

Fuel shortage strands crops in the field

by Rachel Douglas

The best crops in a decade are ripening in southern Russia and Ukraine, but the breakdown of infrastructure and, especially, fuel supplies in the Soviet Union threatens to strand the grain in the field. In early June, already, Soviet television reported "extremely serious" fuel shortages in the Crimean Peninsula, and in Krasnodar in southern Russia. Broadcasting from Krasnodar, the *Vremya* TV news program showed that the usually busiest road in the region at this time of year, the road from Kuban to Novorossiisk, was empty, and lined by service stations that displayed the signs, "No gas. No oil." Region-wide, motor-vehicle gasoline supplies were at one-third the level of last year, a year in which fuel shortages had already taken a toll.

On June 27, *Pravda* raised the pitch of the alarm. Warning that gasoline and diesel fuel shortages were threatening the harvest in Ukraine, the report made explicit that not only a decline in production, but the "sovereignty" decisions by republics, first of all the Russian Republic, have begun to be felt. Ukraine, for example, was 80,000 tons of fuel short in deliveries expected from Russia.

The same day, *Izvestia* painted the national picture, in a front-page feature called "The deficit season." From Kuzbass and Ukraine, Rostov and Stavropol, it said, everywhere there are cries about gasoline and oil shortages. This is becoming seasonal. "But we cannot get used to this. After all, the harvest is threatened."

State-planned production of fuel was set for 1990 at 95% of the previous year's level. Another 30 million tons of oil was supposed to be extracted and refined under the reform-promoted "direct contracts" between fuel producers and customers, most of which never materialized. Furthermore, said the state newspaper, oil production is in decline because of equipment obsolescence, lack of the capital investment needed for exploitation of ever more remote wells, and so on. On June 19, the Council of Ministers passed a resolution to guarantee the full third-quarter deliveries of oil to all domestic customers, by cutting exports. Oil remains the Soviets' chief hard currency earner.

No combines

On June 28, *Izvestia* summed up the situation in Kuibyshev Oblast on the middle Volga: "The watchword of this

year's harvest is reports about a rich crop, accompanied by despairing alarm signals. Interruptions of fuel supply, transport, and cadres at harvest time have been customary for a long time," but now "there is an extremely critical situation." In this area, a local official says the harvest could be triple last year's, "but there is nobody to harvest it. Nobody to prepare the machinery for work. Our villages, like others, have drained out of people in recent decades. There are not enough combine drivers, or mechanics. Ninety-four combines, a fifth of our park, are not repaired. And the rye is already ripe. Without help from the city people, we cannot cope." In the province's service center, there are 2,000 combines in need of repair.

Other official press complaints about threats to the harvest expose the chain reactions, firing off throughout the Soviet economy. While old combines are waiting in the repair shop, new ones are not rolling off the lines. The cause is a lack of sheet metal.

In May and June, there were numerous reports of Soviet auto plants having to stop their production lines, because sheet metal was in short supply. On June 28, *Pravda's* front-page story, looming above the draft charter of the CPSU also printed that day, was on the formation of a strike committee at the Krasnoyarsk Association for Production of Grain-harvesting Combines.

A government official urged the strike preparations—First Deputy Minister of Automobile and Agricultural Machine Building E. Kalinin, who told the workers they should go on strike, since the combine production line had been shut down for a week already, after months of receiving "less than the metal they required."

Kalinin attributed the metal shortage to a cessation of imports, while assurances from the State Committee for Supply (Gossnab), that domestic metal production would be fully adequate, turned out to be worthless. In the time since Krasnoyarsk shut down production, 1,500 combines should normally have rolled off the line.

No fresh produce

The same week, *Pravda's* June 26 article, "Vegetables at a dead end," revealed yet another case of food supplies sabotaged by the collapse of other industries. Cabbage and tomato shipments could not be dispatched from Azerbaijan because of a shortage of packing material. Supposedly at fault are northern cities that fail to return the used crates to the producer republic! In Chelyabinsk and Murmansk, for example, officials say there is no point in trying to send the crates back because the railroads work so badly. "It is paradoxical," preached *Pravda*, "but many northern cities, practically deprived of any vitamin-rich produce, fail to reach agreements on mutually beneficial cooperation. Possessing substantial reserves of wood, they refuse to exchange it for vegetables. What are the vegetables supposed to be shipped to the north in?"