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PEOPLE: PARTIES, UNIONS AND NGOs

In January 2005, the Russian government made changes to the welfare benefit system: benefits in kind, such as free travel and medicine for pensioners, were replaced with money payments or abolished. This sparked the first widespread street demonstrations in Putin's Russia. Only a small minority participated, but they had the support or sympathy of the majority. Government and local authorities hurried to dispel the movement with a combination of concessions, promises and threats.

This episode (which is discussed fully in Chapter 9) highlighted some of the contradictions that make social movements in Russia hard to understand. The demonstrations made the Kremlin extremely nervous. At that time, some in the political elite were terrified that the Georgian 'Rose revolution' of November 2003 and the Ukrainian 'Orange revolution' which began in November 2004 would be repeated in some form in Russia. That did not happen. There were echoes of the Ukrainian events in 2005 in Kyrgyzstan, in the 'Tulip revolution', and in Uzbekistan, in the Ferghana Valley protest movement which ended with the security forces' massacre of protesters at Andijan.* But not in Russia. The revolt by pensioners and other benefit recipients was unexpected, sudden and effective. However, while antigovernment slogans were raised on some of the many demonstrations, no general political movement ensued.

Given that Russia's people have the potential to attenuate, subvert or destroy the power of ruling elites – and that the country's long-term future is largely dependent on how that potential is

* Security forces fired on a crowd of protesters at Andijan on 13 May 2005. The government stated that nine people were killed and 34 injured; credible reports from news organisations and NGOs indicated a death toll between several dozen and 6–700.

realised – these events raised crucial questions. Are Russia's social movements as limited as they seem from a distance? What part might they play in determining broader political change? And how might they react to the hardships threatened by the end of the oil boom? Western journalists all too often conclude, from the absence of national, media-friendly demonstrations like those in Kiev, that the Russian population is sullen, suffering in silence. There are always Russian intellectuals willing to reinforce this misconception with age-old stereotypes of a meek population that neither knows nor cares how to resist the power of their rulers. And after all, Aleksandr Pushkin's *Boris Godunov* – a classic drama of power, with a place in Russian culture comparable to that of *King Lear* in the United Kingdom – ends with the false tsar, Dmitry, usurping the throne, and the haunting stage direction: 'The people are silent.' In this chapter, and the next, I hope to show that nevertheless, Russia's social movements contain the seeds of powerful forces for change.

While the stereotype of a quiescent Russian people hoping for a good tsar is deceptive, it exists for a reason. It was current among Russian intellectuals in the nineteenth century, whose hopes of reforming, or doing away with, the autocratic tsarist regime were frustrated, for one thing, by their inability to communicate meaningfully with the impoverished and largely illiterate peasantry who comprised the overwhelming majority of the population. But the stereotype was overthrown, along with much else, by the three Russian revolutions of 1905, February 1917 and October–November 1917, which drew millions of urban workers, and tens of millions of peasants, into the most far-reaching social uprising Europe had ever seen. These revolutions brought into action an array of collective organisations, from village communes to factory committees and soldiers' and workers' soviets (councils). And these, too, are Russian traditions – although they were quite rapidly dissipated in the retreat from, and defeat of, the revolution in the 1920s and 1930s. It is against this background that the Soviet Union's extraordinarily persistent and pervasive dictatorship developed. That in turn forms the context for the real difficulties of reviving trade union, community and political organisations in post-Soviet Russia.

In the post-war Soviet Union in which much of the adult population of Putin's Russia grew up, collective action, independent of the state and Communist Party, was difficult or impossible. There were no trade unions or community organisations other than those approved by the authorities. There were occasionally spontaneous



'We won't keep quiet!' Workers at the Bum mash engineering factory in Izhevsk demanding better conditions in the dormitories where they live, 2006

Photo: *Den*, Izhevsk.

local revolts, which were quickly suppressed. Rebellious trends in youth culture were harder for the authorities to deal with, but any attempt, for example by groups of students, to discuss politics or circulate forbidden reading matter ended in arrests and long terms of imprisonment. I repeat this point, which I made in the Introduction, to remind readers that, as dictatorship eased under Gorbachev, those who sought actively to change their lives, and their country, for the better – be it in trade unions, community groups, journalism or politics – had little tradition or experience to fall back on. Workers formed independent unions where there had been none for two or three generations; people set about political and social activities that had previously been impossible for them or their parents; journalists learned new types of reporting and commentary. The confusion surrounding any and every attempt to articulate working class interests politically was especially intense – hardly surprising, given the way that official Soviet ideology had perverted the meaning of 'socialism', 'communism' and even 'working class'.

The first post-Soviet years brought, along with unprecedented political freedom, new setbacks for all types of collective action. The economic slump had a devastating effect on communities: the social

fabric of industrial towns was ripped to pieces. The very material certainties of the late Soviet period – of employment, school education, housing and at least rudimentary healthcare – suddenly vanished. The disruption of stable communities and stable workforces provided the worst possible conditions for collective social or industrial action. The economic boom of the 2000s made potentially for an improvement. This chapter describes the progress of the political opposition, NGOs and trade unions; Chapter 9 deals with the protests over benefits and housing, and other community-based social movements.

THE POLITICAL OPPOSITION

Putin's accession to the presidency in 2000 meant the beginning of the end for the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF), then post-Soviet Russia's most powerful political party. The blows struck by Putin's political technologists at the CPRF were described in Chapter 6. But these were not the only cause of its decline. Its 'state patriotic' outlook alienated many of its own parliamentary deputies who would have been happy to trade it in for some form of social democracy. And the party's ideology has had little appeal to younger activists, who would be needed to revive it: they have been recruited more successfully by the extreme nationalist parties and by Just Russia, the junior pro-Kremlin party in parliament.

Western readers should bear in mind that the CPRF is quite unlike communist parties in Western Europe. In their heyday, those parties dominated the left wing of the trade union movement and attracted the votes of millions who saw them as a force that could challenge capitalist governments. Even workers who disliked what they knew of the Soviet Union, or disagreed with the communists for other reasons, often admired communist militants for standing up to ruthless employers, corrupt union bosses or the fascists. The CPRF's history is quite different. It rose in 1993 from the ruins of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, which for two or three generations had a monopoly on political power, industrial management and almost every facet of public life. In the 1960s and 1970s, when French workers might become communists to subvert their bosses, Russian workers joined the party in the hope of being promoted to management. And many of the activists who built the CPRF were lower-level Soviet apparatchiks, embittered by their sudden loss of power and influence. Most CPRF leaders continued

to praise Stalin; those that now rued Soviet political repression joined other parties. Nevertheless, the CPRF had gigantic appeal to voters, especially of the older generation. It denounced the impoverishment of the population, lambasted Yeltsin and his oligarchs, and promised a return to the stability and higher living standards that most people in Russia had enjoyed until the early 1980s.

The CPRF's ideology was adapted from that of the Soviet party, although much of the rhetoric about class struggle was shelved. While the CPRF calls for the restitution of the multinational Soviet Union, its Russian nationalism has become ever more strident and its demands for tougher 'antiterrorist' action in Chechnya ever shriller. From its foundation, the CPRF and its leader Gennady Zyuganov worked in the 'red-brown front' with right-wing Russian nationalists (i.e. 'red' communists and 'brown' nationalists). Throughout the 1990s they turned out on anti-Yeltsin street demonstrations in which red flags mingled with the nationalists' often antisemitic placards.

When Putin and his supporters arrived in government in 1999, they stole much of the CPRF's political thunder. Putin was strengthening the state in just the way the CPRF demanded, and before long could offer the prospect of the improved living standards and relative stability its voters craved. Zyuganov's reaction was to dig in, to remind voters that Putin's remained a pro-capitalist regime and to lambast state corruption and bureaucracy. The CPRF's share of the parliamentary election vote fell from 24 per cent in 1999 to 12 per cent in 2007. Membership fell from around half a million in the mid 1990s to 180,000 in 2008.

A succession of CPRF leaders who wanted to rebrand the party as something closer to social democratic have lost the argument. These include Gennady Seleznev, chairman of the Duma from 1996 to 2003, who was expelled in 2002, and Gennady Semigin, a CPRF deputy and multi-millionaire businessman, who was expelled in 2003. The economist Sergei Glazev walked out and joined Dmitry Rogozin's nationalist Rodina party, which formed the basis of an electoral bloc at the 2003 polls, and was given tacit support by the Kremlin in order to draw votes away from the CPRF. Fragments of Rodina were among the groups swept up in 2007 by Just Russia, the 'loyal opposition' mentioned in Chapter 6.¹

Zyuganov has also dug in ideologically. A new CPRF programme, adopted in November 2008, called for nationalisation, the removal from power of the 'mafia-comprador bourgeoisie' and the revival of the Soviet Union. It also reflected Zyuganov's abiding Stalinism. A long section dedicated to 'saving the nation' briefly expresses

regret over the 'breaches of socialist legality and the repressions' of the 1930s and 1940s – a laughably sanitised phrase to describe the executions, mass deportations and slave labour – but insists that the Soviet party's record was overwhelmingly positive. On the 50th anniversary of Nikita Khrushchev's 1956 secret speech, the first denunciation by a Soviet leader of Stalin's crimes, Zyuganov said the speech had done more harm than good. And in 2008 he published an overwhelmingly positive biography of Stalin.²

The mixture of socialist terminology and a fierce nationalism situated on, and often over, the border with xenophobia and racism, is characteristic not only of the CPRF but of other so-called 'left' organisations in Russia. This is a phenomenon the western European left has struggled to understand. In the early 1990s, socialists I knew in Moscow had often to explain to western European sympathisers why they would not participate in the 'red-brown' alliance, as a matter of internationalist principle. The visitors often simply did not grasp the extent to which an ugly, reactionary nationalism pervaded the demonstrations. On an official level, the Socialist International (the grouping of social democratic parties) was in 2005 considering an affiliation request from Rodina, when it learned to its surprise that a group of Rodina deputies had, together with some CPRF colleagues, written to the prosecutor demanding a ban on all manifestations of Jewish religion and culture. Rogozin, then Rodina leader, explained that he had no intention of taking action against his antisemitic colleagues, although he disagreed with them.³

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The 'red-brown' front has declined, along with the CPRF, in the 2000s, but 'left' nationalist groups remain strident. It is worth mentioning the National Bolshevik Party (NBP), mainly because of the astonishing respect accorded by Russian liberal politicians and western journalists alike to Eduard Limonov, its charismatic but politically unpleasant leader. Limonov, who emigrated from the USSR in 1974, became a punk countercultural novelist in the United States and returned to Russia in 1991. After a brief spell in Vladimir Zhirinovsky's Liberal Democratic party, he formed the NBP in 1993. The party's declared aims are 'social justice' via nationalisation, civil and political freedoms, and 'imperial domination' as foreign policy, aimed first at 'the restitution of the empire destroyed in 1991', and specifically the incorporation into Russia of territories with Russian populations in neighbouring countries – Pridnestrovyie, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and so on. In the 1990s the NBP sought notoriety on the 'red-brown' demonstrations: its

members dressed in black, carried flags displaying the hammer and sickle on a white circle and red background and shouted 'Stalin! Beria! Gulag!' Limonov advocated a 'Serbian solution' to attacks on Russia's statehood. During the war in former Yugoslavia he befriended the Bosnian Serb war criminal Radovan Karadzic, and was filmed firing a sniper rifle into Sarajevo, the Bosnian capital.⁴

Under Putin, the security forces have clamped down on the NBP. Limonov was jailed from 2001 to 2003, on charges arising from an article calling for an armed attack on Kazakhstan. The NBP organises stunt attacks on politicians and public buildings, and most of its 140-odd 'political prisoners' are participants who received heavy sentences. The courts have declared the NBP 'extremist' and therefore illegal. The NBP's status as a target of state repression, its violent nationalist rhetoric, and its leader's cynical punk prose, have given it a following among young people. The NBP's claim to reject 'any form of xenophobia, antisemitism and racial intolerance' contrasts sharply with the sympathy its officials show to racist gangs. In 2004, for example, after a spate of violent racist attacks in St Petersburg, a group of skinheads named Shultz-88 (the '8s' representing the 'h's in 'heil Hitler'), were tried for brutally assaulting Aram Gasparian, an Armenian. Nikolai Girenko, a prominent antifascist who appeared as a state prosecution witness, was later shot dead, and an extreme racist website claimed he had been 'executed'. But for *Limonka*, the NBP's national newspaper, the skinheads were the victims: it advised them that serving time for such a minor success as beating up Gasparian was a waste of nationalist resources. 'If it's terror, then do it seriously. Like Combat 18 in Great Britain [and other fascist paramilitaries] do', *Limonka* advised.⁵

The NBP's attitude to Nazism is equally generous. Photos of stormtroopers decorate the Khabarovsk branch's website. In a cynical, ironic message to followers in April 1999, Limonov noted the birthdays of Lenin and Hitler, the latter being 'the most mysterious and intriguing of historical figures'. 'Stand equal with great people [such as Hitler]. Don't be small', he wrote. Another article ruminated that 'everyone' in Russia 'needs fascism'.⁶ All this would be so much raving from an egotistical eccentric, were it not for the alliance built since 2005 between Limonov and some of Russia's leading right-wing liberals, who perhaps take Limonov more seriously than he takes himself. In 2007 he became a leader, together with liberal politician and former chess champion Garry Kasparov, of the Other Russia opposition movement.

Kasparov's alliance with Limonov epitomises the right-wing

liberals' failure to mount any effective challenge to Putin. The Other Russia was formed in the run-up to the 2007 parliamentary elections, and the heavy police intimidation of the 'Dissenters' Marches' that it organised highlighted state intolerance for public opposition. But Kasparov's project only came to the foreground – and gained an inordinate amount of attention from western journalists – after repeated setbacks for the two established right-wing liberal parties, Yabloko and the Union of Right Forces. Both campaigned strongly on political and media freedom, and both linked these issues to 'economic freedom'. The Union of Right Forces advocates free market and in some cases extreme neoliberal economic policies, while the Yabloko leader Grigory Yavlinsky has taken a social democratic line on economic issues under Putin. The liberal parties' failure to enter Parliament in 2003 and 2007 was mentioned in Chapter 6.

Russia has a small but vigorous antinationalist left, consisting of socialist, Trotskyist, anarchist and 'new left' groups and networks. This left has no national leadership, which some of its participants regard as a virtue, and little national coordination – although since 2005 'social forums', inspired by similar events in the west, have been held. Its strength is its geographically and politically diverse collection of activists, and the wide variety of local campaigns in which it collaborates with trade unions, anti-fascist groups and community movements. In the early 2000s, some sections of the extraparliamentary left campaigned consistently against the war in Chechnya, working closely with human rights activists and leaders of Chechen communities. Although only small numbers were involved, such action demonstrated the possibility of political opposition free of the nationalism that corrodes much of Russia's so-called 'left'.

MOVEMENTS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE ENVIRONMENT, AND OTHER NGOS

Russia's human rights movement, like its political opposition, bears the stamp of the recent Soviet past. In the 1960s, when civil rights movements of blacks in the US southern states and Catholics in Northern Ireland were at their peak, the USSR's human rights movement comprised minute groups of students and intellectuals, for whom the potential cost of each demonstration organised or bulletin distributed was years in a penal colony. For example six

people who protested in Red Square against the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 were arrested after five minutes, and sentenced to between two and four years in prison or exile. So 1986–88 was a historical turning point: almost all Soviet restrictions on the rights of free speech, assembly and movement were lifted. Political exiles, most notably the physicist Andrei Sakharov, returned home. After years of trying to carve out space for legal, civil, political, industrial and social rights in the Soviet system, the human rights defenders (*pravozashchitniki*) could suddenly work openly.

The early Yeltsin years split the *pravozashchitniki*. Some prominent figures moved into politics. For example Lev Ponomarev and Sergei Kovalev became leading 'democratic' parliamentarians, continuing to support Yeltsin even when he ordered the shelling of Parliament in October 1993, although not for long afterwards. Others kept a sceptical distance. The first Chechen war in 1995–96, and the accompanying onslaught on human rights, was a watershed. Yeltsin had 'crossed a Rubicon that will turn Russia back into a police state', Yelena Bonner, Sakharov's widow, declared. After opposing the war, Kovalev was sacked by parliament as Russia's human rights ombudsman. Yeltsin turned on him and shut down a presidential human rights commission he headed. The Chechen tragedy also brought back into the limelight the soldiers' mothers' movement, one of the most high-profile human rights groups of the Gorbachev period, formed by mothers searching for their sons, or the corpses of their sons, who had been conscripted and sent to fight, first in Afghanistan, then in Chechnya.

History has given the very concept of 'human rights' a wider meaning in Russia than it generally has in the west. Here, most people understand by it political and civil rights – freedom of speech and assembly, the right to equality before the law, and so on – whereas the Russian *pravozashchitniki* assume a much closer link between these rights and economic, social and cultural rights, such as rights at work and in the field of housing, health and education.* This is probably partly a legacy of Soviet times, when ordinary

* The background to the narrower meaning sometimes given to the term 'human rights' in the west is a dispute that erupted, after the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, over how these rights would be written into binding covenants. The controversy was aggravated by the cold war. The western powers, in opposition to the Soviet bloc, insisted that political and civil rights be treated separately from social and economic rights.

people who stood up for economic and social rights had to cross swords with local bureaucrats and – in the absence of effective trade unions or NGOs – might come straight into conflict with the state.⁷

Three main types of human rights organisation have been active in Putin's Russia: campaigners such as the Helsinki group, Memorial and others who focus primarily on research, and those such as Public Verdict who provide legal support to victims of abuses. They work within a much broader spectrum of national NGOs campaigning on social, cultural and political issues, and of local community groups taking up causes from housing rights to the rights of small investors cheated by financial fraud. (An example of NGO activity at the grassroots is given in the box starting on page 158.) The *pravozashchitnik* Liudmila Alekseeva – who became active during the post-Stalin 'thaw' of the late 1950s, emigrated in 1977, and returned to Russia in 1993 – explained in an interview that the older groups focusing on political and civil rights issues have become providers of advice, campaigning support and contacts for the wider movement:

In Russia, civil and political rights exist in the constitution – but in life, the state does not observe them.... We have to conquer, to win, every right – be it on housing, on allotment gardens, or whatever – in a fight. Quite often, we have to resist encroachments on our social rights through the courts. And quite often we see decisions there in favour of the rich and powerful. Then we go to the media, we go out and demonstrate.... Our understanding of the concept of human rights is wider than in the west ... because our rights, even the most elementary ones, are not observed by the authorities. The laws are not observed.⁸

Environmentalism has produced another army of campaigners. Groups who took up issues such as industrial pollution were among the first to start legal activity under Gorbachev. The Chernobyl disaster of April 1986, when a nuclear reactor in north-west Ukraine exploded, provided a shocking impetus. Much like the human rights campaigners, Soviet-era environmentalists persisted through the 1990s and became the inspiration for a new generation of activists under Putin. Campaigners who focused on the dangers posed by Russia's decrepit nuclear fleet confronted a culture of military secrecy. Aleksandr Nikitin, a former naval safety inspector

who contributed to a report by a Norwegian environmental group on Russia's northern fleet, was charged with treason, tried twice, and jailed for long periods, before being acquitted in 2000. Grigory Pasko, a Vladivostok-based journalist who reported the dumping of nuclear waste at sea, spent 33 months in jail from 1999 to 2003 on treason and other charges. Another focus of environmental campaigning has been the defence from pollution of Lake Baikal in eastern Siberia, the world's oldest and deepest freshwater lake. The Baikal Environmental Wave campaign group, set up in 1990 to protest at a paper mill that polluted the lake, in 2006 won a government decision to reroute the East Siberia–Pacific oil pipeline away from the lake's watershed, and in 2009 was mobilising against plans to build a uranium waste dump in nearby Angarsk.⁹

The making of a human rights defender

It was Larisa Fefilova's love and loyalty to her husband Sergei that set her on the path to becoming a *pravozashchitnik*. In March 2005, Sergei was arrested and charged with the murder of Artem Galtsin, son of the regional leader of Putin's United Russia party in Udmurtiya in the Urals.

Police investigating the murder picked up Sergei in a street sweep and terrified him into signing a confession – later withdrawn – that he killed Galtsin with a penknife. In court, Sergei's lawyers pointed out that Galtsin died from a blow to the head with a ribbed instrument, and not a penknife, and that at the time of the killing Sergei had broken his right arm and it was in a cast. But the court was convinced by forensic evidence that Sergei insists was fabricated (a drop of blood on his coat, which police had failed to keep separate from the victim's clothing) and noncredible witnesses (prisoners who claimed Sergei had confessed the murder to them). In December 2005 Sergei was sent down for twelve years.

Larisa, an accountancy clerk with no legal or campaigning experience, swung into action. She brought a case against officers who had allegedly beaten Sergei during questioning, and challenged the court's refusal to hear it. She began to collect evidence for an appeal, and she approached Andrei Galtsin, the victim's father and a powerful local politician. But her attention also turned to the dreadful conditions under which Sergei was imprisoned, first in Udmurtiya's notorious prison no. 1 at Yagul, and after the trial at a prison colony

in Mordovia. 'I am extremely worried about Sergei's health', Larisa told me in October 2007. 'He is 20 kilogrammes lighter and has a serious problem with his kidneys. They have failed to treat him correctly and he is being held in a punishment cell.'

On the bus to Yagul for visits, Larisa heard horror stories about its reputation for torture and ill treatment from the mothers, wives and sisters of other prisoners. She formed a local Civil Committee for Prisoners' Defence, to correspond with prisoners and monitor local penal institutions. It linked up with the Moscow-based 'Defend Prisoners Rights' Fund headed by Lev Ponomarev.

In June 2006, the Yagul prison administration faced a serious challenge from the *pravozashchitniki*. Another Moscow-based group, Defend Human Rights, had received letters from prisoners alleging inhumane treatment, and won a decision from the Udmurtiya prosecutor giving access to Yagul for a lawyer, Dzhemal Kaloyan, to investigate. Kaloyan published details of tortures ordered by prison governor Sergei Avramenko and often carried out in his presence. Prisoners were regularly beaten; instructed to squat or do press-ups, and beaten for refusing; and allowed out of their cells only to jog, and beaten if they stopped. Humiliating punishments including being stripped and being ordered to lick the floor. A large number of prisoners had tried to commit suicide, or harmed themselves (for example, by swallowing nails) in attempts to get transferred to prison hospital, from where protests could be posted. Prisoners' belongings were regularly destroyed. Those found smoking were punished by having their cells flooded; in one case they had to live for a week in 5 centimetres of water.

The prison administration launched a counter-attack. Governor Avramenko claimed the report had been inspired by 'criminal structures', to 'destabilise the [prison] regime'. Russia's human rights ombudsman, Vladimir Lukin, sent a representative to Yagul. He wrote to Udmurtiya's prosecutor, stating that the 'special measures' against prisoners were justified, but expressing concern at the number of attempted suicides and the practice of keeping prisoners handcuffed for long periods. He urged the prosecutor to follow personally the cases of those who complained.

Larisa Fefilova and her fellow *pravozashchitniki* tried to arrange to visit Yagul to provide free legal advice, as provided

for by law. They were stymied, and when they arranged a public protest against this illegal obstruction, local authorities obstructed that too. As this book goes to press, Sergei remains imprisoned and in poor health.

Yagul is part of one of the largest prison systems in the world. Russia is second only to the United States in terms of prisoners per head of population; in November 2008, there were 893,700 detainees. The levels of tuberculosis, HIV, hepatitis and other infections are high. In the early 2000s, NGOs monitoring the prison service noted improvements: amnesties shortened many inmates' sentences and increased funding enabled prison governors to improve conditions. In 2004 the Helsinki Federation completed the first comprehensive survey of the system. More recently, the situation has deteriorated. At a meeting between Putin and a group of *pravozashchitniki* in January 2007, Valery Borshchev, an official in Lukin's office, said the prison system had 'become closed off'; cooperation between prison officials and *pravozashchitniki* was 'being deliberately destroyed'. Borshchev highlighted two problems at the Lgov penal colony in Kursk, where several hundred prisoners slashed their veins in a protest: prisoners were pressured not to send protest letters, or the letters were stolen, and 'discipline and order brigades' of trusty prisoners had been formed to administer beatings together with prison guards.¹⁰

WHAT ABOUT THE WORKERS?

The Russian workers' movement is gradually being reborn. It sprang into life in 1989, when striking miners rediscovered the power of grassroots organisation and its political potential. But their movement was too new, and its links with other workers too feeble, for it to withstand the trials of 'shock therapy' and the post-Soviet slump. There was an upsurge of rank and file organisation in the early 1990s. But as the decade wore on, and the nonpayments epidemic grew, demoralisation and desperation spread. Workers were more likely to be blocking roads to demand months' or even years' worth of unpaid wages than to be seeking improvements or pursuing political demands. The post-1998 economic recovery began to open a new chapter. As old economic sectors revived and new ones appeared, industrial disputes began more and more to resemble those in other capitalist countries. There was a rich-

looking pie, and workers wanted a bigger share of it. A new generation of activists, most of whom started their working lives in the post-Soviet period, began to breathe life into independent union organisations, and challenged the collaborationist policies of the largest union federation.

Workers' Organisation and the Unions

The damaging legacy of Soviet repression weighed on trade unions perhaps more heavily than any other social organisations. The Soviet dictatorship, exercised in the name of 'socialism' in a fast-industrialising society, was concentrated in workplaces. Readers need to bear in mind the differences between the Soviet trade unions and those in western Europe or the United Kingdom. The Soviet unions were able more effectively to collaborate with the bosses in disciplining workers, because the system was comprehensive. The union officials 'negotiated' with their management colleagues on the workers' behalf, but under precise guidelines set down in advance through Communist Party structures. They worked with managers to achieve production targets, and isolated, and helped to punish, workers who resisted. They administered benefits to working-class families, including holiday passes, access to supplies of cheap food and other consumer goods, and medical and welfare schemes. In the 1970s, as most Russian workers' living standards rose gradually, the trade unions in many respects played a benign and patriarchal role, as did the state itself. But no 'official' union representative ever dreamed of supporting or encouraging workers to take collective action in their own interests, or to place demands on management outside the narrow framework handed down from above. Nor did they protest at the savage repression of isolated workers' protests on one hand, or of attempts to set up independent unions on the other.

There were no collective workers' actions of any size in Russia between the general strike in Novocherkassk, southern Russia, over food price increases in 1962, which ended in a bloody massacre, and the introduction of reforms by Gorbachev in 1986. When Solidarnosc was founded in Poland, in 1980, Soviet workers knew nothing of it and went through no similar experience. So the miners' strikes that exploded against Gorbachev in the summer of 1989 had few traditions to look back on. Pit after pit joined the strike – which soon became national – in defiance of the 'official' Soviet union of coal industry employees. A further national strike in 1991

laid the foundations for large numbers of miners to quit the union and pledge allegiance to the independent mineworkers' union, the Soviet Union's first 'unofficial' union.¹¹

In the months leading up to the Soviet Union's collapse, the leaders of the independent mineworkers' union gave strong political support to Boris Yeltsin. The absurdity of this workers' vanguard being tied to his regime, which would soon prevail over such a terrible trashing of workers' living standards, is itself an indication of the confusion that prevailed as the workers' movement emerged from the Soviet 'workers' state'. David Mandel, the Canadian writer and activist, argued that most workers entered the post-Soviet period:

marked by the legacy of more than half a century of totalitarian oppression. This included traits such as unquestioning submission to authority, coupled with deep cynicism towards authority, lack of solidarity, weak self-confidence and a weakly developed sense of dignity.

The mobilisations under Gorbachev were too limited to have overcome these tendencies, which would be reinforced by the insecurity and demoralisation resulting from Yeltsin's 'shock therapy', Mandel wrote. Most Soviet workers 'remained wedded to values of social justice, egalitarianism and popular democracy' and the right-wing liberals' concept of economic freedom appeared to them 'a logical response to the oppressive bureaucratic regime'. Yeltsin's indoctrination on the virtues of the 'market economy' was facilitated by workers' 'atomisation and almost complete ignorance of capitalist reality (another legacy of the totalitarian system)'.¹²

The dislocation of the workforce, the break-up of communities, unemployment, poverty and nonpayment of wages under Yeltsin were hardly auspicious for the development of the workers' movement. There were strikes. In 1994, the miners, this time largely within the framework of the 'official' union, again took national action, against the late payment of wages. By 1996–97, teachers, hospital staff and other public service workers were striking regularly to demand payment of arrears. The tactic of blocking roads and railways became widespread; some local governments or employers, which had failed to pay wages because they were themselves chasing late payments, encouraged this. During Yevgeny Primakov's spell as prime minister in 1998–99, even the 'official' unions staged protests. But in terms of organisation and collective consciousness, Russian workers lagged behind.

The old 'official' Soviet unions reconstituted themselves in 1990 under the umbrella of the Federation of Independent Trades Unions of Russia (FITUR), and began to swap subservience to management and state in the name of 'socialism' for subservience in the name of 'social partnership'. In 1992–93 the leaders of FITUR formed an alliance with the Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs, the employers' lobbying organisation, that lasted through the Yeltsin period. Politically, they soon dropped any idea of forming a labour party and acted jointly with the employers' groups, ending up affiliated to Moscow mayor Yuri Luzhkov's Fatherland party. When that merged into Putin's United Russia in 2001, the FITUR affiliation passed to the latter.¹³ Most Russian trade union members, an estimated 28 million, are in traditional organisations linked to FITUR. A small minority, some hundreds of thousands, are in independent unions affiliated to smaller federations including the Confederation of Labour of Russia, the All-Russian Confederation of Labour, Defence (Zashchita) and Sotsprof.

As the economy began to recover in the 2000s, things changed for trade union activists. The improvement in most workers' living standards engendered confidence. In new economic sectors, such as consumer-oriented processing industries and IT, and in some older ones where production was now increasing again, the proportion of young workers – who had no personal recollection of the fear and subservience of the Soviet period – rose. They had no hesitation about organising to improve their wages and conditions. The number of strikes fell sharply as the late payment epidemic subsided, but where activists were at work, grassroots organisation was built, or rebuilt, and shopfloor militancy discovered or rediscovered.

The best indicator of the level of strike activity is the number of working days lost per year. The very sharp decline in working days lost during the 2000s is shown in Table 8.1. Readers should note that this only includes legal strikes – that is, those reported under procedures required by the labour code – and the real figures are higher.

Trade union activists I interviewed reckoned that the economic boom had created better conditions for organisation. Boris Kravchenko, chairman of the All-Russian Confederation of Labour, one of the independent union federations, said an upsurge of trade union activity was to be expected at times of economic growth:

There are many working people who now have something to lose, who have an improving standard of living. They

Table 8.1 Working days lost per year in legal strikes

1995	1,367,000
1996	4,009,400
1997	6,000,500
1998	2,881,500
1999	1,827,200
2000	236,400
2001	47,100
2002	29,100
2003	29,400
2004	210,900
2005	85,900
2006	9,800
2007	20,500

Source: Rosstat.

recognise their rights, they want to defend those rights, defend their jobs and defend that increase of their standard of living.

Consequently, there had been an increase in trade union activity by ‘fairly well qualified workers with good incomes’ in economically strong sectors.¹⁴

Kirill Buketov, a union activist since the late 1980s, and now the Moscow representative of the international food workers’ federation IUF, told me that union organisation had taken a qualitative step forward once the non-payment crisis was left behind and ‘real capitalism, with workers getting paid real wages’, arrived. Conditions began to change in the food processing sector straight after the 1998 devaluation, when both foreign and Russian capital began to invest heavily, starting with tobacco producers, breweries and confectionery makers:

Demand rose very quickly; suddenly all the factories were working three shifts; western companies that had previously imported products to Russia decided to produce them here, and began to invest. With this relative economic improvement, a new working class began to take shape, and a new working class consciousness. People could see: companies are coming here and making a nice profit, and they are not sharing it with

their employees. The employers' attitude to workers changed, too. They simply fired many older workers and took on younger people, often quite highly qualified. These younger people had no experience of working in the Soviet Union. They considered that their wage was their due, their share of the company's revenue. These were much better conditions for union organisation.

The French sociologist Carine Clément, who lives in Russia and works with the Institute for Collective Action, a group that monitors community and protest movements, also highlights the importance of the new, post-Soviet generation, who 'have less thoroughly taken on the ideal that the employer is a kind provider and the state is a caring father'. Her research showed that strikes are often initiated by 'young workers, usually highly qualified, who quite often have some contact with international colleagues, and a broad outlook on life'.¹⁵

For government and employers, the emergence of workplace relations more closely resembling those in other capitalist countries brought with it the need to constrain union organisation. Once Putin became president, he moved quickly to renew the 'social partnership', under which government, employers and workers would supposedly pull together for the economy's sake. Like similar agreements elsewhere, this became a framework within which union leaders have struck compromises with the employers, disciplined workforces, and discouraged rank and file organisation. The first fruit of the 'social partnership' was a new labour code, approved by parliament in 2001. Although it improved some safety and other workplace measures, strengthened the position of unions' workplace representatives and included provisions for managers who breached the code to be disciplined, it significantly undermined grassroots organisation. Legal strikes had now to be approved by a majority vote of a meeting attended by two-thirds of the labour force, or their representatives, rather than by union members; labour disputes committees were now to be appointed by management and workforce jointly, and in the absence of a joint negotiating body, the law gives sole negotiating rights to a majority organisation, so squeezing out independent unions in favour of FITUR affiliates. Collaborationist unions were strengthened, independent and grassroots organisation obstructed.¹⁶

Igor Shanin, secretary of FITUR, told me in an interview: 'The "social partnership" is a crucial instrument for protecting

workers' living standards. We will continue to press for improvements within that framework.' But when in 2005 FITUR representatives signed a tripartite General Agreement with the government and the employers' organisation, the one issue on which agreement could not be reached was the timetable for raising the minimum wage to the employed persons' subsistence level. In 2005 the minimum wage was 720 rubles (\$25) per month, less than a quarter of the employed person's subsistence level of 3,255 rubles (\$116) per month. FITUR laid out a timetable to bring the minimum wage to 2,500 rubles per month in 2007 and up to the employed person's subsistence level by 2008 – but the government agreed only to guarantee 1,100 rubles (\$39) a month. At the FITUR congress in 2006, Mikhail Tarasenko, president of the miners and metalworkers union, said that the time for 'playing at social partnership' was past. The unions had never been extremist, he pointed out, and had always accepted that 'before dividing the pie, it needs to be baked. But now the pie is baked, and needs to be divided justly.' Putin was in attendance, and denounced Tarasenko's suggestion as 'premature and harmful'.¹⁷

The struggle over how to divide the pie continues, and the minimum wage continues to lag behind the employed person's subsistence level. In June 2008, with the employed person's subsistence level at 5,024 rubles (\$180) per month and rising, the government conceded that from January 2009 the minimum wage would reach 4,330 rubles (\$154) a month – a concession, for sure, but one that will still leave millions of Russian workers and their families in dire poverty.¹⁸ Meanwhile a small but determined contingent of trade unionists were taking the battle to divide the pie to their employers by more direct means.

The Strikes of 2007–08

Workers at the Ford factory at Vsevolozhsk near St Petersburg took the lead in realising the potential of industrial militancy. The factory was at the forefront of Russia's car manufacturing boom, churning out the Focus model for the domestic market. Production started in 2002, and from 2005 rose rapidly, reaching 72,000 cars a year in 2007. The workers soon began to demand their share of the factory's handsome profit margin. In late 2005, they responded to plans to raise output by demanding a 30 per cent wage increase and an improved bonus system. A one-week sitdown strike in November that year reduced production by a quarter, but management offered

only a 12 per cent increase (compared with 18.5 per cent inflation). The dispute dragged on until March 2006, and ended with the offer of a 16 per cent rise and improvements to the bonus system. But this was just the start. Furious that the FITUR-affiliated auto workers' union had failed to support them, the workers collectively withdrew from it, and with activists at the nearby Caterpillar factory, initiated moves to form an independent car workers' union.

Demand for cars, and production, was still rising. So the Ford factory committee in late 2006 put new demands: for a 30 per cent wage increase (against slightly slower inflation of about 10 per cent), extra long-service payments, maternity and paternity pay, premiums for children's education, and a 7 per cent supplement and 12 extra days' holiday to compensate for arduous conditions for paint shop staff and welders. In February 2007, a mass meeting voted about 1,300 against six to strike, the factory was brought to a standstill for a day, and management caved in to nearly all the demands except on wages, which were increased by 14–20 per cent.

Round three of the dispute came in November 2007. After an intense round of mass meetings and leafleting, the factory committee demanded a 30 per cent wage rise plus other improvements. Again management refused. A one-day warning strike was staged on 7 November. Managers secured a court order postponing further action for two weeks, but to no avail. When the plant's director appealed to a mass meeting, most of the workers got up and walked out. From 20 November the workers went on all-out strike, which ended, with an agreement to continue pay negotiations, on 17 December. In February 2008 wage rises of 16–21 per cent were agreed.¹⁹

The Ford strikes were unprecedented, in several respects. First, they were offensive actions. Whereas long-drawn-out strikes in the 1990s had essentially been 'hungry revolts', this was a 'struggle for the redivision of profits', as the socialist writer Boris Kagarlitsky observed. The Ford workers were already earning above-average wages, and were driven on in the first place by their knowledge of the sumptuous profits being made in the auto boom. In this sense their action was reminiscent of wages militancy in the British car industry in the 1970s: the more cars the companies needed, the more demands the highly skilled and best-paid workers placed on them. The Ford Vsevolozhsk factory committee chairman and strike leader Aleksei Etmanov explained: 'The factory is exploiting us effectively, but forgetting to increase wages effectively. The capitalist's profit rises, the worker's health is getting ruined.' Andrei

Liapin, Etmanov's counterpart on the factory committee of the GM-Avtovaz joint venture in Togliatti, said that the 'motor boom', with a six-month queue for popular models of cars, had attracted an unprecedented level of foreign investment. 'Besides fantastic demand and consumers who are not over-spoiled, Russia has an abundance of unexpectedly cheap but well-trained labour.'²⁰

A second notable feature of the Ford disputes is that the workers were confident enough to proceed in defiance of those labour code provisions that encroached on the right to take collective action, and to break their ties with the collaborationist FITUR. The Ford workers more easily found the road towards independent union organisation because the Vsevolozhsk plant, having started up in 2002, had no traditional union, Petr Zolotarev, leader of the independent union at Avtovaz, Unity, told me in an interview. When the Ford workers called for the formation of an independent union covering the whole auto industry, Unity was one of the first factory organisations to declare support. Factory committees at GM-Avtovaz, the Renault-owned Avtoframos works and the Nokian tyre factory followed suit. In August 2007, the Interregional Union of Auto Industry Workers, as the new grouping was known, met in Moscow and initiated a campaign to raise wages industry-wide.²¹

The events at Ford were at the centre of a wider movement of wages disputes on one hand and a resurgence of independent union organisation on the other. In March 2007, straight after Ford's well-publicised retreat before its workers' offensive, new trade unions were formed at nearby workplaces including a tea-packing plant – Nevskie porogi. The Sotsprof independent union at Heineken's brewery in the city advanced its own 30 per cent wage demand, like Ford, and backed it up with a work to rule. There was some renewed trade union activity in the oil industry, where harsh conditions and geographical distance have made organisation notoriously difficult. A series of protest rallies in October 2006 in the west Siberian oil field, at which independent unions mounted demands for higher wages and improvements to health and safety regimes, led to the formation of an activists' network. There were significant disputes at the Kachkanarsky iron ore mining complex and on the railways. The increased level of strike activity continued into 2008.

Another indicator of the new workers' movement's impact on its enemies is the rising level of intimidation and violence faced by union activists. Apart from the ubiquitous threat of the sack, trade union activists often face beatings, threats and police harassment.

Etmanov, the Ford Vsevolozhsk strike leader, was twice attacked with guns and metal bars. In December 2008, Valentin Urusov, who recruited 1,000 diamond miners at the state-controlled Alrosa company in Yakutia, east Siberia, to an independent union, was sentenced to six years in a labour camp for possession of drugs. Urusov's colleagues insisted he had been framed, and launched an international campaign in his defence. He was released on appeal in May 2009, but jailed again at a further hearing in Yakutia a month later. The campaign continues.²²

'Where capital goes, conflict goes', Beverly Silver, the historian of international labour, wrote.²³ As capital flew out of Russia in the 1990s, trade unionists, often demoralised or desperate, fought mostly defensive, rearguard actions. In the one-sided boom of the 2000s, labour began to recover confidence. Conflict broke out at Ford, one of the points of entry of foreign capital, in part because FITUR's writ didn't run there and there was no subservient trade union organisation that could discipline the workforce. Strike action by workers at Avtovaz in Togliatti (see box), whose gigantic factory is run by members of Putin's government team, was partly inspired by the Ford strikes. It was successful in bringing wages demand into sharper focus, but did not produce a management climbdown such as that at Ford. Petr Zolotarev, the leader of the independent union at Avtovaz, put it this way:

Yes, there are grounds to talk about a renaissance of trade union activity. There are changes. But let's be careful: many of these changes are episodic, some of the attempts to set up trade union organisation are quite modest. But the movement is in that direction. It's related to the improvement of economic situation. People feel it's possible to do something. And there are difficulties. The government obstructs the establishment of free trade unions, and prefers to deal with the old FITUR-affiliated unions. That is clear from the wording of the labour code and from the discrimination practised against independent union members.

The Avtovaz workers' battle

No one has felt the Putin government's hostility to trade union organisation more keenly than the car workers at Avtovaz in Togliatti. A protest campaign against poverty-level wages in

mid-2007 faced tough repressive action by a new management team put in place by the state corporation Rosoboroneksport.

Avtovaz has long been a front line in the battle between capital and labour. It is the largest car factory in the world, with more than 100,000 employees, and four assembly lines, three of which are more than 2 km long, producing the archetypal Soviet car, the Lada. The plant completely dominates Togliatti's economy. Management and local politicians are as close now as they were in Soviet times. Avtovaz's first strike took place in 1989, when 20,000 workers walked out, demanding a substantial all-round pay increase, supplements for some grades, and indexation. Most Avtovaz workers belonged then, as they do now, to the traditional auto workers' union, ASM – but the 1989 strike catalysed the formation of Unity, the independent union.

Avtovaz's trauma during the 1990s, at the hands of oligarchs and criminals, was referred to in Chapter 5. As car sales increased during the economic boom of the 2000s, the factory's fortunes improved – and workers began to resist management attempts to keep their share of that fortune to a minimum. In 2002, when the new Kalina model was launched, management decided to up the second shift on the third assembly line from eight hours to nine. The ASM consented, despite 90-odd brigade meetings voting against the change. Many workers walked off the job after eight hours before a campaign of intimidation and threats ended the protests. The 2003 collective agreement signalled the cancellation of free welfare benefits, such as medical, cultural and childcare services, and sparked a more widespread protest campaign, supported by Unity. But again ASM sanctioned the changes.

In 2005, Rosoboroneksport took a controlling stake in Avtovaz. A team of administrators arrived from Moscow, headed by Vladimir Artyakov, a member of Putin's circle who worked in the presidential administration in 1997–99 and served as general director of Rosoboroneksport from 2000 to 2005. Artyakov's mandate, apparently, was to bring the local political elite under control, choke off the remaining criminality at Avtovaz, and discipline the workforce. He has headed the Avtovaz board of directors since 2005, and in August 2007 was appointed governor of Samara region.

The new management in 2007 – with the car market

growing and inflation rampant – faced a challenge by assembly plant workers to humiliating pay levels. When I visited Togliatti in October 2007, activists showed me their pay slips: they were taking home around 7,000 rubles (\$250) a month, plus about 6,000 rubles (\$215) in bonuses. These were subsistence rates. A month's food and rent for an average Togliatti household cost 7,000 rubles. The assembly plant workers were mostly on low grades with little prospect of promotion; labour turnover was at an all-time high.

In March 2007, the pro-Kremlin United Russia party – supported publicly by the Avtovaz top management – fought, and won, the regional parliamentary elections on a slogan of raising wages to 25,000 rubles a month, and pensions to 10,000 rubles a month, by 2010. But, while a fleet of Land Cruisers was bought for the personal use of already highly paid managers, nothing was done to improve wages in the short term. Workers in one of the finishing shops, having lobbied their managers without success, started a work to rule on 9 July. Management had 'not learned to listen to workers', and pay rates 'didn't reflect any Russian or international principles', they complained in a collective letter to Artyakov. They demanded a threefold pay increase, to at least 25,000 rubles a month, and warned that they would strike if it was not granted. Word now spread around the plant and Artyakov received about 10,000 letters from individual workers to the same effect. He announced a 4.5 per cent across-the-board pay increase, so derisory that it just heightened the tension.

On 1 August a group of between 400 and 700 workers struck, stopping one of the main conveyor belts for five hours. A mass meeting on the same day attracted a much larger number, mostly women and young workers. Retribution was swift: the management, having refused to negotiate, now sacked two of the strikers and cut bonus payments to another 67. Later, Avtovaz management promised to index wages to inflation, but refused to raise basic rates.

The courts later refused to reinstate those dismissed, on the grounds that no strike had taken place. Unity announced it would support the victimised workers in challenging that decision, up to the Supreme Court if necessary. Twenty-year-old Anton Vechkunin, a Unity activist, had been arrested in the street before the strike and held for three days without charge. He told me in an interview that the police and factory security

guards had 'watched my every move' for several weeks. The officers who arrested him claimed that he had been detained for abusive and disorderly behaviour, a claim he dismissed as 'an insult'.

The strike starkly illuminated the difference between the traditional and independent unions. Nikolai Karagin, the ASM's factory committee chairman and an (unsuccessful) United Russia candidate in the March elections, told workers that stopping work would be illegal. After the strike, he approved the management's disciplinary measures. In an interview with a trade union newspaper, Karagin asserted that the strike would be 'treated not as a strike but as a refusal to work by individuals', and reiterated that he did not support the action.

Most strikers were ASM members, although some quit the union after its failure to back them. It was Unity that supported them, and arranged legal support for those victimised. When workers approached Petr Zolotarev, Unity's president, about their pay demands, he suggested they call on their union, the ASM, to sanction the strike. 'The ASM responded by promising to organise a factory delegates' conference, but this didn't happen', he told me. On the day of the strike, he met with pickets and addressed the mass meeting. 'Workers are often prepared to strike more readily than their trade unions, and that's what happened at Avtovaz', he recalled.²⁴