

Is the Soviet Union headed for a fascist crackdown?

by Konstantin George

The strike wave in the U.S.S.R., which by July 20 had spread to the country's three largest coal-mining basins, has brought to a head the systemic crisis engulfing the Russian Empire, guaranteeing dramatic changes and convulsions in the Soviet leadership, and a strategic crisis with unforeseeable consequences. The strikes have been coupled with a never-ending outbreak of national disorders in the entire southern rim of the Soviet Union. The leading cause of the strikes lies in the ever-worsening shortages of food and basic essentials such as soap, detergent, toilet paper, hygienic articles, and medicines. A hungry and angry population, convinced that things will only get worse, has adopted a posture of open revolt, under the maxim, "nothing to lose, everything to gain."

Mikhail Gorbachov has undertaken the biggest gamble of his career, supporting the justified *demands* of the strikers, while condemning the *form* of action—work stoppages—and demagogically using the mass discontent to justify his repeated calls for a purge of party leaders. This line has been faithfully reflected in the Soviet media since the beginning of the strikes in the Kuznetsk Basin, where the strikers' demands have been repeatedly characterized as "legitimate" by *Pravda*, Soviet TV, and other major media.

Evidence is mounting that Gorbachov and the KGB have taken the very risky decision of deliberately trying to bring to a head, prematurely, crises in a few regions at a time, and to divert anti-Moscow protest into inter-ethnic conflicts *among non-Russian nationalities*.

The latest outbreak of violence in the Abkhazia region of Soviet Georgia, which produced an official death toll of 18, and over 200 wounded, is an example of this. The Abkhazian "autonomy" movement is a fraud from top to bottom, led by

Abkhazian Communist Party cadres, and involving an ethnic group that comprises a mere 16% of the region's population. It was the launching of this movement in March, with its demand that Abkhazia leave Georgia and join the Russian Federation as an "autonomous republic," that triggered prematurely the mass Georgian nationalist protests which culminated April 9, in the Tiflis "Bloody Sunday" massacre.

While pursuing this gamble, the specter of the strikes going out of control haunts Gorbachov.

The strike wave has hit the three mining regions that account for nearly three-quarters of all Soviet coal production: the Kuznetsk Basin (Kuzbass) in central Siberia, the Donetsk Basin (Donbass) in the eastern Ukraine, and Karaganda in western Kazakhstan. The strikes have brought the center of nationalist unrest to the Ukraine, the most populous non-Russian republic, and to the Russian heartland itself.

Gorbachov's future on the line

Gorbachov himself confirmed that the crisis threatens the very stability and structure of the Soviet Union, in two speeches, one on July 18 to a hastily convened meeting of party regional leaders in Moscow, and again on July 19, in a televised speech to the U.S.S.R. Supreme Soviet:

"The situation is fraught with dangerous political and economic consequences," he said. "In this situation we must keep cool, but we cannot be complacent and fail to take action. Now there are reports of calls by railway workers to join the strike as of Aug. 1.

"It is now more than ever clear just what a serious crisis the country had reached by the early 1980s, and we have still not got ourselves out of it. What is worse, in some areas of

the economy and social and political life, the situation has become even more acute. . . .

“The people’s mood is extremely critical. The information coming from major industrial centers indicates the people’s discontent. . . . The country could find itself in such a situation that it would be necessary to think about which measures to take to ensure that the situation does not get out of control.”

Gorbachov has very little time before he must follow up these words with decisive and brutal actions, otherwise his gamble backfires and his head is on the line. He has leeway as long as the strikes are confined to the coal mines, as supplies of mined coal are sufficiently high—provided they are transported to their destinations—to ensure the operation of power plants and steel mills for weeks to come. However, the indefinite continuation of the coal strike and its threatened spread to the railways and heavy industry, would place the U.S.S.R. on the verge of a chain-reaction collapse of industrial production, and thus create the conditions under which Gorbachov himself, rather than his political opponents, becomes the scapegoat for the crisis.

Unrest spreads

The developments in the Kuzbass and Donbass regions between July 15 and July 20 show that any vestige of public confidence in the system has been shattered.

The Kuznetsk Basin: The strike began July 10, in Mezhdurochensk. By July 13, when the strike had spread to 9 of the region’s 11 mining centers, the Soviet government had proclaimed an “agreement” whereby no fewer than 36 of the miners’ 42 demands had been met. The result? Not only did the strike not end, but it *expanded* within 48 hours to shut down all the Kuznetsk coal mines, and scores of other enterprises walked out in solidarity with the miners, bringing the total number of workers on strike to over 150,000.

Soviet TV had bragged, “In two days, more has been achieved for the workers than in 20 years.” On paper, that was correct. But the Kuznetsk workforce and their families were not interested in paper, but in *food* and basic supplies. This was finally acknowledged in Gorbachov’s speech to the Supreme Soviet, where he announced that huge shipments of sugar, soap, detergent, canned condensed milk, and tea were en route to Kuznetsk. Gorbachov declared that this summer the city of Prokopyevsk alone would receive 3,000 tons of soap, 10,000 tons of sugar, 5 million cans of condensed milk, and 1,000 tons of tea. This announcement finally made the first dent in the crisis: 24,000 of the over 150,000 striking workers returned to work.

However, despite persistent appeals by Gorbachov and the regional strike committee, the overwhelming majority of workers, as of July 20, had still refused to return to work.

The Donetsk Basin: The Donetsk strike began at 8 mines on July 15, and by July 20 had spread to at least 70 mines, involving over 60,000 workers. Here, as in Siberia, the government rapidly met the miners’ demands concerning higher

pay, overtime, longer vacations, better working conditions, and so on. To no avail. What good are more rubles in one’s pocket, if there is nothing to buy?

An alarm was sounded by the July 19 issue of *Moscow News*, which compared the Donetsk strike of Ukrainian coal miners with the 1980 Gdansk strike of Polish shipyard workers, which, though it began with “only economic demands,” soon gave birth to the Solidarity opposition movement.

That is indeed what is going on inside the Ukraine. In city after city, Ukrainian national organizations are being formed in the republic which forms the potential “Achilles heel” of the empire.

The leadership crisis

As stated above, Gorbachov has gambled by posturing as the champion of the workers’ demands, and using this to attempt a purge of the party opposition. He employed this line in his July 12 speech to a plenum of the Leningrad regional party, and removed its head, Yuri Solovyov, the first major victim of Gorbachov’s summer purge drive.

In his July 19 address to the party regional leaders assembled in Moscow, Gorbachov repeated his Leningrad purge calls:

“*Perestroika* is in a critical period. . . . The party needs fresh forces. . . . There is a real danger of a weakening of the leading role of the party . . . [because] *perestroika* in the party is lagging considerably behind the *perestroika* process in the society.”

That speech showed how much party opposition to Gorbachov has increased in recent weeks. For the first time, Gorbachov addressed the question of moving forward the next Communist Party Congress, originally set for March 1991. Gorbachov proposed that the Congress be moved forward by six months, to the autumn of 1990. As recently as late June, Gorbachov’s adviser Georgi Shakhnazarov, in an interview with a Japanese newspaper, gave a desired date of “early 1990” for the next party Congress; now Gorbachov does not seem to think he could win support for advancing the event by a whole year.

This follows Gorbachov’s recent tactical retreat on the timing of critical regional and local party elections, which would be crucial vehicles for wholesale party purges. These elections have been postponed from the autumn of 1989 until February 1990.

Finally, the “decisive” Central Committee Plenum on nationalities policy may yet again be postponed beyond the scheduled date of the end of July, following the July 14 Politburo meeting which returned the draft documents on nationality questions back to the Central Committee’s nationalities’ sub-department, for “further work.”

Gorbachov is on a tightrope, as the crisis builds. Whatever happens, the Soviet leader will have no choice but to drop his mask, with consequences which would make the Chinese events pale in comparison. And with that, Western illusions and appeasement will come crashing down.

Ex-KGB chief warns of 'rigorous' actions

In a June 27 speech at the Soviet Ministry of Civil Aviation, former KGB chief and current Politburo member Viktor Chebrikov said that the Communist Party of the Soviet Union was under mortal attack from the current strikes and demonstrations, and warned that "many working people" are demanding "rigorous measures."

The speech bears striking similarity to an editorial that appeared in the Beijing People's Daily on April 26, five weeks before the Tiananmen Square massacre. That editorial, dictated by Deng Xiaoping, called the student demonstrations part of a "planned conspiracy which, in essence, aims at negating the leadership of the party and the socialist system." If it succeeded, China "would become a turbulent and hopeless country."

Excerpts from Chebrikov's speech follow:

'Totally unfounded attacks'

. . . Our party has honestly admitted the mistakes of the past; it has become the initiator of *perestroika*. . . It is dissatisfied with the pace of *perestroika*, the situation in the economy, the shortages of goods for everyday life, and other distortions and shortcomings. However, this is a constructive, active dissatisfaction. . . Despite all this, all kinds of reproaches have been leveled against the party. There is justified criticism, of course, but unfortunately, *totally unfounded attacks are being perpetrated*. One explanation for this is the inadequate level of political training and the immaturity of individual citizens. Clearly, in some cases this applies.

However, this can hardly be the sole explanation for attempts to split the party, to drive a wedge between the party and the people, and to blame Communists for all the troubles and difficulties that our country is going through. At present, a number of groupings with an overtly anti-socialist bent, masquerading as proponents of the people's interests, are actively inciting social dissatisfaction in an effort to pit the working class, young people, and the scientific and creative

intelligentsia against the party. They actively advocate what is essentially a renunciation of the socialist path of the country's development and the introduction of political pluralism and a multi-party system. There has been overt defamation of certain party and Soviet officials. . . .

What is needed is the serious restructuring [*perestroika*] of ideological work in conditions of a broad public dialogue aimed at the consolidation of healthy forces in positions of *perestroika*. Clearly, there is a need to expose the true face of those who in their striving for power are prepared to use any method, who shrink from nothing and work toward the destabilization of society.

Call for a crackdown

Many working people . . . are demanding that rigorous measures be adopted in respect of the demagogues and inciters who are trying by any means available to discredit the party and the ideas of *perestroika* and are staging extremist actions. They believe that such actions should be countered not just by arguments, reasoning, and persuasion, but also by the force of Soviet laws. And this is correct.

Since the Congress of People's Deputies, I have heard the following appeal more than once: "They will not hand power to us voluntarily, we will have to take it for ourselves!" How is this to be understood? What is at issue here? If it is a question of handing over power to those who do not like socialism, those who yearn for the monarchy, those who march in Pushkin Square with the banners of the czarist empire, then you may rest assured that neither the people nor the party will hand over power to them. . . .

It is true that we must eliminate the existing deformations that are distorting the image of socialism. It is true that we must now focus the influence of the party on restoring our people's faith in the ideals of socialism. . . . It will be the party's task, having rid itself of the functions that are not its own, to elaborate the basic guidelines of the country's domestic and foreign policy, to be approved by the supreme organ of power, and to consolidate and pool the efforts of all state, Soviet, and social organizations with a view to accelerating *perestroika*.

Any unprejudiced thinker cannot fail to notice that, the Communist Party aside, there is no force in our society capable of leading it out of the crisis. . . . It is the party which is the most powerful guarantor of the irreversibility of *perestroika* and which does not allow itself to be diverted onto the path of superficial promises, swinging from one extreme to another, or putting the cart before the horse. . . .

The party is always prepared to accept just and constructive criticism and businesslike observations and proposals. It is impossible, however, to tolerate attacks on the party and its cadres, and wholesale accusations against the party apparatus. Such attacks on the party are tantamount to blows dealt to *perestroika* and its present and future. The times demand vigorous actions in defense of *perestroika*, in upholding the party line by words and deeds.