by 500,000 coal miners, which lasted for two weeks, reflected all three components of the primary disease. It came within a hair's breadth of starting a chain reaction of industrial production stoppages and collapse in the Soviet

economy. The strike's prime cause was the impact of the economic collapse on the industrial workforce, above all the agonizing, months-long lack of food and consumer goods; due to the soap shortage, miners have been emerging from the filth of the mines with no means to clean up. The strike's lengthy duration, despite almost daily appeals by Gorbachov to stop, and despite the almost immediate granting—on paper at least—of almost everything the miners were demanding, illustrated the breakdown of any faith in the system and its leadership.

For the Soviet leaders, the Ukraine-centered strike of more than 300,000 miners—involving *all* the major coal-fields of the eastern Ukraine (the Don Basin coal and steel hub), the central Ukraine (Pavlograd), and the western Ukraine Lvov region near the Polish border—was a nightmare come true. During his five-day trip to the Ukraine last February, Mikhail Gorbachov had warned that distribution bottlenecks could bring his *perestroika* “restructuring” campaign to a hasty end, since its alleged successes are not reaching the population.

On Sunday, July 23, in an emergency televised appeal, Gorbachov said, “If this situation had developed further, I mean in terms of time, if the tension had continued and other branches of industry had been involved, then a great deal would have come under threat.” On Monday, July 24, speaking before the Supreme Soviet, he underscored, “This is the most serious test of *perestroika* . . . a serious blow to the economy . . . such is the current situation. We are finding our way out, but it is still tense.”

The turning point came that same day, when the Donetsk (Ukraine) Strike Committee arrived in Moscow, met with Prime Minister Nikolai Ryzhkov, and “worked out an agreement” to end the strike. Soviet media reportage stressed that the agreement included, as in the earlier accord ending the Kuznetsk strike, large-scale deliveries of food, soap, and the like to the region. Furthermore, the agreement was co-signed by Gorbachov himself, who pledged his own accountability for its implementation.

In his opening speech to the July 18 Central Committee meeting in Moscow, Gorbachov had announced a new crash program to import an additional 10 billion rubles worth of consumer goods, which the Soviet state will hold as a “fire brigade” reserve for future strike situations, in recognition that a physical capability for granting concessions in selected instances, is, for reasons of overall internal stability, urgently required.

“It is precisely the economy that contains the roots of the growing tension in society and it is there above all that the party must seek a way out of the situation,” the Russian boss explained. “It is primarily a matter of adopting the most resolute and, I would even say, extraordinary measures, to normalize the situation in consumer goods. . . . All the reserves within the country are being utilized, and, moreover, additional potential for replenishing the market by importing goods worth around 10 billion rubles has been found.”

Resistance

Moscow's worst nightmare is that all potential and actual fronts of strike and national unrest would escalate at once, in a synchronized and coordinated manner; and that a political resistance and its organic leadership—exemplified by the recent creation of the strike committees as the *de facto* independent trade unions of the Ukraine and Russia, on the Polish model—would succeed in avoiding being entrapped by KGB provocations or pushed into rash escalations that might divide the movement.

The Soviet secret service, of course, has been trying to set up provocations in order to bring the conflict to a premature head, thus creating the basis for crushing the organic leaders of the incipient anti-Bolshevik resistance. Fully cognizant of this, the Ukrainian movement has adopted a strategy of synchronized resistance with other republics. The prime demands of the Ukrainian strikers thus dovetailed with those of the Russian strikers in Kuznetsk and Vorkuta in the far north, that food and basic consumer goods reappear on the shelves, and that *independent trade unions* be legalized.

To dispel such potential unity, the Soviet leadership and KGB have moved, in the temporary reprieve granted by the concessions that settled the Ukrainian strikes for the moment, to stage showdowns in three other major fronts of unrest, all strategically placed along the borders of the U.S.S.R.:

- Georgia in the Transcaucasus: A general strike began July 24. Daily mass demonstrations of between 60,000 and 200,000 people in Tbilisi are calling for independence and “Down With the Russian Empire!” These troubles erupted when the KGB set the Muslim tribe of Abkhazians on a guerrilla-war rampage against the Georgian majority in the northern Georgian region of Abkhazia. It was the earlier launching of the Abkhazians in March, with the demand that Abkhazia leave Georgia and become part of the *Russian Federation*, that sparked the mass Georgian counter-movement that led to the Sunday, April 9, massacre in Tbilisi by Soviet troops.

- Moldavia, bordering on Romania and the Balkans: late July, an active KGB- and military-backed mass Russian-chauvinist movement has sprung up to oppose Moldavian ethnic demands for greater autonomy.

- The Baltic republic of Estonia: A strike began on July 25, by 25,000 *Russian* workers at the main industrial plants in Estonia's capital of Tallinn. The strikers, led by the Russian-chauvinist mass organization Interfront, are demanding an end to Estonian language, cultural, and economic autonomy, throwing down the gauntlet to the Estonian majority, which has been agitating for increased freedoms in these areas.

The crucial institutional voices have yet to be heard from. Especially the Soviet military command has not said a word throughout July on the strike wave. But amid this silence, the Kremlin's top brass has been making the international circuit (see page 58) in recent weeks, and may be preparing a power play.