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THE STATUS OF RUSSIA'S TRADE UNIONS
Linda J. Cook
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ABSTRACT

The present report is based on interviews recently conducted in Moscow, and elucidates the structures and policies of Russia's trade unions as well as their relations with government and political parties. The FNPR, the reformed official union, maintains a near-monopoly in most sectors because it controls distribution of social security funds and other benefits and has a well-entrenched apparatus. However, the FNPR presently confronts multiple challenges, including loss of members, threats to its property and distributive role, and internal splits. New independent unions are strong in only a few sectors, but rank-and-file organizing initiatives in enterprises are reportedly widespread. American organizations can usefully aid the development of independent unions, but should not support efforts to undermine the FNPR while the independents remain weak.

Unions have some influence on policy-making through both the executive's Tripartite Commission and representation on Supreme Soviet commissions. The centrist Civic Union, the liberal Social Democrats, and the leftist Party of Labor each has ties to unions and claims to represent labor's interests. All three parties are weak and internally divided, and have very small demonstrated constituencies among workers.
THE STATUS OF RUSSIA'S TRADE UNIONS

This report is based on a series of sixteen interviews with Russian trade union officials, labor experts, Supreme Soviet deputies, and representatives of political parties, conducted in Moscow from May 21 to June 9, 1993. (See attached appendix.) The interviews were designed to elucidate the structures and policies of the unions and their connections to both government and political parties. The major findings and conclusions are presented below.

Structure of the Unions. The Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia (FNPR), reformed successor of the official Communist-era union, continues to dominate, with a claimed 60 million members in a total employed labor force of roughly 73 million. The FNPR inherited the old union's country-wide apparatus, property (including offices, rest homes and vacation facilities), monopolistic role as distributor of social security funds, and bureaucratic leadership style. Members stay because the union provides access to these benefits, because its officials reportedly threaten defectors with loss of benefits, and often because of inertia or the absence of alternative unions. However, the FNPR's authority and legitimacy among its membership are weak. At the same time, the union is deeply-entrenched in most enterprises and has had a close, subordinate working relationship with management. Its basic policy is to defend jobs and real incomes against economic reforms, mainly by pressing for industrial subsidies, wage increases and income indexing. While not rejecting privatization in principle, it opposes the Yeltsin government's policies in this area.

New independent unions have been organizing on the basis of rank-and-file activism since 1989, but remain weak overall. A complete list would include scores of organizations, mostly small locals or ephemeral confederations, ranging from private-sector to anarcho-syndicalist. Four are well-established: the Association of Social Trade Unions (Sotsprof), the Independent Miners' Union (NPG), and the Air Traffic Controllers' and Civil Aviation Pilots' Unions. All four are more-or-less pro-reform:
Sotsprof and the NPG are seen as supporters of Yeltsin's government. Sotsprof has affiliates in many sectors, mostly small break-away unions: it plays the critical role of registering self-organized groups of workers as legal unions. The organizing successes of miners, pilots, and controllers is probably explained by their high educational levels and capacity to earn hard currency. The four together organize fewer than half a million members, though their influence extends well beyond their ranks. They suffer from internal conflicts and corruption scandals, a perception that they are too politicized, and free-rider problems.

In most sectors independent organizing is confined to local initiatives which are, however, reportedly widespread. New unions have the right to organize but face a daunting range of obstacles: would-be members fear not only loss of benefits but discrimination in wages and job assignments by pro-FNPR administrators; emergent leaders have little organizing experience and few resources; levels of activism among workers are low. The FNPR's advantaged position is, however, now subject to several challenges.

**Challenges to the FNPR's Dominance.** Both Yeltsin's government and the independents have raised serious threats to the FNPR’s property ownership and control over social security funds. The government has proposed nationalizing the union’s property, and independents have asserted their right to a portion of it, though so far neither has carried through. Reform of the social security system has also been a prominent issue for both government and legislature, with proposals to either turn the system over to the state or give independents the right to administer benefits for their members. The FNPR, with the help of its supporters in the Supreme Soviet, has so far managed to fend off this threat with a concession only to the NPG, which now controls its own fund. However, the issue is still being actively debated.

In October, 1992, the Trade Union of the Mining and Metallurgical Industry, with more than 2 million members, became the first branch union to split from the FNPR.
The union left in order to support Gaidar's reform program against the FNPR leadership. Mining and metallurgy workers reasoned that many of their enterprises were potentially profitable, so could benefit from privatization and other reform policies: they also wanted more control over the social security funds of their comparatively rich branch, and more autonomy. There are other divisions within the Federation: oil and gas unions support reform and act independently without formally leaving the FNPR; splits with transport unions are emerging; the large Moscow branch presses for more militantly anti-reform positions.

Finally, the FNPR's alliance with management seems to be weakening. Managers not only belong to the union, but until recently shared its interest in defending enterprises against reform pressures. The two often cooperated in pressing the state for credits and permissions, even in organizing strike threats. Now, however, increasing numbers of managers reportedly favor privatization of their enterprises, and most find it easier to work with Chernomyrdin's government than with Gaidar's. They thus have less need to cooperate with Federation unions.

Unions, Government, and Political Parties

Unions and government formally cooperate in the Tripartite Commission on the Regulation of Social and Labor Relations. Of labor's 14 seats on the Commission, in 1992 the FNPR got 9 while the other 5 were distributed among the independents; thus Yeltsin's government recognized the FNPR as the main bargaining agent for Russian labor. The Commission played a significant role in resolving industrial conflicts and as a forum for discussion, but its efforts at policy-making were conflictual and generally ineffective. It was nevertheless reconstituted for 1993, after much conflict among the unions, with 13 seats going to the FNPR. Exclusion of most independents resulted mainly from the government's incompetence or indifference, and produced a sense of betrayal on the part of these generally pro-reform, pro-Yeltsin unions.
The unions are also consulted regularly in the Supreme Soviet, where most working groups and commissions include their representatives. The FNPR especially has a sympathetic hearing in the Commission on Social Policy, which deals with legislation on the minimum wage, pensions, income indexing, and social security, and has exerted a steady upward pressure on nominal wages. Issues of unions' rights and functions are more conflictual because of divisions between the FNPR and the independents, who seek to break the old union's near-monopoly through legislative measures.

The unions also have ties to political parties, including the Social Democratic Party of Russia (SDPR), the Civic Union (GC), and the Party of Labor. The SDPR has links mainly with the independent unions, especially Sotsprof. The GC, a centrist bloc strongly influenced by state enterprise managers, has a formal agreement on cooperation with the FNPR. The independent leftist Party of Labor is supported by the FNPR's Moscow Federation and some additional branch unions. (There are also a number of small far-left party-unions.)

Each of these three parties claims to represent labor's interests and has electoral aspirations, but all suffer from weakness and internal divisions. The SDPR is small, mainly white-collar, heavily factionalized, and about to split; it cannot present a coherent economic program. The Civic Union was held together by opposition to Gaidar's policies; it is also splitting and losing one of its three constituent parties, the Democratic Party of Russia. The Party of Labor comprises a very small group of socialist intellectuals who seek to establish a mass base through affiliation with the FNPR. Each can demonstrate only a very small constituency among workers at present.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

There are several future possibilities for Russia's trade unions. Despite its strengths, the FNPR seems unlikely to maintain itself as a centralized monopoly. Unions in energy and manufacturing branches with export potential want independence and privatization; progressive loss of these unions could weaken the FNPR and leave it a backwater for
poor, unprofitable, and light-industry branches. This seems the most likely prospect, but it is also possible that a new wave of activism may transform the many small, local initiative groups into dynamic new unions which would replace the old in many sectors. Or, government decisions could take away the FNPR’s resources (especially control over social security funds), and precipitate the Federation’s collapse without further splits or development of independents, leaving the majority of workers unorganized.

Interested American organizations (the AFL-CIO and others) are working in Russia to promote democratic institutions by aiding the development of independents unions. Critics charge that their activity encourages divisiveness, but in fact Russia’s unions are already deeply divided. Such organizations can play a constructive role as long as they contribute to the self-organizing efforts of workers who are building new, alternative unions. They should avoid high-level political infighting among the unions, and should take no part in efforts to undermine the FNPR while the independents remain weak: the new unions must become strong enough to accomplish this on their own. The FNPR provides a better defense than no unions at all. It would be disastrous in human terms, and perhaps dangerous politically, for Russia’s large industrial work force to find itself with no organized defense as reform progresses.

As to labor and party politics, only a future election will show which parties attract workers’ support. In a hypothetical future election (and keeping in mind the present instability of these parties), the Social Democrats stand as the most liberal, pro-market of the three, and thus most congenial to American interests in democracy and reform. The Civic Union favors a larger and longer role for the state, but ultimately wants some reform and is committed to democracy. The Party of Labor is anti-market, opposes privatization (except direct transfer of enterprises to their workers), and foresees possibilities of an alliance with the reconstituted Communist Party and a return to administrative methods. Most of Russia’s workers are at present uncommitted to any of these parties.
APPENDIX: PERSONS INTERVIEWED

Andrey B. Bogdanov, Secretary of the Board, Democratic Party of Russia; Chairman of DPR Youth Union, June 2, 1993.

Tom Bradley, AFL-CIO representative, Free Trade Union Institute, May 26, 1993.

Arkady Didezhit, journalist and member of the Social Democratic Party of Russia; also members of the Legal Commission of the Russian Federation of Free Trade Unions, May 25, 1993.


Leonid A. Gordon, Professor, Institute of World Economy and International Relations; Vice-Director for Labor Studies of the Center for Socio-Political and Economic Studies, May 28, 1993.

Lev I. Jakobson, Professor, College of Economics, Moscow State University, June 2, 1993.

Pavel M. Kudiukin, Executive Director, Russian-American Foundation for Trade Union Research and Education, (former Deputy Minister, Ministry of Labor and Employment of the Russian Federation), June 8, 1993.

Sergey Magaril, Member of the Directorate of the Social Democratic Party of Russia; Deputy Chair of the Party's International Commission, May 24, 1993.

Vladimir I. Makhanov, Member of Russian Federation Supreme Soviet and Supreme Soviet Commission on Social Policy, May 25, 1993.

Boris Grigorievich Misnik, President, Trade Union for Mining and Metallurgical Industry of the Russian Federation, June 1, 1993.


Alexander Segal, Press Secretary, Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia, June 4, 1993.


Mikhail Tsovma and Boris Kravtchenko, Kas-Kor Labor Information Center, May 31, 1993.