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CORPORATISM, CONFLICT AND LABOR POLITICS:  
"YEAR ONE" IN THE NEW RUSSIA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the aftermath of the failed August 1991 coup, the Russian Federation moved rapidly 
toward state sovereignty, the beginnings of a democratic polity, and the introduction of a 
market economy. One aspect of the transition involved the search for a mechanism or 
"model" under which labor problems, both of the old sort, and of new sorts to be anticipated 
in the harsh conditions of price decontrol, privatization of ownership, and a retreat by the 
Russian state from Soviet-style dominance in the economy, might be handled.

Under the newly-coined slogan of "social partnership," the government thus sought to 
engage labor (via the trade unions, both "official" and independent) and employers (both 
bureaucrat-managers in the state sector, and emergent entrepreneurs) in a corporatist-
consultative relationship through the mechanism of a "Russian trilateral commission" (RTK). 
This study deals with the rationale, design, composition and performance of the RTK over the 

What emerges as an essentially lackluster record for the RTK as a regulatory 
institution—albeit a record moderated by the fact that 1992 did not prove to be a year of mass 
labor militancy—can be attributed to a number of factors, prime among them (1) the failure of 
the state's attempt at self-extraction from the role of employer as well as that of referee; (2) 
the consequent failure of the "employer" side of the trilateral to "jell" around distinct political/ 
economic interests; and (3) conflict among the unions represented on the labor side, added to 
uncertain abilities on unions' part to deliver or discipline their members. More broadly, the 
mixed record of "corporatist" regulation of labor politics and conflict is rooted in the inability 
of essentially new and untried institutions to perform their designated tasks adequately in the 
chaotic political and economic conditions of early post-communist Russia. In this, the 
trilateral commission joins many other institutions. The implications for the future, seen both 
from the perspective of late 1992 in this study, and from the context of the December 1993 
election results, should be sobering for those who have been optimistic about the adoption of 
new mechanisms and institutions fit to deal with the political-economic problems of post-
Soviet politics.
CORPORATISM, CONFLICT AND LABOR POLITICS: "YEAR ONE" IN THE NEW RUSSIA

Walter D. Connor

With the failure of the August 1991 coup attempt, the USSR's fate was sealed, and the Russian Federation, along with the other components of the old state, launched into independence. "Russian" politics of a post-Soviet variety thus began, but on the basis of both the heritage and mounting wreckage of the old Soviet system. This essay deals with one aspect of that emergent arena of Russian politics, concentrating on the 1991-1992 period—specifically, with labor politics, an area wherein the hopes and objectives of a marketizing, reformist core in Yeltsin's cabinet were to confront both the countering forces of bureaucratic survivals in the old "official" trade unions of the Soviet period, an industrial lobby rooted in heavy and defense industry, and the fears and apprehensions of a Russian majority ill-prepared for change. The treatment through much of what follows is essentially narrative: a story, or perhaps a cautionary tale, of what happened in a revealing, if not well-publicized, area of politics at a tumultuous time. The "whys" of what turned out to be a very mixed record in the government's attempt to structure a "corporatist" mode of regulating labor politics are addressed, in a preliminary way, in the concluding pages.

Prelude: The Echoes of August

While the coup's outcome, and Gorbachev's subsequent resignation from the General Secretarship and the CPSU itself put paid to the "party politics" of the old style which had constituted a rear-guard opposition to reform, the path Yeltsin and the reformers trod was littered with two old institutions that would not disappear: the VKP (Vseobshchaia konfederatsiia profsoiuzov, or General Confederation of Trade Unions) and the FNPR (Federatsiia nezavisimykh profsoiuzov Rossii, or Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia).

The VKP was, in fact, the old All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions (AUCCTU), under the new name it had adopted at its 18th Congress in October 1990, by which time the "All-Union" modifier was sounding anachronistic given the drift of the USSR toward, at a minimum, some looser form of federation under a new name. FNPR had been born in the fall of 1989, out of the old AUCCTU structure, which had--like the communist party--hitherto lacked a specifically Russian Republic organization. In late 1990, and in 1991, both organizations, facing the government's increasingly radical reform plans, kept up a constant
refrain of defending workers' interests, and an insistence that these not be sacrificed as Russia moved toward the market. They found plenty to complain of in the various plans presented by Ryzhkov, then Pavlov, from the government side, as well as the more radical variants that marked the last year of Soviet power.

Though still dependent on the state (which had backed its dues-checkoff privileges, and provided the large funds it administered as the government's delegate in the area of "social insurance") FNPR (and VKP, though the latter was quickly losing its relevance as the old state moved toward breakup) was now also "independent" in the sense that it (or its leadership) made its own politics, took its own line: there was no longer the overall party hegemony that kept state structures and "official" trade unions in line, as of old, and FNPR could now be simultaneously claimant on, and critic of, the state.

Yel'tsin's rise to unchallenged leadership in the Russian Federation in 1991, especially his June popular election, complicated the situation of the old unions. The July 1991 "de-partyization" decree, while aimed at outlawing the CPSU organizations in enterprises, used broader language: Yel'tsin had to reassure both Shcherbakov of the VKP and the FNPR chair Igor Klochkov that the decree was not aimed at outlawing union organizations at plant level. Whether mollified or not by these reassurances, the unions also continued to register concern that workers' and union rights vs. employers had been eroded by the 1990 changes to the state enterprise law, whose original version (from 1987—politically, a geological era's remove from the world of 1991) had provided for elections of managers and other elements of worker control. With the failure of the August coup, Gorbachev's consequent political destruction and the looming certainty that the future held both the end of the Soviet state, and the Russian government's commitment to a market economy, FNPR assumed a tougher attitude, declaring "unity of action" days for October 21-26. Yel'tsin, on October 16, promised that the government would consult with labor unions before taking any major economic/social policy actions; he also accused FNPR of acting in a "monopolist" manner reminiscent of the old AUCCTU.

Whatever the in-built tensions of government-union relations, some consultative context had to be provided where issues could be ventilated and thrashed out. The Yel'tsin government of late 1991, with Yegor Gaidar in charge of economic policy and moving in the direction of a "shock-therapy" policy for 1992, was interested in extracting itself from the owner-manager-paymaster role in the economy, as the beginning of a move toward a referee role between the interests of "labor" and those of the yet-vague category of owners-employers. Some sort of organizational recipe wherein the government would find itself
dealing with “partners” rather than dictating to (and thereby taking responsibility for) subordinates suggested itself, some form of “Corporatism.” While, given the realities of an economy still largely state-owned, Corporatism might be more pious wish than real program, the stage was set for a solution that would include a trilateral body to deal with the many problems labor politics was likely to present in the rapidly approaching future.

**Trilateral Corporatism: Design and Conception**

The “charter” for the trilateral commission was, as such things go, brief and general: a Yeltsin presidential ukaz, “On Social Partnership and the Resolution of Labor Disputes (Conflicts),” dated November 15. Published Nov. 19, it appeared among a welter of other presidential and government decrees of the same date in Rossiiskaia gazeta, whose span, from minimum wage levels to deliveries of petroleum beyond the borders of the Russian Republic, was an indication of the “overload” the Russian state faced as it prepared for the end of the USSR.

The first point specified the annual concluding of “general agreements,” at the national level, between government, the trade unions, and the employers, specifying the obligations of the diverse sides in areas of “employment of the population, the gradual increase of social guarantees for citizens, the social defense of the most vulnerable groups of the population, the preservation of the growth of incomes of workers according to the degree of stabilization of the economy,” etc.: a seemingly tall order that would necessarily come under stress with the move toward the market.

A second point aimed at annual “trilateral branch wage agreements,” in various sectors of the economy, these to take into account the “mutual obligations” of the sides in “organization, pay for work, social guarantees, the hiring and dismissal of workers, securing the increase in the effectiveness of production, strengthening of labor discipline, the prevention of labor conflicts, and also the observation of the interests of the workers in carrying out privatization.” Such agreements should, it went on, aim at securing what looked like being irreconcilable objectives—at “observing economically justified interrelations between growth in wages taking into account the reform of retail prices and growth in the volume of goods produced.” But such agreements “should not worsen conditions of work or social guarantees, established by legislation.”

Point four called for establishing, in a two-week period, a commission to carry out these major tasks, drawing on government, unions, and employers, define its legal status and
procedures—the "Russian Trilateral Commission for the Regulation of Social and Labor Relations" or RTK, as it would emerge.

The "how" of establishing the commission was unspecified—and two weeks was hardly a long time. Press coverage of whatever deliberations were then taking place was thin-to-nil. By late December, some progress could be deduced from a report on the organization of the labor side. Klochkov of the FNPR told a correspondent of recent "intensive exchanges of opinion" regarding the composition of the commission. Agreement had been reached that FNPR would participate on the labor side, along with the Sotsprof union federation and "other parallel union structures." This meant that the FNPR, having sought a monopoly on the labor side, had not succeeded. In December, reference was made at the FNPR plenum to a union draft of an agreement between the government, the "Congress of Russian Business Circles," and the Council of the FNPR, with no other organizations mentioned. It also meant that Sotsprof, an organization combining workers from state and non-state sectors, as well as some small independents, generally pro-reform and destined to become the bugbear of FNPR, would sit on the same side of the table, in uncomfortable proximity.

The "inside" story of how the labor side was assembled was, in fact, one of complexity and interesting clues to how various parties viewed the commission ab initio. The short time available to form the commission (one source indicates that the specified period was not two weeks, but only one week) was partly attributable to the fact that FNPR had "participated" in the preparation of the presidential decree, aiming at monopoly on the labor side. The Congress of Russian Business Circles had similar ambitions on the employer side; this was of little concern to FNPR, which from the beginning would target the government. Labor minister Shokhin and his deputy Kudiukin had, however, other ideas, looking toward broadening participation on both labor and employer sides, and encouraged other unions and employer organizations to caucus among themselves and come up with recipes for apportioning representation.

Among the independent unions, only Sotsprof had shown from the beginning a desire to participate in the commission--the others apparently viewed the presidential decree and the RTK as potential avenues for government interference in union affairs. Thus, the first round of "horse-trading" was between FNPR and Sotsprof. With the initial notion of a trilateral assuming ten members to a side, FNPR claimed nine places for itself, conceding one to Sotsprof. The latter's counteroffer was six seats to FNPR, three for itself, and the remaining seat to be allocated to other unions that might later decide to join the RTK. By this time, other unions were growing more interested--at one of their meetings, organized by Kudiukin
under the auspices of the Social Democratic party, the proposal emerged that each "trade union federation" should get one seat. Since most unions were "federations" this would have reduced FNPR, despite its "arithmetic" predominance, to one seat--it was having none of this and, realistically, this proposal was a non-starter. The final resolution involved expanding the number from ten to 14 places: nine for FNPR, and six for Sotsprof would preserve the numbers each had originally sought, while adding a seat for the miners' NPG, and one for the civil aviation union. This left FNPR, on the labor side, short of the two-thirds majority needed on each side to "deliver" that side's consent to any RTK decision; the resolution of the proportions for labor representation also explains the 14-to-a-side eventual structure of the RTK itself.

The late-December plenum of the FNPR also set the stage for what would emerge as a pattern of labor posturing. The union promised "constructive dialogue" with the government, but Klochkov, looking toward the Jan. 2 price liberalization, complained that "for a long time already no one has controlled prices," claiming that they had risen 5-8 times in 1991 (a clear overestimate). Endorsing the idea of trilateral consultation (though in a manner suggesting that the idea of a commission had not yet been broached in a decree), Klochkov sketched a scenario that was to prove in some ways overblown, but in other ways prophetic.

If constructive proposals [and] demands of the trade unions, expressing the interests of the people of hired labor, are to be ignored, as "populist," "provocational," or "speculative," then it remains to us to use the proven methods of struggle--the organization of mass demonstrations under the slogans of the trade unions."

Deputy Prime Minister Burbulis, and Shokhin as well, appeared and spoke at the plenum as guests of the FNPR. The former gave some indication of the gulf between the radical alarm with which the Yeltsin team viewed the economic situation, and the FNPR's acceptance of the market, "but with" social protections that would seem bound to hamper arriving at it. Asked if the government "really thought" that the confrontation of strong trade unions and a weak economy was dangerous, he replied, "we don't simply have a weak economy, we've got no economy, and strong trade unions don't threaten us, because we don't have them, either."

Burbulis allowed that union complaints that the government had not managed a "dynamic, compact and consequential dialogue" with the unions had some merit, and promised that he would eliminate shortfalls in this area, but issued a challenge to the FNPR's typical line:
Remove, please, from your position in relation to us the notion that the interests of the workers are dearer to you than they are to us...  

FNPR, as it would turn out, was not inclined to oblige.

The Sides and the Players

While there was nothing secret about the commission, coverage of its deliberations tended to be brief, and in all not very informative.

Possibly the first time the roster of members was publicly listed was as the collective signatories of the 1992 general agreement, the full text of which the weekly Ekonomika i zhizni' published in an April issue. The text was preceded in the newspaper by a somewhat odd-sounding preface.

Many letters have come to the editors, in which readers request to be told how the talks of the Russian government, the organizations of trade unions and entrepreneurs concluded. As they told the editors, in the Russian trilateral commission for the regulation of social-labor problems, the talks concluded with the signing of a General Agreement. We publish its complete text below.

No provisions, evidently, had been made for the publication of the document, even though, by the standards of the time and its flow of decrees, declarations, laws, etc., it was not an overly long one. Who, then, were those who sat at the table? The rosters enable us to work backwards to the composition of a body already at work for some time when the agreement was reached.

On the government side, the list was distinctly "ministerial."

M.I. ALEKHIN - First Dep. Min. of Social Defense of the Population
S.V. ANISIMOVA - Minister of Trade and Material Resources
Iu. M. ARSKII - First Dep. Min of Ecology and Natural Resources
V.V. BARCHUK - First Dep. Min. of Finance
P.M. KUDIUKIN - Dep. Min. of Labor and Employment
V.M. LOPUKHIN - Minister of Fuel and Energy
A.A. NECHAEV - Minister of Economics
A.A. TITKIN - Minister of Industry
A.P. USTIUZHANIN - First Dep. Min. of Agriculture
A.G. FONOTOV - First Dep. Min. of Science, Higher Schools, and Technical Policy
A.B. CHUBAIS - Chair, State Committee for the Administration of State Property
M.A. SHAPKIN - Dep. Min. of Justice
A.A. SHEVCHUK - Dep. Min. of Transport
A.N. SHOKHIN - Deputy Prime Minister, and Minister of Labor and Employment

The government's 14 representatives, then, covered a broad, but logical, range of portfolios. On the "output" side of the economy, critical sectors that would constitute choke-points in case of unrest were represented by Lopukhin (energy) and Shevchuk (transport), as well as Titkin with the general industry portfolio. Finance (Barchuk) and the new economics ministry would play important roles in the dicey transition to the market that lay ahead. Nechaev, the economics minister, was a marketeer generally in the Gaidar mode.

Players on the administrative side were typically very much Yeltsin team members, pro-market and committed to change. Given his deputy premiership, labor minister Shokhin would often chair commission sessions in Burbulis' (frequent) absences. His deputy, Kudiukin, once a prosecuted/imprisoned intra-party dissident in the late Brezhnev years when he was a junior researcher at the Academy of Sciences' high-profile Institute for World Economics and International Relations (IMEMO), was also connected to the independent Sotsprof union on the labor side of the table. Anatoly Chubais, the ministerial-level "privatization czar," would exercise critical functions in that role throughout the year, and find himself the continuing center of controversy over policy.

The fourteen commission members on the labor side represented a mix of the old official trade union organization—the FNPR—and new, autonomous unions not affiliated with the old structures.

A.D. VASILIEVSKII - Chair, Union of Workers in Local Industries and Communal Service Enterprises
V.S. GONCHAROV - Chair, Tula Regional Trade Union Council
A.S. DAVYDOV - Chair, Union of Workers in the Agro-Industrial Complex
K.D. KRYLOV - Secretary, Council of the FNPR
M.M. KUZMENKO - Chair, Union of Health Service Workers
B.G. MISNIK - Chair, Union of Mining and Metallurgical Workers
V.I. ROMANOV - Deputy Chairman, FNPR
V.A. TORLOPOV - Chair, Komi Republic Federation of Trade Unions
G.A. TRUDOV - Chair, Union of Heavy Machine Building Workers
A.A. MALINOVSII - President, Interstate Federation of Unions of Civil Aviation Flight Personnel
V.E. MOKHOV - Co-Chair, Republican Coordinating Council, Sotsprof
D.A. SEMENOVS - Co-Chair, Republican Coordinating Council, Sotsprof
A.A. SERGEEV - Chair, Independent Union Miners (NPG)
S.V. KHRAMOV - Co-Chair, Republican Coordinating Council, Sotsprof
Of the labor side, then, the first nine listed were FNPR officials: Krylov and Romanov from the central administration (the latter "number two" to Klochkov), five heads of branch unions organized on the old "industrial" principle linking workers, managers etc., in a given branch, and two--Goncharov from Tula and Torlopov from Arctic Komi--representing the regional organizations which had also been part of the old AUCCTU structure. By the end of 1992, one--Misnik of the mining/metallurgy union--would lead most of his members out of the FNPR in a controversial defection.

Sotsprof, an umbrella organization linking workers in state and non-state sectors, and including some smaller business owners as well, was despite its original title (socialist trade unions), a pro-government supporter of the market transition and reform. Its three representatives constituted the bulk of the independent faction on the labor side. It claimed, in 1991 (therefore, USSR-wide at the time), to include 200 organizations with a combined membership of ca. 250,000. 14

Sergeev chaired the NPG--the independent union of coal miners, based explicitly on the "craft" principle and limited to coal-face (primarily, therefore, underground) workers--one of the sturdier offspring of the mobilization of the coal fields that began in the hot summer of 1989. Though in numbers smaller than the FNPR union of coal industry workers, it commanded more loyalty and attention from its voluntary membership. Finally, the airline pilots' union, small in numbers, represented a critical occupation nonetheless. Later, they would be joined by the militant union of air traffic controllers (FPAD). 15

Government, labor, and "business," then, to complete the trilateral of Corporatism. The term typically used for this third side was "predprinimateli (rabotodateli)", which literally translates as "entrepreneurs (employers)" though the latter word derives from its roots as "work-givers" (rabota-work, dat'-give) and may reflect a somewhat different shading than the French-derived English "employer." Neither the terms "businessmen" nor "entrepreneurs" fit too well, as a roster heavily weighted in favor state enterprises would show.

Iu. A. BESPALOV - President, Union of Producers of the Chemical Industry
L.I. VAINBERG - President, Association of Joint Enterprises, International Unions and Organizations
A.V. VASIL'EV - President, Association of Exchange Structures of the Agro-Industrial Complex; Chair, Russian Agricultural Exchange (birzha)
N.I. GOLOVANOV - Vice-President, "Rosavtodvor"- road-building enterprise
A.V. LISURENKO - Chair of Administration, Russian State Association "Rostop-prom"
V.V. PISKUNOV - President, Association of Industrial Enterprises of Russia
G.M. SAVTSOV - Vice-President, "Rosavtotrans" trucking enterprise
M.Z. IUR’EV - President, League of Industrialists and Goods-Producers of Russia, General Director of the “Soiuzinterprom” production union
V.P. KOLMOGOROV - Vice-President, Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs (RSPP)
P.I. NEUMYVAKIN - President, Russian Bank League
G. Iu. SEMIGIN - Chair of Administration, Congress of Russian Business Circles; President, Russian Financial-Industrial Group
V.M. SKACHEV - Chairman, Executive Committee, Confederation of Entrepreneurs’ Circles of Russia
P.T. DRACHEV - Vice-President, Union of Leaseholders and Entrepreneurs of Russia
N.A. SHULIATEVA - President, Union of Small Enterprises of Russia.

“Employers,” then, were a mixed bag, with these rather grandiose titles offering little clue to their actual nature. The first eight represent what were at the time still large-scale state enterprise categories, either in production, or in the case of Golovakov and Sovtsov, road transport and infrastructure. Among the latter six, Semigin, Skachkov, and Drachev are more clearly from the emergent private sector in production, services, and finance/banking. Kolmogorov, of the RSPP—the Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs—sat at the table as the representative of the premier “industrial lobby” organization, rooted in large state enterprises, especially the defense sector, with large numbers of workers. Organized in 1990-91 as the USSR Science-Industrial Association, recast on the Russian Federation level by its head, Arkady Vol’skii, the RSPP would in various ways seek to play a major role in the “centrist” opposition to Yel’tsin’s economic policies in 1992-93. (Among those on the employers’ side, Vainberg, Iur’ev, and Piskunov were also members of the RSPP’s executive board.)

Employers’ representatives, then, stood for everything from large state production complexes with massive employment rosters and consequent sensitivity to the application of any stern financial discipline, to smaller private employers in production and services; while those in financial services might well be among the “new rich,” they were not the employers of large labor forces, nor likely to become such. The former category would not always go against the government—much would depend on the government’s willingness to support them while “in transition,” and on the prospects they perceived for profitable privatization. The latter would not always be uncritical in their support of a marketizing government, since that government would find it very difficult to craft taxation policies and procedures that could please emergent business interests.
The fourteen-to-a-side trilateral thus amounted to 42 members, plus the government-appointed coordinator: not a large group, given the difficulties of the market transition, and the tensions that were to be anticipated. On the other hand, it was a large number to handle serious business, in a context of rules/procedures new and unfamiliar, and to a large degree yet to be defined. It was also large from the point of view of assembling it in substantial quorum—these were all “busy” people, for whom the RTK was an activity, but not necessarily a central one in their pursuits. How important it would become, among those pursuits, and how much effective regulation it would provide in the area of social-labor relations, remained to be seen.

The Trilateral: Open for Business

As 1992 dawned, the daily formerly published by the old official trade unions, Trud, reported rather laconically that the RTK had held its first meeting. No details were given. Given the economic circumstances—especially the Jan. 2 decontrol of retail prices across a broad front, in partial imitation of Balcerowicz’s 1990 shock therapy in Poland—the commission could hardly avoid becoming the forum for complaints about present exigencies, long before any stable procedural rules or discussion of long-term problems could be initiated.

Klochkov of the FNPR asserted in an early January interview that the union was “for” reform, but against poverty, and a “lumpen-egalitarian” approach. “Dialogue” was critical—in its absence, the FNPR would know “how to react” to an arrogant government. The FNPR, as he put it, was not a government, not an old-style official (kazenavi) union. The sharp spike of price rises looked like the product of such arrogance—by the middle of the month, FNPR members of the commission complained to Yel’tsin about price rises they saw as totally unregulated, even on goods where some controls had been promised; effectively, they accused Gaidar of bad faith, and demanded that he be “brought to responsibility” (echoing Soviet-era rhetoric). Fairly or foully intended, the taxing of the government with breaking promises on pricing policy would become a constant refrain. The government was a ready target, since it is hard to see how it could have, in any case, controlled prices or attempted to do so without bringing on other forms of disaster. (Inflation, after all, had been running at unprecedented levels in the old USSR in late 1991—consumer prices had nearly doubled during that year.) On the other hand, whether the Yel’tsin government could have anticipated that retail prices would rise over 2,000 per cent for calendar 1992—and what they might have done to avert this while continuing on the road to the market—is also unclear.
Skyrocketing prices provoked short protest strikes, especially among the "salariat"—educational and health personnel, not normally given to militancy, but hurt by the downside "stickiness" of their own modest compensation as directly state budget-funded personnel (as opposed to many production workers, whose managers could simply raise prices, passing on some of the extra revenue as wage rises). By late January, such strikes, plus FNPR negative reactions to various aspects of the government's draft of a general agreement, gave the trilateral partners plenty to handle.

The union had already threatened protests earlier, for January 17, if its demands were not met. Izvestiia, clearly on the government's side as it would generally remain throughout the year, listed some of what the FNPR was demanding.

The demands... include unconditional adherence to the previously declared minimum social guarantees; expansion of the list of food products sold at fixed prices; the introduction of subsidies for meals in school and university cafeterias, hospitals and old age homes; the conclusion of wage-rate agreements in industries that have fixed prices for their output; full indexing of the population's income; and other proposals with surefire appeal to the public at large. Not one of the proposed measures has been thought through from the standpoint of the state budget's capabilities. 19

The paper quoted a combative Klochkov: "If we are forced to... we will name the specific people we do not want to see in the government. If the government does not compromise, it simply won't be allowed to function."[emphasis added] 20

This was union bravado, and not the last time it would be asserted. The threat was extended into a strike threat: a two-hour warning strike for January 27, which FNPR claimed could involve 60 million people. The strike was averted by deliberations within the RTK. The business weekly Kommersant, reported the deal without details (and oddly giving the impression that the commission had been organized to deal with the threat) noted that the government was finding it hard as well to deal with unions not part of FNPR, with the misleading implication that much of the education/health worker white-collar militancy was driven by such unions. 21

Concessions on the government's side settled, for a time, the teachers' and doctors' demands—heralding a pattern that would become rather common. Patterns were also emerging in the small drama of the RTK's own internal operations. Not the grand stuff of the new Russian politics, it was nonetheless revealing of some of the deepest problems a new government in new and trying circumstances was to face.
On the government side, one recurrent refrain was that the commission was not “the government”. Burbulis, who chaired sessions of the RTK in its early days (though then labor minister Shokhin was its major architect) referred to it as a problem-solving context in February; Shokhin, stressing its crisis-prevention functions, denied that it would function as a “fire brigade” to deal with situations already gone critical. Burbulis, after the commission had settled a March outbreak of labor problems in the Kuzbass (see below), emphasized that all three sides had “acted as arbiters empowered by the state” in the matter—anything but the government acting alone.

In fact, the RTK was not much of anything, to judge by some early accounts. A journalist sympathetic to FNPR reported on a meeting on February 11; “many chairs” were empty. Among the missing were Burbulis, Shokhin, the FNPR’s Romanov. On the agenda, discussion of the draft law on “collective contracts and agreements”: debate centered on which of these two terms should come first in the law’s title! The meeting was interrupted, the assemblage told to clear the room in 30 minutes, as another “more important” body had to meet in the same place. Then, Shokhin entered, straight from a meeting with Yel’tsin, to announce that the Vorkuta coal miners—probably the most militant and politicized in the industry—had declared a pre-strike condition. Yel’tsin wants the RTK to handle the problem: so, off to Vorkuta, “sign up, whoever is going.” The reporter signs—“I want[ed] to see how the commission will straighten out what, up to now, presidents and premiers could not....”

The Reluctant Fire Brigade

The commission was, obviously, called upon to be the fire brigade its inventors had declared it was not, and conflagrations seemed to be a constant. Clearly, whoever spoke for coal miners on the labor side of the table could not speak for the miners of Vorkuta. And it was precisely the “government” those miners wanted to see: a government that had, in January, and with little evident recourse to any element of trilateralism, caved in to the Kuzbass coal miners, and other workers in the coal industry there, and raised their wages 100 per cent. The government, while it talked tough, was ready to buy labor peace—at least in sectors it viewed as critical—by a basically capitulationist approach. The trilateral commission, if anything, provided in this context yet one more mode of approach to the government, one more channel through which labor could advance demands—though it often disregarded this channel. From early on, it was also clear that traditional state-industry interests, with large workforces, would dominate the employer side of the RTK—the true independent entrepreneurs’ organizations were weaker, newer, and tied to much smaller labor forces.
typically doing very different sorts of work. These "employer" interests were in no way compromised by government softness on militant wage demands. Indeed, as cash shortages would arise in the coming months, due to the inadequate capacity of the state's printing presses to cover rapidly rising wage bills with the requisite rubles in a cash economy, state employers and their workers would find a touchy and very "common" cause against the government.

In a February interview, Shokhin pointed up some of the problems from the government's viewpoint. Allowing that no such body as the RTK could be expected to enjoy easy going in such times, he insisted that government-labor relations still could not be allowed to become a matter of "street fights." For the unions, he implied, the main issue thus far had been inclusion at the RTK's table itself: the FNPR had reached for a monopoly, the other unions had, in opposition, and seeking access, staked their counterclaims. (While this might seem one more brick in the edifice of what the FNPR would define as the government's unremitting opposition to it, other unions on the commission, including the miners' NPG, had shortly before criticized the government side for not only a general anti-union position, but for favoring the FNPR in a manner detrimental to them.) But if one question was, thus, "does the labor side include all trade unions?", another--equally or more important for what Shokhin wanted to convey--was whether trade unions and their leaders really represented the interests of workers. Unions gave lip service to the necessity of the transition to the market, he complained, while laying on the table proposal after proposal in logical conflict with that transition: broadening the list of goods to be sold at fixed prices, for example. Higher wages were another union demand--but unaccompanied by any proposals as to how the government might find the wherewithal to accomplish this. Presumably at issue especially here for Shokhin were the pay packets of government employees themselves--"budget-financed" personnel. For Shokhin (perhaps naively) union honesty here would require proposals for wage increases and explicit union endorsement of higher taxes to finance them. With the unions mute, he observed, the government had to act on its own, and thus bear alone the criticism of entrepreneurs threatened with the burden of those higher taxes.

Looking then at the broader prospect, and reflecting on the Soviet organizational legacy, Shokhin mused on the situation of the government as it dealt with unions in a context "corporatist" in design. On the whole, it was better for government, and easier, to deal with fewer rather than more unions, but only under conditions where those unions and their leaders are able to reach agreements with their members. [If they cannot], if union heads cannot demand
from their members the observation of any sort of game rules, but are only translating their demands to the government, then there will be no normal mechanism of social partnership. The strength of social partners is that, if they have already agreed, then they guarantee the observance of these conditions, whether they are a trade union center or an association of entrepreneurs.30

If so much of the workforce was still state-dependent (state employed and likely to remain so, state-employed in material production and thus privatizable but still dependent on the state as paymaster, subsidizer, monopoly purchaser, price setter, or only in the sense that wage raises by independent employers depended ultimately on government additions to the cash supply), the government had no choice but to be a "party" as well as partner and arbiter in the labor-relations arena.

March: Troubles in the Kuzbass

Such was certainly the case in the Kuzbass coalfields in March. The large January pay raises to miners and auxiliary coal-industry personnel (including office workers, kindergarten supervisors, cafeteria workers and anyone else in the "branch"), drove prices in the Kuzbass sky-high; those outside the branch, including office workers and other auxiliaries in parallel jobs to the above-mentioned, could not keep up. Some strike activity commenced March 6,31 with the broader threat of an unlimited region-wide strike on March 10 unless a "government" delegation arrived on the scene before that date. Behind the demand was the regional FNPR affiliate—the Kuzbass Federation of Trade Unions (KFP)—acting mainly for non-coal industry people whose wages, so far below those of coal-branch employees, were anything but "equal pay for equal work."

Labor was not, however, united. The Kuzbass "workers' committees"—lineal descendants of the organizing bodies of the 1989 strikes, and tightly linked to the independent NPG which represented miners but not other coal industry workers--denounced the whole business as an anti-Yeltsin "provocation," the KFP as a "last bastion of reactionary communist forces," a "strike by the nomenklatura,"32 and called upon workers in the region not to support the KFP promptings.33

The commission decided to send a delegation—the KFP "postponed" action until March 12.34 Shokhin emphasized that this was a trilateral delegation, a response of the commission per se, not a purely government response to the KFP demands, and that it was coming to ascertain how widely the region's working people supported the strike call.35 With Shokhin at
its head, the delegation met with "local representatives" at Novokuznetsk March 13—though it is not clear that it met with representatives of the KFP which was pushing the strike.\(^{36}\)

It might well have been tempting to Shokhin to make such an end run around his local irritants. The dynamics of the Kuzbass process were never totally clear: the anti-KFP, anti-FNPR forces claimed on March 12 that the strike had already failed because of the lack of genuine local grass-roots support.\(^{37}\) While the government had not been brought to its knees, Shokhin, back in Moscow on March 18, indicated that it had proposed new wage rises from April 1 in the "budget" sector where so many of the aggrieved worked, as well as other adjustments.\(^{38}\) The government had, in fact, conceded on a broad front.\(^{39}\)

Only the government, in effect, could. Still proprietor of the mines, administrative setter and controller of fuel prices kept so low the mines could not make a profit, and therefore subsidizer of those same mines, it had set the high mining industry wages. It was the only source of a wage adjustment for budget workers as well. There is no real indication that the "labor" component of the RTK delegation, whether FNPR or NPG, played any independent role. It was not, on the evidence, a matter of government capitulation to "strong" unions—if anything, the anti-strike Kuzbass workers' committees looked locally stronger than the FNPR.\(^{40}\) More, it seemed to be a matter of the government taking a "reasonable" approach to understandable demands in hard times—just as it would have to deal with pressures to raise, constantly, the minimum wage level. But all this could and surely would have been done in the absence of the trilateral commission.

"Success": The 1992 General Agreement

Aside from the fire-brigade tasks thrust upon it, the regular activity of the RTK in late winter focussed on the reaching of the trilateral general agreement whose creation was one of its main raisons d'être. This was accomplished—more or less—on March 25. The success was announced to the popping of champagne corks, but the qualification is necessitated by the refusal of several of the FNPR representatives to sign on that date, before consultations with member unions could be held (emphasizing thus the "truly" federative nature of the FNPR)—all this after various FNPR criticisms of the draft during the negotiating process.

Early in March, FNPR had called the draft a "government document," casting harsh price increases in "rosy hues," presenting privatization targets in the form of "planned indicators dear to the heart of bureaucrats," without any reference to vouchers that would allow citizens to participate in the process (FNPR would later prove a critic, more often than not, of the government's voucherization program), saying little about protecting employment,
at a time when women college graduates in Vologda could not “get jobs as cleaning women.”
But the union would not walk out, it would stay at the table, and continue to fight while
rejecting any compromises “to the detriment of the toilers.” FNPR also kept up a running
attack on the government’s undertakings to the IMF, on plans to free energy prices with their
potential for “wrecking” the economy. Still disgruntled over the allocation of seats to the
independent unions, FNPR made a target especially of Sotsprof, which “backed the
government in all things.” Was it appropriate, they asked, that deputy labor minister
Kudiukin, who sat on the government side of the table, was also a member of Sotsprof’s
insurance fund board?42

On March 25, only eight of the 14 labor representatives signed the general agreement—
the independents, plus three of the FNPR delegates. This thus fell short of the two-thirds of
each side rule for RTK adoption of resolutions, etc. FNPR deputy chair Romanov referred to
a consultation session scheduled for April 2 as a reason for not signing, as well as substantive
matters on which the FNPR found itself vs. the government. While the FNPR newspaper
published on March 3 an alternative variant of the general agreement more to its liking, on
March 2 the leaders did recommend signing the agreement, with something of bad grace,
while again criticizing the government for “interference” in union affairs. That the
government newspaper Izvestiia had on March 27 reported the agreement as reached, in the
absence of a majority of labor signatories, was one of the complaints.

FNPR chairman Igor Klochkov reflected on the signing process and the delays several
days later, in what could only be called a mixed review.

FNPR remained dissatisfied with the agreement, and with he government. One of its
assessments returned to the theme of a government obsessed with cold figures, insensitive to
the “social” dimension. The union wanted to continue price controls on some critical goods
and foods, the government wanted wholesale liberalization, whatever the consequences.
Shokhin was ridiculed for having suggested that free prices for some goods might be lower
than the current levels, and that workers then might demand price liberalization themselves.
The union had agreed to a “no strike” provision, but reminded the government that this
applied to issues covered in, and agreed upon, in the document, and did not exclude labor
action on issues not so covered, including the worsening cash shortage that left wage
payments increasingly behind schedule. Here, strikes would be “fully legal.”

For all the criticism, the agreement was rather remarkable for the number of
commitments the government had made. Finance for retraining, job creation, unemployment
benefits had been promised—FNPR doubts that these could readily be squared with the
government's promises to the IMF on holding down inflation and the budget deficit were not
totally off the mark. The government had committed itself to the establishment of a
minimum wage, to be reviewed quarterly, with similar reviews of pensions and other benefits:
its earlier cave-ins gave little reason to hope that it would or could exercise heroic
budgetary/monetary restraint, and the unions for their part had made no commitments to
restraint in their wage demands. Employers had promised that they would avoid mass layoffs
and factory shutdowns, but this promise effectively tied the government to them: without a
supply of credits from the government, employers by themselves could not deliver this.
Effectively, they were betting against government courage, or foolhardiness—and the bet was
to prove a good one.

The Cash Crisis

Prices were rising rapidly; though lagging, wages were rising too. The rises exceeded
the poor adaptive capacities of the cash-emission system. Wages by late spring were at levels
astronomical by the standards of only two years before. Plates to print the new, larger-
denomination notes necessary now that people were paid by the thousands, rather than
hundreds, were still lacking. Workers in many areas—especially those, like the coalfields,
where pay was extraordinarily high—were behind, waiting for literal bales of rubles to be
delivered, while galloping inflation rapidly eroded the value of those still-undelivered rubles.
Local government in the Kuzbass and in Cheliabinsk lacked the cash to meet their wage and
salary obligations: as of May 8, when the issue was raised at a commission meeting, they
were 10 billion rubles in arrears. Local governments and unions united to protest government
"inaction." The RTK decided to send a delegation to the Tiumen oil-producing area, where
the cash shortage, combined with rising consumer prices and low procurement prices for oil,
were creating an "explosive" situation. Burbulis assured the FNPR's Romanov that the
beginning of June would see "immediate steps" to cover the cash arrears in the hardest-hit
areas, and to meet the demands of railroad and transport workers similarly affected, as well as
government clarification at the next commission meeting of how it would moderate the social
effects of planned fuel price increases.

Gaidar, as deputy premier, and the government's "point man" on the economy, had to
address both the cash problem, and the non-cash issue of enterprises running up massive
mutual debts rather than stop producing the goods for which payments could not be made.
They were betting on the government's inability to rein them in, an attitude Gaidar criticized
as "stupid and irresponsible" at the RTK meeting on June 3—at which he also indicated that
the government would nonetheless make some credits available. He addressed himself to an interviewer soon after:

The situation in the coming months will be determined by the extent to which we manage to deal with the nonpayments and cash crisis. About the nonpayments crisis. Here we must be extremely careful and refrain from making any injurious decisions--such as immediately writing off all enterprises' debts and reducing interest rates, which will make the situation almost hopeless.

Strictly speaking, nothing terrible has happened yet. Not many enterprises have come to a halt, and none has gone bankrupt. Not even those that should have done. There is a shortage of cash--and that's a disgrace, but wages are still being paid. The level of unemployment is as yet much lower than even our most "optimistic" predictions. Nonetheless an atmosphere of fear is being whipped up everywhere. But let us look into it--let us look at these nonpayments. Enterprises themselves now tackle questions of material and technical supplies. Let them buy what they need. They have nothing to buy it with? Then let them sell their output. If it won't sell, let them cut their prices. They don't want to? But otherwise there is no market. Do they expect the government to give it to them? On credit? At privileged interest rates? We can't! Of course, we will gradually issue more credits, but we will try to hold the interest rate. A drastic reduction in it today would be the worst thing imaginable.

Still, the cash crisis was a critical matter, and one that affected people in the here-and-now, as opposed to the constantly-deferred threat of unemployment. Gaidar, for all of the tough rhetoric, was sensitive to this; but also concerned that crisis response had become a constant governmental burden, with little sharing among the other social partners.

In a sense this is a technical problem. But socially it is very explosive. Serious unpleasantness can be expected here. Of course, we are taking "fire brigade" measures--we have introduced indexation for wages put on deposit, on the basis of an annual interest rate of 80 per cent. This is not a bad way to alleviate the problem. True, it costs money too, but with far less of the losses that could result from a social explosion. After that it is all a matter of organization and technology. Can the printing presses take the necessary "pace"? How quickly will we be able to put bigger bank notes into circulation?

Finally, Gaidar gave his own reading of the situation that was, on the one hand, keeping factories open and workers employed, and on the other keeping the government "tied," out of fear of a social explosion, to supporting the inertial motion of production for employment's sake: the latter with the promptings of a legislature that proved resistant to the sort of market logic he usually espoused.
It is very regrettable that the law on bankruptcies was not adopted. This means that enterprises producing output that nobody wants or offering their goods at excessively high prices are continuing to operate in the same spirit, continuing to pay wages to their workers. In this situation they can hardly be expected voluntarily to reduce prices, change their product, or get rid of surplus property.

Most likely they will expect, or demand through their lobby in parliament, the writing off of debts, budget subsidies, or at best cheap credits. Which is in fact happening in practice. But to insist on the writing off of debts and the granting of subsidies amounting to many billions and cheap credits, and at the same time to demand a curb on inflation—that is economic madness, an impossible task.54

Coalition Politics: Labor and Employers

Madness or not, the pressures to muddle onward, to do nothing to disturb, and much to maintain, the fragile situation, would continue to be felt by the government. The FNPR’s Romanov, two days after union and employer sides had come together to formulate positions on energy price increase threats and wage arrears, criticized the government’s ignoring of the consequences of its actions at the May 29 commission meeting.55 On June 9, Gaidar and Shokhin accepted a set of joint recommendations from the FNPR and the industrialists’ RSPP, at a meeting with Klochkov and Vladislavlev, co-chair of the RSPP. These included tightened controls over banks to guarantee the delivery of cash—even on a daily basis(!)—to enterprises; goods sales at intra-enterprise distribution points for temporary chits in the absence of cash; accounts for pensioners at shops where they could be registered and buy on credit. These were the sorts of measures one might expect from actors formed in the old command-administrative economy, but they were also rational responses to the emergency of a shortage of banknotes in a cash economy.56

Labor and management could readily get together on such issues; but collaboration ran deeper than shared alarm at cash shortages and the prospect of threatened fuel price rises that could bankrupt most plants. Even the emergent “real” private sector had complaints about the government, and reasons aplenty to share a critical stance with the FNPR.

In an April interview, RTK member Gennadi Semigin, of the Congress of Russian Business Circles (representing “150 insurance companies, 150 exchanges, 700 commercial banks and 500 individual enterprises”), shared some of his views.57 Siding so often with the labor side was, as he put it, good for business. Social disruption and disorder would, if allowed, spell the end of entrepreneurship. Workers and employers “needed stability”—this was far preferable to “bigger profits now.” The government, as Semigin saw it, was not less
concerned with stability, but it "has a fetish—financial stabilization." This it was pursuing to
the exclusion of a concern with encouraging investment and other necessary components of
social stabilization.

Semigin faulted labor minister Shokhin for taking a simplistic view: all the unions
wanted was higher wages, all business wanted was lower taxes. Not true, argued Semigin:
we employers raise wages ourselves, we look for tax help for enterprises undergoing military-
to-civilian conversion and for those that produce mass consumer goods. But the government
was trying to divide business and labor, and while it failed with the former, its partial success
with the latter—the FNPR-Sotsprof confrontations—helped it little. Business, in spring 1992,
was neither to be seen as the Russian version of early 20th century capitalism, nor as the
"cooperative" sector of the late 1980's, grafted onto the then Soviet command economy. It
was more complex, it needed "literate" economic policies on the government's part—ones that
would take into account more than financial stabilization. His Congress, Semigin complained,
had put together a set of proposals in late 1991, anticipating the initiation of social
partnership. Gaidar had enthused about some of them, but when 1992 began, none were
adopted—after that, "we got what we got." Without some changes, summer 1992 would see
"a collapse of industry," and the "fall will not be an improvement, as Boris Nikolaevich
[Yeltsin] says, but full clinical death."

Some of this, certainly, was "p.r." directed at the worker/union audience. Semigin and
the Congress had been the first non-state private employer organization to show an interest in
the yet-to-be-established RTK (at the point when FNPR was arguing that it should have
monopoly on the labor side). The kinds of operations he represented employed relatively
few people, but were also still probably near-incomprehensible ("making money out of
money") to the workers represented by FNPR and some other unions. Nor at this point in
Russia's disorderly nascent capitalism were sharp practices and weak business ethics anything
rare. Semigin spoke thus for a new financial community that wished to be seen as a
responsible collective citizen, concerned for the society as a whole in the present and future.

Times, then, were growing riper for moves that might link labor interests with
managerial, especially those of the state-industry managers with their large workforces, their
concerns with government credits and subsidies as well as tax rates. In June, the FNPR
stepped up its attacks on the government and the trilateral mechanism. Reviewing five and a
half months of its work, Rabochaia tribuna criticized "the work of the commission, or more
exactly, its lack of activity," and noted the frequent absence of a quorum even at meetings
scheduled to address important issues.
Another piece in *Trud* blamed the frequent absence of government representatives, rather than the other two sides, for the quorum shortfalls, and noted that "even" Burbulis and Shokhin seemed to lack the clout to compel broad enough governmental attendance to get work done. The tone of the article seemed to question the basic relevance of union participation in the RTK (Sotsprof as a rule supported "any" government proposal), and pushed for an activation of unions at the plant level to struggle for good agreements and wage arrangements as privatization impended. Walking in the corridors of power, it seemed, was not doing the unions very much good.\(^{60}\)

Government, then, and not employers, remained labor's main enemy for the FNPR. And so the latter proposed an "alliance" to the employers. On June 16, Klochkov offered to form an "assembly of social partnership" with the employer side.\(^{61}\) A June 19 report specified a first meeting scheduled for July 8—indicating that consultations had already taken place, and the FNPR's offer was unlikely to be "rejected."\(^{62}\)

July 8 thus saw the founding of the "Russian Assembly of Social Partnership" (Rossiiskaia Assambleia Sotsial'noego Partnerstva—RASP) in Moscow. Rather than a broad labor-employer coalition, however, this was strictly an FNPR-RSPP affair. RASP would not seek to block reform, but to create an effective partnership as an alternative to "class struggle"\(^{63}\)—though it had not been these two partners who had been struggling vs. one another. RASP's foundation was a move "forced" on labor and management by government monopolism and "general legal nihilism."\(^{64}\) The newspaper *Rabochaia tribuna*, co-published by FNPR and RSPP, headlined its story "Two Partners Remain": the third, government, was acting as "a traditional autocrat, enriched by Bolshevik experience." This was, of course, a somewhat whimsical characterization of the Gaidar government, especially when its source was the organ of organizations headed by old apparat types like Klochkov and the RSPP's Arkadi Vol'skii. Still, on their side of the story, the interests of labor and [seasoned, sober] industrial management coincided. Vol'skii stressed the need for "practical" work, and Klochkov hailed the industrialists' readiness to assume "responsibility" for the economy, and the workforce.\(^{65}\)

What was RASP? What did its founding amount to? More event than organization, it can probably best be seen as a quasi-organizational expression of the commonality of interests and positions of large-scale state-dependent industrial managers and the FNPR, arrived at a time when the "industrial lobby" seemed to be on the rise as an organized political force, and just as the government seemed to be standing still—or retreating—on critical elements of its own earlier economic transition agenda.\(^{66}\)
The government's political compromise with the lobby had seen Shumeiko, Khizha and Chernomyrdin enter the cabinet shortly before, provoking speculation about concessions to centrist forces, worried about the orderliness of the transition to the point that one might doubt they retained a view of the objective of that transition. This in turn had fueled further speculation about the political ambitions—and potential—of Vol'skii, as the “head” of the industrialists. At the end of May, the RSPP had spun off a political party in its own image—the “All-Russian Renewal Union” “Obnovlenie”. A month later, Obnovlenie joined with Nikolai Travkin's Democratic Party and Vice-president Aleksandr Rutskoi’s People's Party of Free Russia, and with the “New Generation—New Politics” parliamentary faction to form the centrist “Civic Union (Grazhdanskii Soiuz)” bloc—soon after had come the foundation of RASP.

Civic Union would “make the running” as an ostensibly broad-based constructive opposition to the policies and practices of the Yeltsin-Gaidar team of youngish reform economists (not “experienced managers”) in the cabinet, and push for priority state support to critical [state] industry, to fend off possible “Kuwaitization” of Russia—its relegation by the world to the status of large-scale resource exporter and, as such, able to provide wealth and Western living standards to the minority appropriately situated, but only poverty for the rest. FNPR, though evidently “invited,” did not join Civic Union directly; but Klochkov indicated in July that FNPR was seeking a political partner, a party of bloc with which to ally. A “shopping expedition,” driven by the union’s interest “only in the socio-economic aspects of... cooperation,” it went beyond whatever clout the FNPR could exercise in the trilateral and on the factory floor, to explore the parliamentary-electoral arena and, presumably, the possibility of exerting influence on who the FNPR’s governmental “social partners” would be. “We are,” Klochkov said, “interested in rendering support at any level of elections to those candidates who adhere to the social policy of the trade unions.” Creating RASP had been, in his words, an “intermediate stage” in this process, but one that had revealed, in the government’s conciliatory reaction, the power that the unions, in organized concert with employers, possessed. FNPR was not to conclude its search with a formal marriage to any political partner, however.

**Routinization of Futility?**

As 1992 wore on toward autumn, the utility of the RTK was subject to more doubt, its procedures to more criticism—none of which would quite lead to its abandonment. A political sideshow of a sort, it was neither powerful enough to become the forum for arbitrating the
intractable problems that were its common fare, nor quite marginal enough to be let go. The high political drama of cabinet reshuffles, growing confrontations between the parliament and the president, and the impending crisis that at the end of the year would see Yeltsin sacrifice Gaidar and install the industrialist Chernomyrdin as the new premier, all tended to cast the mantle of obscurity over the commission. Still, its operations and problems were a kind of index of the problems that provided much of the "stuff" of the ongoing political conflicts at the highest level.

Personnel shifts changed some of the RTK players. Burbulis left the cabinet to become an advisor to Yeltsin, out of the direct line of political fire, and with this move left his role in the RTK. Shokhin left the labor ministry to take the cabinet portfolio on foreign economic relations. His successor, Gennadi Melikian, found himself in a similar situation to Shokhin's, in a context hardly altered since January: as he put it, in the arena of social partnership, the government was supposed to judge between labor and employers, but "the employers are not owners, but hired employees of the government." No paradox, then, in the two-vs.-one pattern of RTK political wrangling, in which the government alone acted as a restraining force on the upward spiral of wages—a job, he put it somewhat plaintively, that employers did for themselves in the West. But, sounding somewhat "centrist-industrialist" himself, he stressed the minimal level of unemployment vs. the earlier dire projections, and expressed support for a policy of "selective help" to enterprises. This was, ultimately, a financial-budgetary rather than a "social" matter—all factories could not be helped. But an overall policy of harsh denial and forced closures would otherwise generate joblessness at levels socially and politically impermissible.

Government policy, however thus moderated, could not satisfy FNPR. In September, the union federation focused on what it deemed—correctly—the government's attempt to deprive it of its (largely government funded) welfare functions. The "social insurance fund," whose administration was one of the central functions of the old AUCCTU and now of its FNPR descendant, was by a presidential decree in August to be placed under government control. Klochkov reacted in the RTK:

We are categorically against it. We regard it as an offense against the interests of working people and we will not allow that part of this money be taken away from them and sent to mend holes in the budget. There are plenty of those, of course.70

Thus Klochkov criticized the government for budgetary holes, while ignoring the fact that FNPR's social insurance fund represented a claim on that budget, with hole-creating
capacity; nor did he entertain the notion that if the decree stuck, the government would presumably assume the social insurance obligation, as well as the funds.

But, in fact, Klochkov and the FNPR could be excused a bit of persecution complex in this connection. From spring on, the government, with support from Sotsprof and the miners' NPG, had been attacking this legacy of official trade union monopoly. In June, an attempt had been made to put the fund under a commission including FNPR and other union representatives, with a majority of the seats going to government representatives. No action had been taken, and the constitutional court was left to grapple with the issue. After the founding of RASP, Melikian also made some apparently conciliatory moves on this matter toward Klochkov. The issue was not likely to go away: funds flowing from the government, plus the accumulated resources and properties of FNPR, represented an inheritance that could not but make it a target. In November, the "St. Petersburg Entrepreneurs' Forum" would send a letter to Yeltsin, attacking FNPR's continuing resistance to reform, and calling on the president to declare all the FNPR's accumulated Soviet-era properties state property, and place it all on the privatization block, adding to the state assets pledged to the mass voucherization process then about to begin.

From Trilateralism to Bilateralism

October developments were to manifest another sign of disenchantment with the trilateral context. In a reprise of its 1991 gambit, the FNPR announced a "day of protest" for October 24—the substance of its complaints much what they had been for the whole year. But on October 20, government and the FNPR (not the whole labor side of the RTK) met bilaterally. Labor minister Melikian led the government side, Romanov, evidently, the FNPR team. The sides agreed to further talks in the format of a "conciliation commission" (soglasitel'naia kommissiia) with the first of those meetings scheduled for October 27. Melikian characterized some of the FNPR demands as "divorced from reality" but signalled an intent to come to grips with others. On state credits for ailing factories, he agreed that "a consideration of market and social [emphasis added] factors" was required; however, state-imposed price ceilings on milk, bread and potatoes were rejected. On October 22, Yeltsin and Klochkov met in the Kremlin, expressing support for "expanding constructive contacts between presidential structures and the trade unions." Though there had been some implication that the October 24 protest had been given a month's postponement after the Melikian-Romanov meeting, Klochkov reported that he had told a concerned Yeltsin at their October 22 meeting that FNPR unions "had contained protests" as long as they could, and
that whatever came on October 24 "would be a grass-roots initiative." The day, in the
event, saw no massive disruptions--after it, Klochkov seemed to be overplaying a not-
necessarily-strong hand when he said that FNPR would not support demands that had been
heard for the government's wholesale resignation--but thought that it would be "enough to
replace a few key ministers." The October 27 conciliation commission meeting did take place, with most of its effort
devoted to questions of enterprise support, defense industry conversion, and privatization
procedures. Whether such was the stuff of drama or not, bilateralism seemed, in the fall of
1992, to be replacing trilateralism. (It had, in fact, been tried earlier in the year, in the first
wave of strikes by educational and medical personnel, when government and FNPR had, quite
logically for a matter that involved "budget personnel" only, held bilateral discussions as a
preliminary to reporting their results to the full RTK.) The government also seemed to be
structuring new bilateral contacts with employers. Gaidar, in his role as acting Prime
Minister, led a group of cabinet officers on October 25 to Togliatti, for a meeting with "about
60 industrial generals." Taxes, credits, and other aspects of industrial policy were discussed.
Gaidar characterized the talks as a step in the "coordination" of government policy with "the
most important representatives" of a major social group "on whom social stability depends,"
and explicitly connected this with the forthcoming Congress of People's Deputies session,
where government policy and personnel would surely be subjected to the now-predictable
attacks. The establishment of an "industrial policy council" was agreed upon; Gaidar
chaired the first meeting of this bilateral body on November 2.

The draft rules say the new council is established to ensure "practical interaction
between the leaders of enterprises and the Government of the Russian Federation,
and the consolidation of their efforts with a view to develop production and
render state assistance to entrepreneurial activity."

The council's main tasks, in accordance with the draft rules, are "to inform the
Government of the Russian Federation about the stance of the industrial
community with regard to major social and economic problems," "to prepare
proposals for creating conditions facilitating the satisfaction of consumer demand
and involvement of industrialists in the process of implementing reforms" among
others.

Deputy premier Shumeiko, at the meeting, expressed hopes that the council would
supply the government with data and expertise, also noting--perhaps with pious hope, or
tongue in cheek--that "the Council has nothing to do with politics, especially politicking."
Complaints about the new structures were not long in emerging. After its October 27 [first] meeting, the government-FNPR conciliation commission suffered a “flop” in its second scheduled coming together (November 2 or 3). The government had failed to deliver its responses to the FNPR positions by the promised date of October 31. Deputy labor minister Kudiukin visited FNPR on November 2, with apologies for the delay, which he attributed to government overload in preparing for the December session of the Congress of People’s Deputies. But only two of the seven government team officials showed up at meeting time, and the meeting was cancelled, with a re-schedule date of November 6 at the labor ministry—some guarantee that a government-side quorum would be present. Nezavisimaia gazeta held out some hope that this encounter might go off smoothly.

...there has been a fairly fortunate selection of issues to “get the ball rolling”: on the one hand, the social consequences of conversion in defense spheres, relieving the lot of which is something the government has been working on for some time even without pressure from the trade unions, and on the other, increasing the minimum wage, an area where it is very possible that compromise will be reached.

With regard to the general outcome of the talks, they are most likely to go on for a month at least. So “explosive” November will pass by more or less quietly. But the blackmail threat of strike action after 23 November if the talks do not achieve their goal is not causing much alarm in the government because, according to [Kudiukin, “FNPR] is incapable of stirring the masses to strike action on its own, it can only ‘paralyze’ by mounting spontaneous disturbances and ‘directorial strikes’.”

With respect to proximate goals, however, things were not progressing smoothly. FNPR’s minimum wage proposal involved raising the then 900 rubles/month level to 3375-4000 as of December 1. The government countered with a figure of 1800, with a further lift to 2250 in the first quarter of 1993. No agreement was reached; one report indicated that the union had “accepted” an immediate rise to 2250, but was insisting on an upward adjustment in December.

Klochkov reflected on the month-long work of the conciliation commission on November 30. Satisfied with agreements on state support for the arms industry and its workers, he was less pleased on the wage issue: evidently convinced (however grudgingly) that the state budget could not support a 3375 ruble minimum wage, he wanted an early specification from the government as to when in the first quarter of 1993 it would raise the
minimum to 2250 (making it clear that the government had not made the concession implied in the last paragraph). 85

Government-FNPR talks thus ended with neither total agreement, nor with a complete parting of the ways. It is probable that FNPR had its eye more on the December Congress of People's Deputies session, in the hopes—not really misplaced—that it would produce changes at cabinet level, and policy moderation in line with some of the union's recurrent demands. Veterans of both the tri- and bilateral processes put different "spins" on their reviews of the experience. Kudiukin asserted that the conciliation talks had been "suggested by three ministries" so that, outside the trilateral, government might find out what FNPR wanted—and stressed that these had been talks with the FNPR alone, not with the whole labor side of the RTK. The unions, he said—with FNPR clearly in mind—make threats and demonstrations rather than performing real work at the factory level, but had firmly mastered one word: "gimme (dai)." FNPR Council secretary Solov'ev saw things differently. "The trilateral commission yammers on about these problems. But it is necessary to solve them, right? So FNPR sent its demands to the president of the country, and he obviously decided direct talks would be more appropriate. Let him send our demands to the trilateral commission, let them consider them there. For us the form of talks is not important, but their content, their results." Among the results he was unhappy with was the failure of the government to link the minimum wage level to the ruble cost of the "minimum physical norm"—the calculated necessary "floor" in purchasing power/living standard. 86

Later on, Melikian and Klochkov made joint statements. Tax breaks for enterprise social infrastructure and investment expenses, credits for defense conversion, were among the accomplishments of the conciliation commission; the sides had not been able to agree on subsidizing bread, milk and potato prices, nor on the share of factory assets that might be transferred to work collectives. The sides would continue to meet on issues unresolved, and to work toward a 1993 general agreement. The conciliation commission would "inform" the RTK on the results of its deliberations. 87

Hardly in the style of partnerly joint statements, though, was a December 18 interview with Solov'ev of the FNPR council. He accused Gaidar of trying to freeze the wages of budget-funded workers, of delaying the effective payment dates of salary supplements, and of trying to shift responsibility for these to local governments (which were, of course, in various ways denying the central government tax revenues, and thus might reasonably be expected to pick up some of the slack even in the absence of laws which did give them primary responsibility for pay to budget personnel). The new minimum wage of 2250 rubles was too
little, vs. a physical minimum of 2600-2800 in October—what was "really" needed, on average, was 5800 rubles per month. The labor ministry's argument that such a level was impossible--based on the International Labor Office's principle that the minimum wage must take account not only of physical minima, but of the capacities of state budgets--was "not convincing." The government's promise to index minimum wages by the second quarter of 1993 was "to be believed only with difficulty." Solov'ev ended on a class-conflict, populist note. FNPR demands were not the cause of price rises. Monopoly producers [many of whom were the "industrialist" allies of the FNPR], the rising salaries of bosses "and the clerks around them" (an appeal to the visceral distrust of office workers by shop-floor personnel who often out-earn them)—these were the blameworthy parties. Reforms, then, had to "come not at the cost of people, but to their benefit [!] Without such normal social partnership, civil peace in the country is impossible."90

Klochkov, finally, reviewed the year of social partnership from the FNPR leadership perspective on December 25. FNPR, he insisted, sat at the table to represent the interests of hired labor in securing a fair market price for that labor. It rejected the government's "harsh" monetarist course, the "pseudoliberal models" it followed. Sparing for the moment the usual disparaging comments about Sotsprof or the NPG, he protested the tendency (presumably the government's) to divide trade unions into "good" and "bad"—social partnership could not work if unions were not to be treated as equal partners.90 FNPR's social insurance fund, then, should remain with FNPR: once one got beyond "politics" and attempts to separate the funds from the FNPR, as Klochkov put it, "logic and facts argue that a self-managing social security fund under the aegis of the union is now, in the transition period, the most appropriate (preemlymyi) variant."

Oddly enough, as it seemed, after the various attacks on governmental policy and ill-faith, and the accusations directed at Sotsprof as a government stooge, Klochkov praised the potential of the trilateral commission. It could become, in 1993, a "pivot" (sterzhn') of the system of social partnership—he hoped for a presidential decree on its continuance soon. (By this point, Klochkov probably had some inkling of changes that would come in a commission whose continued existence for 1993 had not yet been publicly guaranteed—changes that were likely at this point to please FNPR.)

Conclusion

As I warned readers at the outset, much of this paper is, designedly, a "chronicle," and given the cascade of events the instrument of trilateralism was called upon to deal with, it
may have a certain breathless "and then...and then..." quality. But with the RTK, as with many political institutions of whatever uncertain life-span in the new postcommunist Russia, establishing precisely what happened is an important—though not easy—task. A free but partisan press, selective in its coverage, may provide more information than the old Soviet version, but it does not necessarily engender clarity. Establishing what happened has been a matter of using the press, other media, and of interviews with many interested in, and/or participants in, the processes of labor politics. There are still gaps in the picture of the RTK and its operations in 1992, which one may hope will be filled in the future, but the treatment in this essay will serve to give the reader some sense of the RTK in action—whatever the lack of clarity in its mandate, the lack of resources and clout at its disposal, the lack of full commitment to it as the prime forum whereby old and new forces in the chaotic Russian economy might resolve their differences, on the part of the three sides.

The RTK's was surely a lackluster record. But "failure," if such it was, needs to be judged against the failure of other institutions in the same year. Neither parliament, nor cabinet, nor other organized expressions of the new politics were notably successful in 1992. One has the impression that averting chaos in 1992 may ultimately be regarded as evidence that it was not so bad a year, and that little more than this might reasonably expected from new institutions with so little history, and linked so closely to the personalities of those who staffed or participated in them.

The question then of "why" things happened the way they did may be seen as a very complicated one, requiring for its explication recourse to a large literature on the comparative politics of corporatism, social/political movements, labor politics etc. as well as a thoroughgoing familiarity with the Soviet-era "prehistory" of labor politics and failed perestroika. Or it may be an altogether simpler one, the answers to which are obvious from the record since August 1991. I do not imply any prejudgment of the utility of the broader literature by opting, in this conclusion, for the second approach. It is still early going for the political processes of post-Soviet Russia; the process of emergence from the old structures of state socialism and the command-administrative economy is historically unprecedented, just as the emergence of those structures was. If the conceptual frameworks of the old Soviet/East European and "comparative communist studies" fields are deficient in giving insight into what is happening now, it is not clear to me that—for the present—the broader literature affords much more.

Why, then—first of all—"corporatism"? If anything, because it seemed the most "logical" among a range of less than optimal designs whereby labor politics could be
conducted in what looked like being the concrete conditions of 1992 in the Russian Federation.

The government could not escape a major role in regulating “social-labor relations,” even if it sought to do so—that the role might be played as one member of a commission tasked with such regulation was about as much as could be expected. What was very much a non-corporatist mode of regulation in the United States, where government largely kept “hands off” while capital and labor did their dealing, was unrealistic. What West European market democracies had, in varying degrees, opted for, on the basis both of more state ownership in mixed economies and a social-democratic conception of the appropriate role of the state, bore a greater resemblance to the best balancing of forces and emergent interests that Russia could hope for. But there was, indeed, as much “hope” as realism in the choice.

A functioning corporatism, commonsensically, requires that the lines of demarcation separating the interests of the parties be clear. This was, from several angles, a condition that the realities of the RTK could not satisfy. On the union/labor side, this was first of all a matter of the FNPR—its politics, size, and inclusiveness. FNPR, clearly, aimed its demands at the government, to which it remained hostile. Its initial concept of the government side would have had the latter group all the major state industries on its side—the major employers—rather than have state industries on the “employer” side of the trilateral. FNPR, according to its Soviet-period design, included on the branch principle the workers, white-collar employees and managements of plants and associations, as well as regional union councils whose functions and constituencies were ill-defined, but surely broader than “labor representation” as such. The inclusiveness, and the long-automatic dues checkoff, made for the massive numbers the FNPR could claim. But with the numbers, and the weak affiliations so many felt to such an organization, came an unwieldiness. Assuming total honesty and sincerity on the FNPR’s part, it was hard to see how its national council could really stay in effective touch with the shop-floor moods and fears of such diverse groups as it claimed to speak for. The miners’ NPG, the airline pilots’ and air traffic controllers’ unions, independent of the FNPR, “knew” their smaller, occupationally better-defined memberships better, and had agendas different from the FNPR’s, as well as histories that made their relations with FNPR anything but solidaristic. Their issues—on which they did engage the government, often in hard bargaining—were narrower focused than the broad range of complaints that FNPR repeatedly laid before the government side. Sotsprof, finally, was harder to characterize: embracing hired labor, especially in the private sector, but also small business proprietors;
reliably pro-market and pro-government. That the FNPR could attack it as a governmental stalking horse was not entirely surprising or unjustified, whatever Klochkov & co.’s agenda.

On the employers’ side, the problem of interest demarcation was simultaneously obvious, and complex. If there were no strong conflicts on the employer side between state and private enterprise representatives, there were different “stakes” in government policy. Financial/commercial interests were concerned with taxation and legal regulation, but were not dependent on government subsidies or credits. The various associations that represented state industries, on the other hand, operated on behalf of “dependents” of the government in a direct sense. The managerial strata had specific agendas for survival, for particular modes of privatization that would benefit them while preserving selective ties to the state as buffers against economic difficulty. On the whole, they aimed at maximizing their own room for maneuver while limiting the government’s ability to cut the strings of dependence. As Kudiukin put it, the state might still be the “owner” of enterprises, but it could not really act in the role of employer, or dispose of the prerogatives generally associated with that status. The problem, in its 1992 form, went back to the “radicalization” of Gorbachev-era reform in its late phases. After the adoption of the December 1990 law on enterprises—which effectively superseded the 1987 state enterprise law—

the administration of state enterprises received a very high degree of autonomy in practically all spheres of their activity.... Gradually the independence of administration also grew in determining product prices and in selection of their own economic partners. This process of liberation was completed in the liberalization of prices in January 1992 in those branches where it occurred. Today the boss of a state enterprise disposes of all the rights of an entrepreneur, save property rights, but directly because of their absence he bears practically no responsibility at all (in the present confusion it is even unclear which government organ has the right to dismiss a director guilty of wrongdoing.91

From another equally important angle, the RTK’s failure to produce decisions that stuck, its entanglement in what seemed to be never-ending political skirmish, derived from the failure of all three sides, in various ways, to “deliver” what, even in a general way, might be regarded as their constituencies.

On the labor side, FNPR in this sense played from weakness, but played “as well” as it could. Too large and diverse, too distant from its millions of members, the leadership could not really produce the sort of mass general strike whose repeated threat was its stock-in-trade; this, it seems, the government came to understand. Nor could the central FNPR leadership prevent wildcat strikes by affiliates. They might try to take advantage of such, or not, but
they could no more deliver quiescence than mass militancy. That 1992 was not a more strike-ridden year had more to do with the factors that left much of grass-roots Russia confused, demoralized and anxious in the face of stern economic trials, than with any ability of the FNPR to control its millions of members.

The situation was different with the NPG. Tough, with a leadership tightly linked to its base in the militant underground coal cutters, it got much of what it wanted from the government (allowing for the government’s difficulties in delivering cash for escalated wages) because of its concentrated clout and the economy’s need for coal. It took care of “its own” in classically narrow “craft union” fashion. NPG did not really need the forum of the trilateral commission at all to do this--Sergeev might just as well have stayed off the RTK and still gotten what he did.

Least “active” on the whole was the employer side, for reasons that should be clear from the preceding narrative. The segment of financial/banking/commercial interests had no major “labor problems” that counterposed them to their employees, for the simple reason that the numbers of the latter were small, their pay good, and their attitudes likely to be more “flexible” than average for the labor force. These might agree with the state-sector employers on many issues, but could not really speak for them. The managers of large-scale state industry, it might be said, were only indirectly represented on the employer side in any case; FNPR had wanted them all on the “government” side, along with the non-industrial officials, since it was the government that was its target. This defect reduced the admittedly moderate possibility that, as privatization plans proceeded through the year, some distinct large industrial employer voice would arise, less linked to the interests expressed by FNPR.

The government side, obviously, failed in a sense to represent itself, given the frequent absences of some of its major players at RTK sessions. Beyond this evidence that the government may, from the outset, have nurtured only modest expectations about what might be accomplished, there was also a problem of governmental inconsistency and indecisiveness. “Shock therapy”--however much a mix of rhetoric and concrete policy--had been the government’s line from January 2 on. But with the late spring “opening” to the industrial lobby that saw Chernomyrdin, Khizha and Shumeiko join the cabinet, what sort of policy, what manner and pace of transition to the market, what degree of involvement of itself the government stood for, became less clear. Whoever spoke for the government would find fewer clear positions around which to craft any authoritative statement of policy. The government had played the major role in the invention of corporate trilateralism. But in its search for its appropriate role on the RTK, it was neither fortunate enough to find disputes
assuming a form that it could referee as a “social partner,” nor tough (or foolhardy) enough to pursue the sorts of policy with which 1992 had, at least in rhetoric, begun. Ultimately, in the sideshow that was the RTK, the critical underlying problem was the same as the one that underlay the "high politics" of economic transition. A new government, committed to political democracy, had come into power before the critical social and economic building blocks of liberalism, including organizations of homo economicus on the employer and labor sides, had emerged. In the West, especially the West of liberal corporatism which Russia sought to emulate, the emergence of such organizations and interests had preceded the development of democracy. The new government of Russia was less historically fortunate: its political burdens included the creation of those building blocks—a Herculean task. In their absence, there was little for any corporatist mechanism to regulate.

March 7, 1994


10. Ibid.


12. Ibid.


15. Though relations between the two air-related unions were strained at times, both would, on the RTK, form part of a predictable opposition to the FNPR.


20. Ibid.


30. Ibid., p. 2.
33. TASS, (Russian), 1022 GMT, March 9, 1992; FBIS, March 10, 1992, p. 31.
39. See Kommersant, no. 11 (March 9-16), 1992, p. 2; see also Elizabeth Teague, "Russian Government," p. 22.
40. Later in the year, the NPG would express regrets that it had "gone along" with the FNPR coal union in the latter's demands for across-the-board increases for all coal industry workers and employees (not only the coal-face workers who were NPG's base) in Vorkuta and later in the Kuzbass.
41. RT, March 7, 1992, p. 3.
42. Trud, March 14, 1992, p. 2.
45. RT, April 3, 1992, p. 3.
46. Ibid.
47. See FBIS, Mar. 14, 1992, pp. 36-37.
52. Interfax (English), 1309 GMT, June 3, 1992; FBIS, June 9, 1992, p. 44.
54. Ibid., p. 45.
55. Ibid., p. 47.
57. Interfax (English), 1409 GMT, June 11, 1992; FBIS, June 12, 1992, p. 43.
59. See Kirichenko, op. cit.
64. Interfax (English), 1539 GMT, July 8, 1992; FBIS, July 9, 1992, p. 44.
68. See ibid., p. 3.


72. Ostankino TV (Moscow), First Program, 1700 GMT, Sept. 4, 1992; FBIS, Sept. 8, 1992, p. 27.


74. ITAR-TASS (English), 1109 GMT, Nov. 23, 1992; FBIS, Nov. 23, 1992, p. 39.


89. RT, Dec. 8, 1992, p. 2.


