TITLE: The Russian Agrarian Union: Just Another Interest Group or the Village Coup Committee?

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The Russian Agrarian Union:  
Just Another Interest Group  
or the Village Coup Committee?

Don Van Atta

Executive Summary

On June 29, 1993, nearly 700 delegates to the Second Congress of the Agrarian Union of Russia met in the Hall of Columns of the House of Unions in Moscow to demand that the Yeltsin government restore central control of agriculture, increase financial subsidies, stop playing about with land reform, and allow the collective and state farms to get on with their business of producing food for the country unhindered by free-market prices and the need to pay back bank loans.

As detailed below, the Agrarian Union is far from speaking for "the agrarian sector" as a whole as it claims it does. The Russian countryside faces real, and very difficult problems, and solving those problems will continue to be very painful. Indeed, the most serious single problem, the need to close down the most marginal farms and basically reorient production on most others from attempts to produce a little bit of everything to what is most economically efficient, has not yet been seriously addressed by anyone, reformer or reactionary.

However, despite the countryside's natural conservatism and the relatively good showing of anti-Yeltsin forces in the referendum there, the Agrarian Union Congress is unlikely to produce an organization capable of giving its reactionary leadership the kind of effective base for counterrevolution they seem to have in mind. Russian society and government are far from stable, but the Agrarian Union, based on its most recent congress, is not capable of organizing a repeat of the events of August 1991, however much its chairman--August 1991 coup committee member Vasilii Starodubtsev, who, despite his signed parole not to leave his residence in Tula oblast', participated actively in the congress--may hope it can.

*Prepared by NCSEER staff.
On June 29, 1993, nearly 700 delegates to the Second Congress of the Agrarian Union of Russia met in the Hall of Columns of the House of Unions in Moscow—where Lenin’s body once lay in state and the purge trials of the 1930s condemned their victims—to demand that the Yeltsin government restore central control of agriculture, increase financial subsidies, stop playing about with land reform, and allow the collective and state farms to get on with their business of producing food for the country unhindered by free-market prices and the need to pay back bank loans.

August 1991 coup committee member Vasilii Starodubtsev, who, despite his signed parole not to leave his residence in Tula oblast’, was an active participant in preparations for the Congress in Moscow, opened the meeting to thunderous, if not general, applause.\(^1\) The ceremonial playing of the Russian national anthem, usually a standard beginning for such events, was met with the delegates’ opening, if not general, applause.

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\(^1\)For capsule biographies of Starodubtsev, see Don Van Atta, "Profile of Coup Leader Vasilii Starodubtsev," *Report on the USSR*, Vol. 3, No. 35 (August 30, 1991), pp. 3-5, and Ethel Dunn, "Why Did Vasilii Starodubtsev Join the August Coup?" *Research on Soviet and East European Agriculture* (December 1991). Starodubtsev was the first coup plotter let out of the "Matrosskaia tishina" investigative prison last summer, apparently as part of a governmental deal with the collective and state farm elite to keep them from withholding food from state procurement agencies at harvest time. Reportedly, he has already been warned twice about breaking the terms of his parole by traveling to Moscow.
gatherings, was notably missing. Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin, deputy prime minister for agriculture Aleksandr Zaveriukha, and Agriculture Minister Viktor Khlystun shared places of honor on the stage with Vice President Rutskoi, now the government's bitter enemy and declared opposition presidential candidate, National Salvation Front board member Mikhail Lapshin, former agricultural Minister Gennadii Kulik (fired by Yeltsin after the 1991 coup attempt) and Starodubtsev himself. After the lunch break, following a series of increasingly anti-government speeches by various provincial agricultural officials, neo-fascist leader Viktor Anpilov spoke. Somewhat later, vice-president Rutskoi effectively accused Yeltsin of betraying the village. In his late-afternoon speech to the gathering, a somewhat shell-shocked Chernomyrdin gave in very little, but promised to make the Agrarian Union's chairman a counselor to the President. Since those present reelected Starodubtsev to that post, a coup leader, technically still on trial for treason, wound up promised a job as advisor to the man he had tried to overthrow less than two years earlier.

The post-Soviet Russian government remains weak, inefficient, and riddled with corruption. But it certainly knew of Starodubtsev's activities, and the government leaders must have debated the wisdom of sharing the stage with such a motley assortment of their opponents. Their decision to allow the Agrarian Union congress to proceed as it did may be evidence of the growing strength and self-confidence of the reform current in Russian politics. Nor was the Agrarian Union itself as united as first impressions might have suggested. To see why, it is necessary to consider the origins of the Agrarian Union, the likely interests of most of its members, the central importance of the land issue in current politics in the Russian Federation, and the situation in the countryside.
The Agrarian Union

The enormous, centrally-controlled collective and state farms, enveloped by state-monopoly supply, processing and consumer sales organizations, were a fundamental part of the old Soviet command economy. In the 1970s and 1980s, the farms, never very efficient, became sinks for an increasing amount of investment. As Gorbachev's perestroika unfolded, demands to allow individuals to leave the farms and even to close down the least efficient ones entirely, began to be raised. A natural part of the change was the restructuring of existing rural organizations which had been "transmission belts" for regime policy, and the creation of entirely new institutions, to represent rural interests to the local and central authorities.

The first such rural organization to appear, the Association of Peasant Farms and Agricultural Cooperatives of Russia (AKKOR), organized in mid-1989, set itself the relatively narrow task of helping to create and representing a new class of individual private farmers. AKKOR could be organized only because one of its founders, Vladimir Bashmachnikov, used his position in the CPSU Central Committee apparatus to make local and regional officials think that the new group had "the center's" support. AKKOR had a major part in drafting the 1990 Russian land reform legislation, especially the Law on the Peasant Farm which allowed farmers to leave the kolkhozy and sovkhozy with a share of land and production equipment for the first time since collectivization.²

Since collectivization, the Soviet countryside has been ruled by farm managers, local agricultural bureaucrats, and party officials. United by common career patterns and all subject to party discipline and the common fear of collecting too many career-destroying "strict reprimands noted on one's party record," they were able to use the vast investments poured into the countryside during the Brezhnev era to strengthen their own positions. As the party weakened during perestroika, the natural conflict between farm managers and their local party bosses emerged. Farm chairmen, who had been dependent on the local and national party elite in order to develop their farms, threw off the party's guidance.

These shifting balances of power between the central and local authorities and within the rural elite itself were reflected in the growing self-confidence of the best farm managers, who became a distinct, vocal interest group, the "Agrarian Deputies," during the USSR Congresses of People's Deputies in 1989 and early 1990. Vasilii Starodubtsev emerged as the farm managers' leader. Starodubtsev, chairman of the "Lenin" kolkhoz and Novomoskovskii agroindustrial association in Tula oblast', had very nearly gone to jail under Brezhnev for doing the kinds of illegal things any farm manager had to do to make his farm work well. His brother Dmitrii, also a farm manager, actually did serve time in prison for similar offenses in the 1970s. By 1990, however, Starodubtsev had become the chairman of the Russian kolkhoz council, a "representative" body set up in 1970 to give managers of outstanding farms some small input in policy-making.

By mid-1990, the farm managers' lobby understood that it needed support outside of parliament. The kolkhoz council, by definition, united only collective farms, leaving out state farms and other agricultural institutions. The search for a broader forum capable, in
the eyes of the farm managers' lobby, of speaking for all agrarian interests, resulted in the creation of the Agrarian Union and its USSR equivalent, the Peasants' Union. Starodubtsev became chairman of both bodies. Starodubtsev defeated Ligachev in the election for the head of the Russian union, symbolizing the replacement of party apparatchiks by managers as the leaders of opposition to economic and political reform.

The Agrarian and Peasant Unions claimed the right to speak for all agriculturalists, whatever the form of farm or enterprise they might happen to work within. As the corporatist representative of all of agriculture, Starodubtsev even demanded (though he did not get) a seat on the CPSU Central Committee politburo. The Union also sought the right to approve all agricultural policy decisions before they were finalized by the party and state.¹

The USSR and Russian Unions were essentially top-down organizations. Although they claimed to have branches in each oblast' and most rural districts, those branches were often little more than phone numbers in the local agricultural administration office. However, so long as the basic structure of the old system remained in place, the farm managers needed little more, for the Union was intended to be little more than a fig leaf for their lobbying activities and the kolkhoz and sovkhoz elite already knew one another from hundreds of meetings, conferences, and legislative sessions—to which they were routinely

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elected by virtue of their positions as successful agricultural goods producers. Local agrarian union branches could hardly be bothered to legalize their organizations.4

The Peasant Union’s claim to represent all of agriculture, and Starodubtsev’s real belief that he did so, led him to join the August 1991 State Committee on the State of Emergency (GKChP) in its attempt to overthrow Gorbachev.5

The coup split the Agrarian Union. AKKOR, which had been an uneasy "collective member" of the Union, publicly resigned from it on August 19th. Since the Russian Agrarian Union had never been much more than a pale reflection of the USSR Peasants' Union, the dissolution of the USSR and the accompanying end of the Peasant Union, along with Starodubtsev’s arrest and imprisonment, effectively led to the Agrarian Union’s atrophy. Not all of the union’s regional affiliates had ever bothered even to become legal entities, and many of those that had disappeared during the year following the coup.

The "Corpus of Farm Directors"

Far from all farm chairmen and directors supported the coup, as successful farm manager Anatolii Aidak pointed out shortly afterwards.6 But many, perhaps most, of them did so both because they believed in the old system and because they knew that without state

4As a result, the Kurgan agrarian union delegates were denied a vote at the first Agrarian Union congress, however. Ivan Nikolaev, "7 direktorov i 1 fermer … poedut v Moskvu na s"ezd Agrarnogo soiuza Rossii," Kurgan ekspress (June 24, 1993), p. 1.

5Starodubtsev's own later statements have made quite clear that he knew what he was doing when he joined the GKChP. For an attempt to explain away his participation, however, see Vladimir Shvetsov, "Moi drug v GKChP: Kak popal v putchisty Vasilii Starodubtsev," Pravda (November 23, 1991), pp. 1, 3.

credits and administered delivery of production inputs—including the annual "voluntary" mobilization of urban labor to get in the harvest—most of their farms could not survive. Moreover, having just emerged from the shadow of party guidance, the farm managers were now able for the first time to use their positions to enrich themselves actively at the expense of their members, something many of them have had no qualms about doing. But unlike industrial enterprises, which are physical units difficult to break up and which require sophisticated technical management skills, the very large collective and state farms could be broken up into more efficient, smaller units—as many critics of the kolkhoz system both inside and outside the USSR had long argued could and should be done—and in that case managers’ power and their jobs would disappear. The managers are, by and large, well aware of these facts and have made appropriate preparations. For instance, Moscow-area kolkhoz chairman Lapshin, the head of the Agrarian Union parliamentary faction and the leading anti-agrarian reform spokesman after Starodubtsev himself, showed a visiting US Department of Agriculture delegation the land he would give himself if the kolkhozy were broken up in mid-1991. But the longer they can hold on to their jobs the more they stand to gain.

The managers’ lobby also understands that permitting free sales of agricultural land is the basic issue in agrarian reform. All Russian farmers, whether on large state and collective or small private farms, now get their financing, including production credit, directly or indirectly from the state budget. Although farmers can mortgage their equipment and buildings, they cannot, under the current Russian constitution, mortgage their most valuable asset, the land, to raise funds. The 1990 peasant farm law and a number of presidential
decrees have attempted to allow land mortgages, but because they contradict the constitution and almost all agricultural credit still derives ultimately from the state-owned Russian Agricultural Bank, few land mortgages have actually been written. But once the land can be freely mortgaged, rented and sold, many more farm members are likely to take their shares of kolkhoz land and leave, and private farmers will become a real threat to the dominance of the kolkhoz system. Since there are now some 250,000 officially registered private farms, and the Agrarian Union’s congress was told that kolkhozy and sovkhozy have already lost 20% of their total land to private farmers and individual plots, the secession of more people from the big farms fundamentally threatens the large farms’ existence and their managers’ power. (They are of course also correct in arguing that allowing free sale of land will mean the end of the Russian peasantry in its traditional form. But since, by the directors’ own admission, little remains of them anyway, and everywhere in the world the commoditization of land—though often with strict legal limits on its resale—has accompanied capitalist development and industrial modernization, the argument seems more self-serving or naively romantic than serious.)

The Directors and Reform

Since the coup, most serious political groups have been based on economic institutions. Arkadii Vol’sky’s Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs, the original base of the Civic Union, has been the best-known such group. The Civic Union, which includes almost no rural representatives, has maintained a somewhat uneasy coalition with the parliamentary "Agrarian Union" fraction, the largest organized body of deputies in the
chamber. (This "Agrarian Union" shares a common name and perspective with the extraparliamentary Union, but apparently has had no direct organizational ties to it because of the outside group's inactivity.)

Both bodies have agreed on opposition to reform and in demanding a restoration of state subsidies and state control of the economy, as well as opposing privatization by means of publicly traded vouchers. However, the Civic Union and the agrarians have differed on the issue of land sales. The structural differences between agricultural and industrial enterprises outlined above explain this difference. The industrial managers, by and large, do not oppose privatization if it is in their interests because they stand to benefit from legally taking over the plants they have practically run. (As one close advisor to Vice President Rutskoi bragged during a visit to the United States, the Civic Union is proud to be the party of "nomenklatura privatization."7) If the industrial managers can control and benefit from land sales, fine. The agrarians, however, stand to lose everything if their farms are broken up—jobs, power, and free access to their farms' resources. For them, land sales is the key issue. Thus the Civic Union parliamentary fraction adopted the Agrarians' opposition to land sales in order to cement their parliamentary majority. So also the parliament came to refuse any constitutional changes, resulting in the April 1993 referendum and the convening of the Constitutional Conference in order to get around parliamentary intransigence. So, also, Vice President Rutskoi, who, as he told the Agrarian Union Congress, was put in charge of agrarian reform by President Yeltsin in February 1992 in order that he should fail, found himself logically driven into the arms of the agrarians as he moved away from Yeltsin's

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7 Personal conversation.
positions. The logic of Rutskoi’s political trajectory worked itself out at the Agrarian Union Congress, where he came out against any reform which would threaten the existing kolkhozy and sovkhozy. He told his listeners that, having learned about the problems of agriculture first hand, no presidential directive could drive him away from his friends. Now, he declared grandly, "I will be with you till the end."

Given these political realities, the minimum program of the Congress’ organizers was clearly to create another institution which could be used to mobilize opposition to Yeltsin’s new constitution. The only change in the prepared agenda indicated this purpose: a request from the floor added discussion of a "peasant instruction" (krest’ianskii nakaz) to the Constitutional Conference opposing legalization of purchase and sale of agricultural land. The Agrarian Union’s council, a smaller body elected at the Congress, approved this instruction and forwarded it to the government on the day after the Congress.

The Congress’ Economic Demands

The first hours of the Congress were devoted to "educating the government" about the participants’ problems in hopes of government aid—a way of "letting off steam" common in such meetings in Russia and the former USSR. Leaving aside all high-level political gamesmanship, the speakers’ concerns, and their anger and anguish, are very real and very serious.

Russian agriculture is still operating under direct state administration. Production and investment credit comes only from the state. Only the "privatized" monopoly Roskhleboprodukt has significant grain handling, storage, and milling facilities. Although non-state
channels of input supply are developing, most farm inputs still must come from state or "private" monopolies.

Freeing of prices for industrial inputs has left the farms facing severe cash flow and overall income problems, as monopoly suppliers have raised prices while state controls on retail food prices have left farms increasingly cash-short. The government's inability to meet its own obligations, leaving promised credits and subsidies, and even debts for produce bought from the farms, unpaid for months at a time, have made the situation worse for all farms, large and small.

Many, perhaps most, primary equipment supply and repair enterprises, district slaughterhouses and milk plants, and similar enterprises have now been privatized. But, because of their parlous financial condition and the rules imposed by the State Committee on Property, farms have been unable to obtain controlling interests in the newly privatized processing industries in most areas. Yet, because of the way the rural infrastructure was designed, most areas have only one processing plant accessible, creating a "natural" monopoly to the farms' great disadvantage. (Most farms, and farmers, have responded by attempting to establish their own small processing plants, enterprises which are unlikely to be commercially viable in a market economy but which are absorbing large amounts of scarce construction materials and equipment.)

Collective and state farms still feel themselves responsible for the social and physical infrastructure in the countryside. Kolkhoz chairmen and farm directors assert that schools and hospitals are closing, roads are not being repaired, and pensioners are in danger of losing all social services. It is impossible to judge objectively how far this complaint is true,
but there is surely some justice to it, for local government outside of the farm management in most of the former USSR was effectively nonexistent. The rural soviets’ one real power has been to dispose of land, and complaints about the land reform process suggest they are not willing or efficient in using that right.

Speaker after speaker at the Agrarian Union congress complained about imports of foreign foodstuffs. In response, Chernomyrdin promised that grain imports--exclusive of corn--would be sharply reduced this year and cut almost to nothing in the following one. That promise has been made repeatedly by Soviet and Russian leaders with little effect as yet, but given Russia’s lack of hard currency to buy more farm products, it may come true. What no one at the congress mentioned, however, was that much of the imported grain is bought to feed unproductive livestock held in large, expensive, state and collective farm stock barns located in areas where local feed and forage, or even the transportation infrastructure to bring it in from outside, are woefully inadequate for the herd size maintained.

Parliamentary Agrarian Union chairman Lapshin, who complained especially loudly about the Russian government’s support of American and Western European farmers through foreign grain sales (actually, this year, it is American and Western European taxpayers who are paying for most of the grain sold to Russia), failed to mention that he has been loudly and repeatedly complaining about the threat of the country’s finding itself on a bread and water diet as a result of the fall in the number of livestock on the collective and state farms. Lapshin’s solution is to raise state grain prices and simultaneously to raise state subsidies to meat and milk producers to pay the higher grain prices--while, of course, maintaining state
subsidies on retail food prices because to do otherwise would be unfair and threaten food riots.

Most of the speakers clearly intended their litany of complaints to support arguments that state control of agriculture needs to be reimposed. In fact, one speaker argued, if the Ministry of Agriculture refused to administer agricultural production, then the Agrarian Union should take it on itself to do so. Japan, Germany and Finland were cited approvingly as models for Russian agriculture. The Congress’ draft resolution on the situation in agriculture boiled down to a demand for greater state appropriations for the farms, a demand constant throughout the 1980s.

Although many speakers complained that the government was incompetent, failing to carry out its promises to the agrarian sector, no speaker raised the question of whether or not the government actually had the resources to fulfill its own promises, let alone the demands from the Congress. Bashmachnikov, speaking for AKKOR, did suggest that there was no alternative to further marketization and reform. But he was nearly shouted down.

**Government Infighting**

The overall tone of the congress, and the delegates’ demonstrative reelection of Starodubtsev as the Union’s chairman, give some grounds to agree with one Russian newspaper correspondent’s comment at the session that the body represented little more than an attempt to create a "rural GKChP."

But more positive signs could be detected as well. All the speakers, including Starodubtsev, who admitted that the union had done nothing for a year and half while he for
"generally-known reasons" had been unable to lead it, grudgingly and mutely accepted that the market economy was there to stay. Beyond demands for more state aid, no speaker had any alternative to the government's program to offer, although Rutskoi bitterly criticized Chernomyrdin for failing to adopt the program that he, Rutskoi, had worked out.8

Chernomyrdin emphasized that the situation in agriculture had stabilized--things were no longer getting worse at an increasingly rapid rate. Criticizing Rutskoi for claiming that the country was in a "hypercrisis," Chernomyrdin cautioned him against sowing panic or loosing the real danger of hyperinflation, which, the prime minister said, was still being successfully avoided. The premier added that although Rutskoi's ideas had been understandable to the vice president "as a pilot, to me, as a manager [khoziaistvennik] they were not," and so the government rejected Rutskoi's program.9

Initial Media Reports

Initial media reports of the Congress made clear that the newspapers read events to suit their stands in the major political conflict between president and parliament. Russian TV's news apparently ignored the whole event--at least, I saw no coverage on the evening or

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9Since the fall of 1991, the Ministry of Agriculture and, during 1992 and early 1993, Rutskoi's now-disbanded Federal Center for Land and Agroindustrial Reform have tossed back and forth some thirty-odd drafts of an "agrarian reform program." I have read one version prepared by the ministry, which is a reasonable, if rough, policy directive, and one version prepared by Rutskoi's people, which amounted to little more than a laundry list of demands for state aid and a rough version of what a five-year plan must have looked like. The "program" debate continues.
late news the day of the Congress. The generally pro-Yeltsin Izvestiia, in its account of the meeting, completely ignored the considerable criticism and worse of government policy at the Congress, limiting its comments to emphasizing that even that body had accepted that economic and political reform was happening and could not be stopped.\textsuperscript{10}

The parliament’s newspaper, Rossiiskaia gazeta, tried to find a middle way between the clearly anti-democratic arguments of Starodubtsev and his supporters, who have no use for Yeltsin or the parliament, and supporting the President. The correspondent found it by supporting Rutskoi’s general position without giving the specifics of what he said in an impassioned speech that seemed to this observer to be the irritated comments of a very bitter man. The reporter ended by asserting American support for this position, claiming that “in their analytic reports the many American consultants who are plowing the limitless spaces of Russia are more and more frequently uttering sober sentences: 'Rapid creation of individual farms in Russia has not succeeded, the farmers don’t have any equipment. It is necessary to bet on high-tech socialized agriculture.’”\textsuperscript{11}

With the possible exception of Yuriii Chernichenko, the journalist and leader of the Peasants’ Party of Russia who is the favorite whipping boy of every opponent of agrarian reform, no Russian policy maker, farm organization leader, or farmer, nor any sober foreign observer, would disagree that rapid, complete decollectivization in Russia is unlikely and

\textsuperscript{10}Elena Yakovleva, "'Uveren, chto kollektivnye formy khoziaistovaniia mogut byt' effektivny i u nas, v Rossi"	extsuperscript{i}---napisal Boris El’tsin v privetstvennom obrashchenii k s"ezdu Agrarnogo soiuza Rossii," Izvestiia (June 30, 1993), p. 1.

probably undesirable. Whether the not the asserted conclusion follows, however, is less clear. The real issue seems rather to be how to ease the death agonies of the very large farms and soften their impact on the people who have spent their lives working in them.

Is the Agrarian Union a Viable Organization?

It is unclear who, if anyone, the Agrarian Union Congress really represented. Only some sixteen provincial agrarian union affiliates were legally registered and so able to hold local meetings which might be argued to have produced delegates able to speak for anyone besides themselves. Another fifty-five regions sent representatives, but they were effectively self-appointed or at best selected by rump meetings called hastily by local agricultural officials just before the congress. AKKOR had been offered thirty percent of the delegates’ mandates, and a good many representatives of private farmers did attend, although there were many complaints that delegates selected by regional farmers’ associations were denied credentials by local agrarian union committees and other cases where delegates were not aware they had been selected until they had arrived in Moscow. (AKKOR had its own council meeting the day before the Congress, so many private farm activists were in the capital for both meetings.)

Observations from the balcony suggested that although the delegates loudly approved of Starodubtsev and the more inflammatory and reactionary passages in Anpilov’s and Rutskoi’s speeches, a large minority, perhaps as many as half, of those attending sat on their hands at those moments.
Farmers still produce relatively little of the country's overall produce, although they have made rapid gains and many private farms that succeeded in getting established during the first wave of reform in 1990 seem to outproduce the local big farms by a solid margin. Given common economic problems, the AKKOR delegates did not want to leave the meeting and open themselves to local abuse for "breaking our common front." But they had come prepared to leave again if the meeting turned too sharply against the government (the farmers' association had voted the day before to join the pro-Yeltsin election bloc in the forthcoming elections), and apparently at least one delegation, from Krasnodar krai, the country's single most important farming province, would have followed the private farmers out.

All of these things suggest that the Agrarian Union is far from speaking for "the agrarian sector" as a whole as it claims it does. The Russian countryside faces real, and very difficult problems, and solving those problems will continue to be very painful. Indeed, the most serious single problem, the need to close down the most marginal farms and basically reorient production on most others from attempts to produce a little bit of everything to what is most economically efficient, has not yet been seriously addressed by anyone, reformer or reactionary.

However, despite the countryside's natural conservatism and the relatively good showing of anti-Yeltsin forces in the referendum there, the Agrarian Union Congress is unlikely to produce an organization capable of giving its reactionary leadership the kind of effective base for counterrevolution they seem to have in mind. Russian society and government are far from stable, but the Agrarian Union, based on its most recent congress,
is not capable of organizing a repeat of the events of August 1991, however much its chairman may hope it can.