

# Workers' councils in Russia

**I**NDUSTRIAL output in Russia has dropped to less than half its 1991 level. Even the government says that one quarter of the population has been pushed below the poverty line.

While a tiny minority — ex-bureaucrats and gangsters — have got very rich very quickly, the transition to a capitalist market economy, has, paradoxically, led to the breakdown of ordinary market relations.

Companies are not paid by their customers, and don't pay their suppliers, and no-one pays taxes. With a continuing collapse of industrial production, if the government tries to break the trap by printing more rubles to cover wages and pensions, then it risks restarting the destructive super-inflation of 1992.

About 80% of the workforce is now in the private sector, but capitalist normality is still a long way off.

According to the latest survey, only about a quarter of the workforce are being paid their wages on time and in full. Millions of workers — and pensioners, and soldiers — have received no money for up to six months.

The economic disruption in Russia is qualitatively greater than in other ex-Stalinist economies in Eastern Europe, where some, like Hungary and Poland, are even showing respectable growth (industrial production up 5.8% in Hungary, and 13.9% in Poland, over the last year). Society was more thoroughly pulverised and atomised in Russia — for fifty years, the only individual initiative fostered or even permitted was that of the spiv, the wide-boy and the nark — and military production commanded maybe 40% of the whole economy.

Russia also has a bigger workers' movement than the East European states. There is a big independent miners' union, and the former state-stooge unions have shown more life than elsewhere. The unions are still highly bureaucratised, and they have been dragged into dubious alliances — with Yeltsin, with the revived Communist Party of Gennady Zyuganov, and (in a formal electoral alliance) with the managers of big industrial enterprises, with whom trade unionists were supposed to share a common interest in stopping those enterprises being shut down.

Yet new reports — still fragmentary



— indicate a new turn.

A report by Fred Weir in the *Hindustan Times* (4 December) told of "spontaneously-organised workers' councils which are taking over local government functions and posing a direct challenge to regional authorities and trade union leaders alike.

"The 'salvation committees' are essentially the same idea as the 'soviets' of workers and soldiers that spread throughout Russia during the revolutions of 1905 and 1917... [They] have spread to every major community of the Kuzbass region... and are growing increasingly confident..."

The miners have called for the removal of the government, but without being able to propose any clear alternative. The workers' councils control mining towns and cities in remote Siberia, far from the centres of power: information about them is hard to get in Moscow as well as in London.

The workers' councils emerged together with a strike by miners, teachers and other workers demanding payment of wage arrears. The government seems to have bought off that strike, for now, but that does not necessarily mean that the workers' councils have disappeared.

Valery Zuyev, a mine electrician who heads the committee in the 250,000-population town of Prokopyevsk, told the *Guardian* (18 December): "It's like Lenin said: if the authorities can't govern in a

new way, and the masses do no want to live in the old way, a third force appears". The report by James Meek in the *Guardian* continues: "There have been calls to buy weapons... the committees unite workers from all sectors. 'If they drive you into a corner, if your children are hungry, if the constitution isn't respected, the only thing is to demand the government be changed', said Mr Zuyev. 'If you can't achieve that peacefully, you do it by force'."

Russia's Federation of Independent Trade Unions held its congress on 5-7 December and, according to Renfrey Clarke, Moscow correspondent for Australia's *Green Left Weekly*, "The congress had an atmosphere quite different from previous top-level gatherings of the union federation. While the delegates were still overwhelmingly full-time union officials, many of them were new figures, freshly elected and in much closer touch with rank and file unionists than the people they had replaced. For the first time, the sense was present that the participants in the congress were under pressure from the mass of union members. The dominant view among delegates to the Federation's congress was that Russian labour needed to build its own political structures". Only by such structures being built, and winning political power, can Russia be saved from mass pauperism and barbarism.

Alan Gilbert

# Free jailed Indonesian activists!

**O**N 12 December the trial began in Indonesia of SBSI union leader Muchtar Pakpahan, jailed by the strong-arm Suharto dictatorship following the strikes and demonstrations in July last year. Starting on 12 December, about 20 members of the People's Democratic Party (PRD), including Dita Sari, president of the other main independent union organisation, the PPBI, were also brought to court.

Both Pakpahan and the PRD members are charged with "subversion", which can carry the death penalty. The indictment against the PRD members

charges that they "undermined the ideology of the state", made "political speeches which criticised the government", and conducted "demonstrations demanding an improvement in the political system".

A tremendous lead in international working-class solidarity for the Indonesian labour activists has been given by Australian dockers, who have taken industrial action on several occasions since September to delay Indonesian shipping and cargoes. Thirteen ships have been affected to date, and the latest action was in the port of Newcastle

on 14 December. Now that the Australian government has pushed through a new labour law outlawing "secondary" action, the dockers' boycotts are illegal, but union National Secretary John Coombs declares: "The Suharto government is using the subversion laws to crush, imprison, and possibly even execute any of its opponents engaged in peaceful, legitimate political and labour activity".

Wilson, one of the PRD activists on trial, has managed to get a letter "to the workers of Indonesia" out of jail. In it he declares:

"Our worker friends are also in a prison like us. You are imprisoned by a wage system that is unjust... you are imprisoned because you are not allowed to establish a free trade union!

"It is the rulers and businessmen that have created this situation. And it is the rulers who have imprisoned us too. And all so that business's profits expand, oblivious of the misery of the workers... The factories are like prisons, with their own grim-faced security forces and great high walls...

"Workers of Indonesia whom we love, when we were first arrested we were gripped by fear. But after months of interrogation, we have come to understand that it is the rulers who are afraid of us... the rulers are afraid when they see the workers increasingly confident in the PPBI and SBSI...

"We know we are present in the hearts of the workers. And in these fearful and uncertain times, what is in our hearts can be the light of our life...

"We pray this will not be our last letter. While workers suffer, there will always be in the prisons those who have defended the workers. Here inside the prison, we know that as long as we struggle together, the workers will win their prosperity..."

It is up to the labour movement internationally to make sure that this is indeed not the jailed Indonesian labour activists' last letter. Fax letters of protest to the Indonesian Minister of Justice, Uahi Utoyo Usman S.H., on 00 62 21 525 3095, and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ali Alatas S.H., on 00 62 21 380 5511. Send copies to the Indonesian Embassy, 38 Grosvenor Square, London W1, and to Action in Solidarity with Indonesia and East Timor, 00 612 9690 1381.

## Serbian protests continue

**A**S we go to press, the streets of Serbia's capital, Belgrade, have been filled for over 40 days running by demonstrators protesting against the vicious regime of Slobodan Milosevic. Despite often freezing weather, the protests have continued without a break since late November, when the opposition won the elections for 17 major local authorities, including Belgrade, and the regime cancelled the results.

On 3 January Milosevic signalled the beginnings of a climbdown, acknowledging that nine of the 17 local authorities had indeed been won by the opposition. The protests, however, continue.

Since 1991 Milosevic has taken imperialistic war to the rest of former Yugoslavia, whipping up Serbian chauvinism. The result for the Serbian people has been little but defeat, brutality against minorities within Serbia, economic ruin, and a political regime little looser than the old Stalinist system, with independent and dissident media regularly suppressed.

Much of the opposition is right-wing. Some, for example, denounce Milosevic for not being Serbian-chauvinist enough, and "selling out" in Kosovo, where Serbian rules colonial-style over a 90% Albanian population.

The students of Belgrade University, however, have declared: "We are not taking sides between the party in power and the opposition — what we insist upon is the rule of the law. Any government which is not willing to acknowledge its own electoral defeat does not deserve our support and we overtly oppose it".

They demand the establishment of a

new electoral authority and the resignation of the Chancellor and student vice-chancellor of the university. Unfortunately they have also approached the Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church to bless the students' cause. The Orthodox Church, the backbone of Serbian chauvinism, has mostly supported Milosevic, but is now backing the opposition.

According to Belgrade journalist Branka Kaljevic: "This is the third time in Milosevic's ten-year rule that students have come out in the streets to protest. They first protested in March 1991. The authorities welcomed them with tanks, tear gas and brutal police repression... The students booed down both the then highly popular Radovan Karadzic [the Bosnian-Serb warlord] and the Serb Patriarch Pavle who had called on them to disperse..."

Many students then left the country to avoid being called up for Milosevic's war. Another round of protest in June 1992 again failed to topple Milosevic, and again many students went abroad. "Now, four years later", writes Branka Kaljevic, "a new generation is in the streets".

Whether a section of this new generation can spearhead a powerful and consistently democratic opposition, and link up with the workers, we cannot tell. But only that outcome offers hope for a liveable new settlement among the peoples of ex-Yugoslavia, especially in Bosnia-Herzegovina, where partition into three hostile and chauvinist "ethnic" statelets remains the reality under the surface of the Dayton agreement.

Chris Reynolds

# General Strike in Israel

**W**ITH a general strike movement from 26 December to 1 January, Israeli workers have forced the right-wing government to back down on a cut in tax credits for women workers.

The strikes reached their peak after Histadrut union leader Shlomo Shani was arrested. He was seized by police on 29 December at a Haifa chemicals workers' demonstration, on the grounds that earlier strikes had breached a court order. On 30 December strikes hit the ports, the railways, Israel's aircraft and military industries, the Post Office, TV, radio, banks, gas and electric companies, government offices, and many others. Shani was released; then on 1 January Parliament voted down the tax-credit cut.

For decades, left and right in Israel have been defined more by attitudes to the Palestinians than by direct class issues. The majority of the Jewish working class have supported the right-wing parties, while the middle class voted for the Labour Party. But the structures have begun to shift.

The Histadrut used to be a very odd trade union movement, closely tied to the state. Alongside its trade-union "department" it had other departments which owned enterprises, thus making it also Israel's biggest employer, and ran a large part of the social welfare system. Enforced transfer of its industrial assets to private owners, the erosion of the Labour establishment's grip on the state machine, alongside a decline in the Labour Party's control in the Histadrut, have made the Histadrut more like a normal trade union.

Now the Netanyahu government has committed itself to what Netanyahu called "a Thatcherite revolution" in Israel. The tax credit cut



Netanyahu goes Thatcherite

was a fallback proposal after Netanyahu's first favourite for budget cuts, a charge for all visits to the doctor, had been defeated in Parliament.

The government is pressing for extensive privatisations, and the employers — happy though they are to be "liberal" when it's a matter of measures which might open Arab markets to them — are driving for the replacement of collective bargaining by individual contracts, and threatening to abolish check-off for union dues. Chamber of Commerce Danny Gillerman frantically denounced the general strike as "a Bolshevik move".

Some socialists in the West have written off the Israeli-Jewish working class as an imperialist-minded elite hopelessly tied to their bosses, but plainly it is now time for them to reconsider.

The path to Arab-Jewish workers' unity, based on recognising the self-determination of both Palestinians and Israeli Jews and joint struggle against the bosses on both sides, will still be long; but it is possible.

*Rhodri Evans*

## A new workers' party in Israel?

**L**OUIS Roth, the chairman of the workers' council at Bank Leumi (one of the two largest banks) and Chaim Katz, chairman of the workers' council at Israel Military Industries, have begun talking up the idea of an independent workers' party in Israel. Israel already has a Labor Party, but many Labor Party leaders are estranged from the trade union movement in this country. Some of Israel's top industrialists are identified closely with that party, and yet they openly denounced the recent general strike and sided with Netanyahu.

Strangely, Histadrut chairman Amir Peretz, a Labor Party member himself, responded to the Roth-Katz proposal without condemning it: "The workers' leaders feel that a new situation has emerged . . . maybe it's best to build ourselves up as a 'balance of power' in the Knesset to protect our interests. I'm hearing about this direction [building a workers' party] not only at the level of the workers' leaders, but also out in the field. There are the first buds, there's the chemistry, but sometimes one shouldn't translate Utopian ideas into reality . . . In spite of that, I can't promise that this won't happen. I'm divided myself.

There's no doubt that today the workers don't have enough allies in the Knesset."

Militant workers at Haifa Chemicals booed Labor Party politicians like Yosi Beilin — while cheering the Communist union leader Binyamin Gonen. And the growing rift between Labor Party industrialists like Benny Gaon and trade unionists like Amir Peretz seems to make their continued co-existence in a single party impossible.

Likud supporters in the workers' councils were among the strike leaders last week, and some of them rejected personal appeals coming from their party's leadership to call off what Netanyahu was labelling a "political" strike. In some sectors, Likud unionists were more militant than their Labor party counterparts.

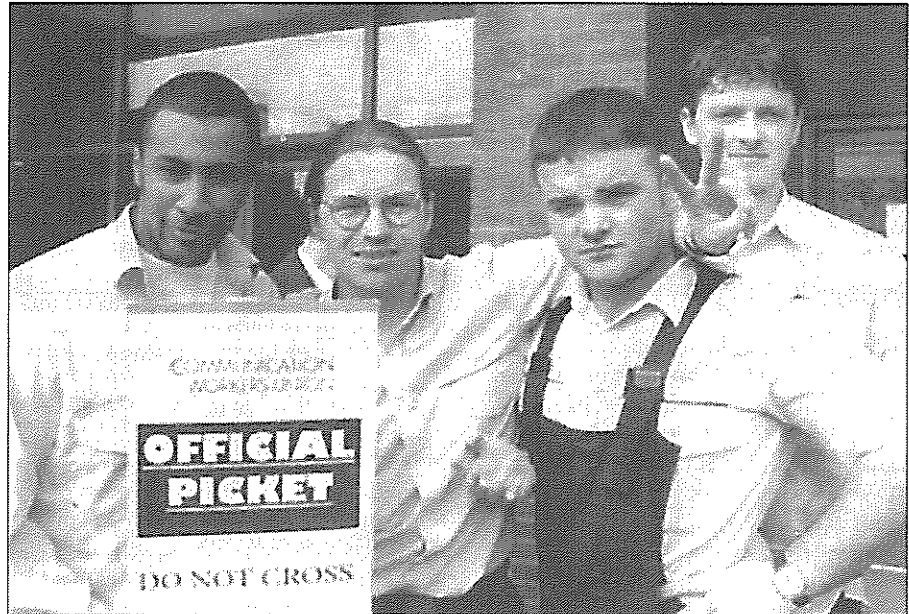
We are seeing signs in both major parties of a break-up along class lines.

Whether an independent workers' party will emerge is presently unclear. But the very fact that the idea has been proposed marks a sea-change in Israeli politics.

*Eric Lee [From BibiWatch, <http://www.ariga.com/bibiwatch/>]*

# Two views of the postal dispute

**"The 1996 Postal Dispute is dead but the issues behind it have not been buried. The CWU membership have not been defeated. They know that and so does management." Two postal workers give their assessments.**



**"The CWU membership have not been defeated"**

## Two-nil up at half-time

**T**O think of the current negotiations as a deal is the wrong approach. Our attitude in London is that we are involved in a long war. There was never going to be a quick victory. It was always going to be a long drawn-out dispute. Now we are at half-time, and we are two-nil up.

If the dispute had been over one issue, for example, a dismissal, then we would have re-started the industrial action after the second ballot. But looking at this dispute and the way it has developed, we've got every confidence that we can get a satisfactory conclusion.

I understand the argument for immediate industrial action, but the threat of industrial action together with the campaign we built up amongst the membership could get us a good deal.

There are a large number of our members who think that tactically it would have been better to have more industrial action. I don't think that is a bad thing. In itself, it is a positive attitude. But, without exception, in London the activists, the people who were the dynamo of the dispute, believe our tactics are right. Sometimes, if you want to give good leadership you have to say things that the members don't necessarily agree with.

National officers will have to negotiate on the shorter working week, five-day working and restructuring because we have established union policy over several conferences on those issues. The

Joint Working Groups were set up to discuss the most controversial things within the overall package.

Our view is that the previous deal offered no real commitments on five-day working or shorter hours. If negotiators bring back a similar deal, we will reject it like the last one.

I dare say Royal Mail will try to impose changes in weak, isolated areas during the talks, but I don't think they will be very successful. Everyone is being very vigilant, and the union, from the top to the bottom, is in a strong negotiating position. Royal Mail will be worried about starting the dispute again and I don't think they are prepared for that at this stage. They might later on!

I wouldn't expect too much from a Labour government. I was a trade unionist under the last Labour government, and it wasn't any easier then.

The issue in the election is not so much whether a Labour government will be better, but that another Tory government would have us lined up for privatisation and destroying the trade union movement, going further than they have ever gone before. They will probably set out to destroy the industry if they get re-elected.

If we don't get a Labour government it will be a nightmare, because the Tories have only been stalled on privatisation. It's on the back-burner.

In fact, we need two strategies: one

if Labour gets elected, and one if the Tories win.

The situation in the union now is good. I have been involved in the union for twenty years and I have never known a situation where the members are having such a big input.

Even two years ago, when management originally came out with the Employee Agenda, the average member expected a fight followed by its implementation. Our campaign and industrial action have completely changed that scenario. We cannot tell how it will turn out, but we are in a far stronger position to move forward.

*Norman Candy, London CWU*

## Who pulled the plug?

**"O**NE moment we had a 60% vote in favour of taking action that would have put the union in the most serious position in its history. The next it all disappeared. It's just like someone pulled the plug."

That comment from a CWU Executive member opposed to the settlement probably sums up best the situation



## SURVEY

To call what was voted on a settlement is stretching things. It has postponed matters. Joint Working Parties (JWPs) are being set up to look at the two most contentious areas, Ways of Working and deliveries, and report back in April. Negotiations on all other outstanding issues will take place between now and then and a single comprehensive Agreement should go to the membership in late spring.

The advantage now rests with Royal Mail. They have a period where, free from official opposition, they can experiment with their ideas in units either daft enough to accept them or too weak to resist them.

[illegible][illegible]

What was missing throughout the dispute was an active rank and file organisation with strong links to the branches. Such a body could have ensured that Executive members did not behave like isolated individuals, but as an alternative leadership to the right-wing Joint General Secretary, Alan Johnson. At crucial moments it could have provided the necessary policies, agreed after full discussion, shown the support that existed in the branches for those policies and provided those Executive members who were tempted to wobble with the necessary backbone to stand firm.

During the dispute supporters of *Workers' Liberty* published 14 strike bulletins to provide the ideas and politics that could lead the strike forward. If, through the dispute, CWU members get a better understanding of the nature of the present union leadership and Royal Mail management, and the need for an active rank and file movement, then the last eight months will have been worth it. We will play an active part in promoting that.

**From the CPGB, BCM Box 928, London WC1N 3XX**

## Letter from Israel

## Who supports Netanyahu?

**T**HE Israeli bourgeoisie and its organisations — Federation of Industrialists, Federation of Chambers of Commerce etc. — openly and vocally support Peres' Labor Party and share Peres' view of "the new Middle East". An offhand answer might be that Netanyahu has taken over the Likud — a party which traditionally gets the majority of working-class votes, though it in no way deserves them, least of all under Netanyahu.

However, Netanyahu gets considerable support from a group of US, Canadian and Australian millionaires, who gave him enormous sums in 1993 to help his campaign to take over the Likud Party, and financed his successful 1996 campaign for Prime Minister.

Every few weeks another new millionaire backer emerges for Netanyahu, the latest being the Jewish banker Safra of Brazil, whose bank in Sao Paulo is one of the biggest in Latin America. Some of these millionaires are fanatical Jewish religious nationalists, such as Erwin Moskowitz of Florida USA, and Yosef Gutnik of Australia — both of whom also gave enormous sums to the settlers and the extreme right. Most of them, however, seem mainly interested in obtaining chunks of the Israeli economy which Netanyahu promises to privatise. Ron Lauder is reported to have his eye on both the Israeli postal authority and the Israeli broadcasting authority.

On 22 November 1996 Netanyahu proclaimed that his main economic aim was "to bring the Thatcher revolution to Israel", which will have the result of "making Israel one of the richest countries in the world." This apparently means bringing his international friends into the Israeli economy.

Still another element, which is most speculated upon, is a connection with the organised crime and "the new millionaires" of the former Soviet Union, who are known to be operating in Israel — where a large Russian community exists.

The contact person — if these contacts really exist (of course

Netanyahu hotly denies them) — would be Netanyahu's chief henchman, Avigdor Lieberman, director of the Prime Minister's Bureau, who is an immigrant from Russia himself and who is in charge of Netanyahu's privatisation plans.

Also, rumours of this kind of connection have arisen around the new Russian Party, headed by the former dissident Nathan (Anatoly) Scharanski, now Minister of Trade and Industry — a party which arose out of nothing to become a major power in Israeli politics, in a way which was never completely explained.

In general, what seems to be shaping up is a fight between the established Israeli bourgeoisie (represented by Labor) and foreign millionaires allied with Netanyahu who intend to carry out "a hostile takeover" of the Israeli economy.

I have a feeling that the first shot was Israeli tax authorities taking the offensive against Rupert Murdoch's Israeli operations, a few weeks ago; Murdoch is also reported to be one of Netanyahu's contacts, and the Prime Minister is known to stay with him on visits to London. It seems to be significant that this affair first got the headlines and then totally disappeared from media attention.

The big question, of course, is what will the workers do? The workers at the public sector companies seem militant, and backed fully by the Histadrut. After some strikes, Netanyahu took a step back and promised the workers that "the smaller companies will be privatised first." He now seems to focus on the other aspect of his "Thatcher revolution": dismantling the Israeli welfare system.

The budget due to be presented to the Knesset in December includes deep cuts in welfare, health and education. But it will not be easy for



Clinton supports Netanyahu

Netanyahu to pass it. There is a rebellion inside his own party, especially from the faction of Foreign Minister Levy, which carries on the populist traditions of the Likud.

Until now, the Likud had much more in common with the Peronist party of Argentina than with the British Tories or the US Republicans. But then Carlos Menem has proved, with the original Peronist party, that such a party can be "tamed"... We will have to see how it develops.

One thing more: established Israeli big business, which has a lot to gain from opening up of the markets of the Arab world to Israeli goods, clearly has an interest in supporting Peres and the peace process. But some smaller industrialists, producing low-quality consumer goods in workshops employing ten or twenty low-paid workers (in the past, Palestinian ones, now migrant workers from different third world countries) seem afraid of competition from similar workshops in the Palestinian territories, where the wages are even lower. The same is true of Israeli farmers, who very much fear agricultural imports from the Palestinian territories or from Jordan. These two sectors clearly have an interest in keeping the borders closed, and regard peace as a threat. Many of them support Netanyahu.

Adam Keller

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