

Kremlin creates a safety valve

by Konstantin George

Stung by the July outbreak of strikes that nearly went out of control, Mikhail Gorbachov and the Soviet leadership have turned to Boris Yeltsin, the “Russian Mussolini,” to create a new institutional safety valve which they hope can contain and channel the explosive popular rage which is building up over the worst economic conditions in the Soviet Empire since World War II.

Over the weekend of July 29, Yeltsin was instrumental in founding a so-called Interregional Group of deputies from the Soviet Congress of People’s Deputies. The grouping is supposed to serve as a gathering-point for those deputies who have spoken out, in many cases honestly, against the degrading and inhuman conditions of working people in the Soviet Union and for the rights of non-Russian national groups. But it is also designed to serve as a bridge between the Soviet leadership and the strike committees and other organic leadership now emerging around the U.S.S.R., functioning as a cushion to protect Gorbachov from becoming a target of strike ferment.

As the Soviet news agency TASS made clear on July 29, the Interregional Group was founded in accordance with guidelines issued in Gorbachov’s July 18 Moscow speech to regional party leaders. On that occasion, Gorbachov called it a “natural thing” for people to be “influenced” by “left-wing radicalism” in the present times of social unrest. TASS noted that the new group had been formed to “reflect the left-radical part of the population.”

Yeltsin’s group has already grown phenomenally since its founding. The weekend founding conference was attended by over 360 members, including some 240 deputies, or about 10% of the total 2,250 People’s Deputies. By Aug. 1, there were 388 People’s Deputies who belonged to the Interregional Group. The Soviet state has generously provided the money and means for Yeltsin’s group to issue a regular newspaper, translated *The People’s Deputy*, with a run of 300,000.

Gorbachov and Yeltsin exchange favors

The Soviet leadership’s need of such an institutional safety valve became urgent on July 18, when the mass strike of the Russian Kuznetsk coal miners had spread to the Ukraine, stopping production in the Donetsk coal region, the U.S.S.R.’s largest, and three other Ukrainian coal belts. After all of Gorbachov’s attempts to settle the strikes had

failed, he addressed an emergency meeting of the Politburo and all party republic and regional leaders, and gave the green light for the formation of “left-radical” groups within the party, within the framework of “pluralism of opinion” in a one-party system.

On July 22, as the strikes continued to escalate, Yeltsin returned Gorbachov’s favor by appearing on Soviet television to make a dramatic appeal for all strikers to return to work to avert a “national catastrophe,” and gave his word that the regime’s promises to the strikers would be kept.

In his July 29 speech before his new Interregional Group, Yeltsin pledged total support for Gorbachov and for *perestroika*—the crash military restructuring policy which has been gutting the Soviet Union’s consumer sector—and inveighed against the “party aristocracy,” hailing the newly formed strike committees as “the embryo of true people’s power,” in a situation where “social tensions are rising” and where workers have “lost all faith in the leadership.” In an effort to turn the ferment into a weapon against Gorbachov’s own political enemies, Yeltsin declared: “The party aristocracy has become its own class. The workers’ movement is directing itself against this class, even if it has yet to realize this.” Similar attacks on the “party aristocracy” and *Nomenklatura* were made by other founders of the Interregional Group, including historian Viktor Afanasyev, liberal economist Gavril Popov, and the editor of the weekly *Ogonyok*, Vitali Korotich.

Yeltsin’s “fire brigade” will have a heavy work load. A crippling national rail strike during August cannot be ruled out. Its expected outbreak on Aug. 1 was only averted by a dramatic appearance on Soviet television on July 31 by Railways Minister Konarov, who announced that all demands of the rail workers had been agreed to, following emergency meetings with strike representatives from all the major rail lines.

How long this truce will last, is anyone’s guess. New strikes by angry Ukrainian coal miners are now likely, since there is strong dissatisfaction with the much-heralded agreement—as evidenced by the Aug. 1 meeting in Moscow between Soviet Prime Minister Nikolai Ryzhkov and the strike committee from the *Donetsk* coal mines.

In this explosive situation, not only will the Yeltsin group grow in strength and influence; its formation has now broken ground for the future creation of other “groups.” It is only a matter of time before a “right-fascist” group, anchored around the adherents and supporters of the Russian-chauvinist Pamyat Society, also forms in the Congress of People’s Deputies.

And in that sense, Yeltsin’s and other groups in the making are bound to be more than safety valves. Yeltsin, or Pamyat, or a future synthesis of the two currents, embody a *ruling* option one or two years down the road, should the depth and dimensions of the systemic crisis dictate such a drastic transformation.