

R U S S I A

Shafted

Each morning, Gennady Pryazhin descends by cage-lift about a half mile into the suffocating earth. Then he squeezes himself into a sloping tunnel, about the height of a bar stool, and performs a grueling 650-foot crawl to the coal face. Hunched-over, amid screaming machinery and flying dust, he operates a conveyor belt for six long hours before squirming out of the shaft and beginning his journey back to daylight again.

Their lives ravaged by devastating market reforms, Russian coal miners may be heading for a confrontation with Boris Yeltsin.

By Fred Weir
SHAKHTI, RUSSIA

“It’s like going through birth twice a day,” the burly 37-year-old miner jokes. “It would be difficult to keep doing this even if everything else was fine. But life is turning into pure hell for us.”

By late April, Pryazhin and his co-workers hadn’t seen their monthly salary of 216,000 rubles (about \$120) for four months. Working conditions at the Yubeleynaya mine, in the

heart of the Donbass coal basin, have deteriorated sharply over the past three years. Production, as at most Russian coal mines, has plummeted almost 30 percent since 1991.

The plight of the coal miners reflects a broader crisis faced by Russian workers suffering the side effects of market reforms. With production dropping faster than in the first year of shock therapy—and with strikes increasing by 900 percent in the first quarter of this year over the same period in 1992—a time bomb appears to be ticking. And this time the explosion will come not in Moscow but in the hinterlands.

There is some irony in the miners’ situation. Massive coal strikes in 1989 and 1991 undermined ex-Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and helped vault Russian President Boris Yeltsin into power. Acutely aware of the miners’ organized might, Yeltsin made sure their wages rose faster than inflation during the turbulent first year of shock-therapy market reforms.

But as part of a general inflation-fighting strategy, the government has gradually cut subsidies for equipment and capital repairs. Following Yeltsin’s knockout victory over parliamentary opponents in Moscow last October (See *In These Times*, Oct. 18, 1993), Russia’s 800,000 coal workers went without pay for several months.

Coal miners are not worse off than other Russian workers, but they are far better organized than most. Once the pampered aristocracy of Soviet labor, miners have been in the forefront of worker protest since their stunning nationwide walkout in the summer of 1989. Then they called for rapid privatization of their mines and the right to sell coal at world market prices.

Now, ironically, they are demanding more state regulation and higher subsidies. “Now we understand that our fate is deeply connected with that of the whole society,” says Vitaly Budko, the lanky 42-year-old former coal face worker who leads Russia’s Independent Coal Miner’s Union from a grimy office block in downtown Moscow. “We know there are no separate solutions, and we are very anxious to work together with the government to find a common one.”

All of Yubeleynaya’s 1,600 workers live nearby in Taloviy, a bleak, treeless village set amid slag heaps, with one grocery store, two kindergartens, a school and several rows of simple, one-story wooden cottages. “It’s not Paris, but we live here,” says Yuri Kounev, chairman of the Yubeleynaya trade union committee. “Everyone here depends totally on the mine. If it closes, the village dies. Some of our people would be starving now if it weren’t for their kitchen gardens. Where else in the world does a coal miner also have to be a potato farmer just to get by?”

Strange as it may sound, many coal miners around

Shakhti say the person they respect most is the head of management, Alexei Melkov, general director of Rostovugol, a vast regional conglomerate embracing 26 coal mines and 40,000 workers.

Melkov is one of those people former prime minister and shock-therapy architect Yegor Gaidar had in mind when, following his retreat from government last January, he bitterly assailed the "corps of Red Directors" for mobilizing their vast influence against his reforms. A heavyset and square-jawed former engineer, Melkov certainly looks the part of an obstructionist apparatchik. Seated in his comfortable wood-paneled office in downtown Shakhti, a portrait of Lenin peering from behind his massive desk, he makes no effort to conceal his contempt for the former prime minister's fast-track route to capitalism. It was, he says, a "Harvard experiment ... using the Russian people as guinea pigs," supervised by "zealous young professors" in Moscow.

The alternative approach Melkov outlines, though, smacks more of New Deal Keynesianism than hard-core communism. "If you suddenly cut the subsidies to coal mines, all these communities will die," he says. "There will be just an economic wasteland. We are asking the government to generate a gradual plan and provide the financial means for shutting down unprofitable mines and investing in projects to retrain and relocate displaced miners."

But it's not simply a matter of economics. Without new investment and technological renovation, Russian coal mines are likely to grow even more dangerous than they are today. Statistics compiled by the Independent Coal Miner's Union show that accidents across Russia have risen an appalling 63 percent from last year. Fatal accidents jumped in the first quarter of this year to 83 from 77 for the same period in 1993.

The situation today is tense. In late March, after several months without pay, miners threatened to launch a political strike if subsidies already budgeted for their industry were not paid. The government quickly agreed to turn over 1.2 trillion rubles (about \$650 million) in several weekly installments. By mid-May back wages (albeit ravaged by inflation) were beginning to reach the workers.

But coal miners say they want more convincing indications that the state cares about them and their communities. Specifically, they want to see the long-promised blueprint for restructuring their industry, including plans to close down 40 mines the government insists are unprofitable. And they want to see, in hard figures, what resources will be provided to ease the transition for them and their families.

"I agree that mines have to be shut and workers released," says Vladimir Dubov, a miner at Yubeleynaya. "I am ready to share the sacrifice. But I want to know what to expect in return. We coal miners have worked hard all our lives; is it too much to ask for help to rebuild our homes and to find new jobs?"

For Budko, who may be the last coal miner in Russia to have anything nice to say about President Yeltsin, rising anger among the rank and file presents a dangerous

dilemma. "People are losing faith and hope. It is increasingly difficult these days to convince my comrades that now is not the time for a general strike," he says.

"We are the leaders of the working-class movement in Russia. If coal miners move into action, it could develop into a very broad and serious situation very quickly. It might destroy whatever stability remains in the country."

Without a sea change in government policy, that confrontation appears more than likely in the next few months. "How long can people be told to be patient while they watch things keep worsening?" asks Budko. "I don't understand why our government cannot seem to apply itself to anything but rhetoric and factional struggle."

Surprisingly, considering all the abuse they've taken, many coal miners say they would gladly forgive all and support the government if it showed a little genuine concern for their plight.

"No one wants to strike," says trade union chairman Kounev. "But miners are asking themselves: how long can we go on this way? We worked all winter to make sure others had coal for heating and electricity. We worked even when we didn't receive wages ourselves. Now we are asking the government to think about our future. We want to survive, too."

Bred Weir writes regularly from Russia for *In These Times*.



Identity crisis

By Ellen Meiksins Wood

It used to be that the main target of the left—especially of the socialist left—was capitalism. Now it's not even clear that people who call themselves socialists, let alone "left liberals," see it as part of their political or intellectual project to contest capitalism. It isn't just that they have accepted capitalism, for better or worse, as the best social order we're likely to get. It is that the dominant intellectual and political currents of the Western left hardly understand the very *idea* of capitalism.

Addressing capitalism means considering it as a historically specific system of social relations, a social form with its own logic and its own laws of motion—the imperatives of competition, profit maximization, "productivity," "growth" and "flexibility," with all their social and ideological consequences. Capitalism has a historically unique capacity to expand itself and to engulf other systems of social relations. It is the most "totalizing" system the world has ever known, both in the sense that it pervades all aspects of our lives and that its spread is uniquely global.

Yet the left today talks instead of fragmentation, "difference," the impossibility and undesirability of "totalizing knowledges" and universal values. In this postmodern view, capitalism as a totalizing system doesn't exist. What we have instead are a lot of particular identities and forms of

domination, but there is no—or no knowable—overarching system that imposes itself on us all.

The best we can hope for, the postmodern left argues, is a plurality of local and particular resistances within the interstices of the existing social order. Some people take the optimistic view that in this fragmented, postmodern world, there are many spaces where alternative social values and practices can flourish. Thus, "identity politics." Others look at this fragmented world more pessimistically. But in either case, capitalism and its underlying principles remain unchallenged.

To be sure, there are various oppressions—having to do with gender, race, sexuality and so on—that should be challenged, and that the traditional left has tended to ignore, or merely pay lip service to. And it is

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important for the democratic left to demonstrate a greater appreciation of diversity than it has tended to in the past. But it isn't clear why, having recognized the complexities, diversities and multiple oppressions in the so-called postmodern world, we can't also recognize that capitalism is not only dominant but massively present in every aspect of our lives and in all our "identities."

For all the apparent plurality and fragmentation of the "postmodern" world, the overwhelming tendency of capitalism is to homogenize rather than diversify human experience. Certainly, the various special oppressions have a moral claim on our attention, and need to be fought against. But class, as the constitutive relation of capitalism, has a more strategic location and a more universal reach than other social "identities."

For that matter, does it really make sense to lump together very different social categories and relations—gender, race, sexual preferences and class—in a single concept like "identity"? What kind of guide to politics is an indiscriminate category like that? Let's leave aside the many conceptual problems involved in applying the term "identity" to a wide variety of social *relations*. Just consider the practical differences among these various identities.

By definition, the abolition of class would mean the abolition of the capitalist system—assuming, that is, we agree that capitalism exists. But would the end of racial or sexual inequality destroy capitalism?

A truly democratic society would celebrate differences of culture, gender, sexuality and "life styles"—and make practical and institutional provision for their full enjoyment. But how could one think of celebrating or institutionalizing *class* differences in a democratic way?

To deny or ignore the systemic totality of capitalism has far-reaching