

Mass strike wave hits U.S.S.R. as communist regime falters

by EIR's Soviet Staff

Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachov presented a 14-point "anti-crisis program" on April 9 to a session of the U. S. S. R. Federation Council, consisting of the presidents of the Soviet Union's republics. The plan, which is to be passed by parliamentary vote within a week and implemented over the coming year, includes draconian austerity measures, as well as some concessions to reformers. It amounts to a desperate attempt to find some way to curb the political mass strike wave that has swept the country.

For the first time since the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, hundreds of thousands of people are pouring into the streets of Soviet cities, demanding the ouster of the communist regime. Although strikes and protests have denounced the price hikes which the central government imposed on April 2, and the economic breakdown of society is a driving force in the protest movement, still the miners' demands are by no means limited to the issue of "bread."

Thus the Soviet government newspaper *Izvestia* of April 8 reported from Kemerovo, Kuzbass, that the council of the strike committees in the region had "rejected the story that appeared the day before in one of the central newspapers, that the new wave of strikes was linked with the rise in prices." The report quoted the council chairman: "As far as we know, such a motive has not been a factor for a single one of the municipal strike committees. . . . Economic concessions by the government are not what we demand or seek. Our demands are political, and they are unchanged."

In Belorussia, where workers defied a government strike ban, strike committee leaders are demanding the resignation of Gorbachov, the removal of the Communist Party from all state power structures, and the formation of a coalition government.

Strikes gain momentum

The crisis came to a head as the Soviet government failed, in talks with strike representatives April 2 and 3, to end the nationwide coal strike, which has demanded the resignation of President Gorbachov and Prime Minister Valentin Pavlov. The strike had begun March 1, and has been expanding in

scope ever since, threatening to spread to other industries. The Soviet government's offer to grant the miners, in stages going into 1992, a doubling of their wages, plus increased pension benefits, was rejected by the strikers.

In the Belorussian capital of Minsk, April 4 and again April 9, the city's entire industrial work force staged a half-day general strike. As reported by *Izvestia* of April 5, the tens of thousands of workers were joined by thousands of students, who marched to the city's center. Until the first months of this year, crises had wracked nearly every corner of Moscow's empire, while Belorussia had remained a "backwater." No longer. It was the first warning signals to this effect that caused Gorbachov to leave Moscow on sudden notice at the height of the Persian Gulf war, to undertake a four-day tour of Belorussia.

TASS of April 4 reported that "numerous" strikes had occurred that day in the U. S. S. R. in protest against the price hikes, but, aside from what happened in Minsk, censored all details on other cities and regions.

The U. S. S. R. has been nearing the threshold of a general strike since April 4, when, at a Moscow press conference, coal strike leader Pavel Shushpanov, chairman of the executive bureau of the Independent Miners' Union, made the following declaration: "Today, carrying out the will of those who have entrusted us with the defense of their rights, we declare that the struggle is not over. And if our demands continue to be ignored, a general political strike is not to be excluded."

Mass strike support demonstrations were held on April 7 by tens of thousands of miners and workers from heavy industry in both the Donetsk Basin of eastern Ukraine and the Kuznetsk Basin of central Siberia, the two critical industrial regions.

Gorbachov's anti-crisis program

In response to all this, Gorbachov emphasized to the Federation Council the "alarming situation" and "extreme danger" facing the country, and called for the following measures, according to a summary by the TASS news agency:

1) a limited ban on political strikes until the end of this year, and formation of a coordinating committee between central and republic-level governments for the implementation of the program;

2) development of a market price system by Oct. 1, 1992;

3) working out of privatization plans in the second half of this year;

4) ending the monopoly position of the state foreign trade organizations, decentralizing of foreign trade activities;

5) convertibility of the ruble, access to foreign currencies, reducing of imports by 15% by the end of this year;

6) attracting of foreign investments by economic zones and measures to ease the transfer of profits;

7) budgetary austerity and a freeze on new investment projects in the second half of 1991;

8) suspending of decrees by the republics that conflict with central government decrees, cuts in central funding of those republics that do not cooperate with Moscow;

9) more powers for the Central Bank with respect to the republic-level banks, disciplinary use of credits to rebellious republics;

10) founding of stock and raw material markets with access to foreign investors;

11) direct responsibility of administrative bodies and enterprises for food supply, centralized control of supply with grain and basic food stuffs;

12) additional mobilization of reserves among industrial workers and the Armed Forces for the harvest and processing of food;

13) increasing the private share of sales of food products and other goods;

14) reduction in military expenses, use of military facilities for civilian purposes.

Yeltsin's role

It is becoming apparent to many that Gorbachov's flailing about will only lead to civil war or other disastrous developments. Indeed, the conclusion that the Soviet Union cannot survive the social, economic, and political convulsions of 1991 without Russian Federation President Boris Yeltsin, Gorbachov's principal rival, playing a key role, was the true reason behind Yeltsin's dramatic victory of April 4-5, in the concluding two days of the extraordinary session of the Russian Federation Congress of People's Deputies.

Yeltsin's actual supporters have never held a majority in the Russian Congress. He was given emergency powers, and the mandate to become the first popularly elected President of Russia, in elections now set for June 12—the first anniversary of Russia's declaration of "sovereignty"—by a huge Congress majority, the same majority which, until April 5, had refused to grant Yeltsin his demands.

The about-face by the Russian Congress majority was a shift orchestrated by the Russian elite, after the failure to end the miners' strike. In this situation, the only Russian figure

of national stature who still has the trust of the population, and therefore could act successfully to brake or contain the mass strike wave, is Boris Yeltsin. Yeltsin is prepared to deliver in this regard, in exchange for his new vast powers, and other concessions from Moscow Center. It was notable that in his 10-minute address to the Russian Congress on April 5, after he was granted emergency powers, he stressed that he needed those powers to "end strikes" and "restore stability" to Russia. This was the one portion of his short speech that was ignored by the Western media.

But, both Gorbachov and Yeltsin face the same political, economic, and social problems, and Yeltsin has shown no indication that he has any better way of solving them than Gorbachov does. If destruction of the real economy proceeds much further, then no one, including Yeltsin, will be in a position to deliver. Yeltsin has "won" for the relatively short term, by having secured his certain election by popular vote to the presidency of Russia in June. However, his popularity may evaporate within months thereafter.

Will Germany help?

As both Gorbachov and Yeltsin also know, a compromise that would restore stability is absolutely essential for what the U.S.S.R. and the Russian Republic desperately need—infusions of foreign capital investments in infrastructure and industry. The leading financial powers of Germany have signaled that German finance is ready to contribute massive funding to a U.S.S.R. economic recovery, but only on condition that the present upheaval give way to reconciliation. In an interview the first week of April with the German monthly *Manager Magazine*, the Eastern European expert of Germany's largest bank, Deutsche Bank, Axel Lebahn, underscored: "Only a strategic alliance between the economy and the state in the West can help to make the Soviet Union a full member of the world economic system. The West must make clear that it is not ready to support with its own resources the continuation of the present civil war in the Soviet Union. Only someone who has an economically reasonable alternative should count on Western economic help."

Should the Soviet leadership ensure these conditions, Lebahn proposes a "gigantic" German co-financed program for the revitalization of the Soviet transport system and the modernization of the oil and gas sector, saying "the future belongs to gigantic investments through which sectors, regions, and infrastructure are developed as completely integrated systems." It is notable that at the end of March, Gorbachov, in an interview with the German weekly *Der Spiegel*, called for German-Soviet "large projects" to develop and modernize Soviet industry and infrastructure.

It is not yet too late to begin implementing such a program of large projects and "gigantic investments," which would be to the mutual benefit of all countries of Central and Eastern Europe, and, emphatically, for all republics of the U.S.S.R. Time, however, is running very short.