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Ex-USSR

Social Partnership and Class Independence in the Post-Soviet Labour Movement

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From a left perspective, the history of the labour movement can be viewed as a long and arduous struggle of the working class for self-determination, whose ultimate expression would be the replacement of capitalism by a self-managed society without exploitation, that is, by socialism.

That struggle has been conducted against the bourgeoisie and the capitalist state, but even more so against ideological currents within the labour movement itself that implicitly or explicitly accept capitalism as inevitable, or at least preferable to any real alternative, and that reject the claim that labour and capital are opposed by contradictory interests. [1]

On the political level, revolutionary socialism has competed for workers' allegiance with reformism of various hues; while in the trade-union movement the proponents of "trade-unionism of struggle" ("syndicalisme de combat," in French) have fought it out with the supporters of "social partnership."

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As an ideological or strategic orientation, "class independence" is based upon an analysis of the respective interests of labour and capital, labour and the state, as fundamentally antagonistic. Labour's relations with capital and the state are therefore determined in the final analysis by the correlation of class forces, rather than by any shared interests.

It follows that the labour movement's strategy in defending and promoting workers' interests should give priority to shifting the balance of forces in the workers' favour. And while many factors can contribute to the labour movement's strength, its main resource is the solidarity of rank-and-file workers, their active commitment to common goals, and the confidence in their collective capacity to effect progressive change in their conditions of employment and in society as a whole.

"Social partnership," on the other hand, although it comes in a variety of forms and degrees, is a strategy ultimately based on the view that labour and capital share a fundamental, common interest in the success of the given enterprise and of the national economy as a whole. And success under capitalism always comes down to profitability, since without it there are no jobs, wages or benefits.

Accordingly, any serious conflict that might arise between labour and capital tends to be viewed as being due to a failure of communication or the refusal of one of the parties to understand its own long-term interest. Negotiations take the form of "social dialogue," rather than confrontation, and force (at least on the workers' part), while not excluded, is relegated to a mostly symbolic role.

It is worth noting that this harmonious view of capital-labour relations, often accompanied by "participation" schemes, has long been part of the arsenal of employers and governments. [2]

Today, perhaps more than at any other time since the emergence of mass, organized labour movements in the latter part of the nineteenth century, "social partnership" predominates in virtually all countries. [3]

This is at once a consequence and a cause of the major shift in the balance of class forces against labour, that began in the 1970s in the established capitalist countries and in the late 1980s in the former Communist world. I will make my own position clear at the outset: "social partnership" is at best a case of wishful thinking that bears little

relationship to capitalist reality, and all the less so to capitalism in its current neoliberal version; at worst, it is a manifestation of corrupt union leadership. Most often, it is a combination of the two.

But though the premises that underlay "social partnership" do not correspond to reality, as an ideology it has strong roots in reality, namely in labour's very real dependency upon capital, which is an inherent part of capitalism. And as a rule, the strength of "social partnership" in the labour movement varies inversely with labour's dependence upon capital. In other words, the ideology is more prevalent when labour is weaker, and vice versa. At the same time, "social partnership" itself contributes to, and reinforces, labour's weakness.

This article briefly examines the role of "social partnership" in the defeats suffered by the labour movements after the demise of the Communist regimes in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, the three predominantly Slavic and the most industrialized countries of the former Soviet Union. That role played itself out somewhat differently in each of the three countries, but in each case it contributed significantly to the dramatic setback suffered by workers, who saw their savings wiped out, their real wages fall by more than two thirds [4], and the promise of democracy broken, if democracy is understood as a law-based state that allows free competition of social interests for influence on government policy. [5]

The argument here is not that a different strategy would necessarily have allowed workers to come out ahead from the fall of the bureaucratic dictatorship. Objective circumstances, outlined below, did not favour labour. But, at the least, the losses could certainly have been much smaller. The fact is that the unions did not make use even of the limited resources they readily had at their disposal to defend their members' interests. There were, of course, exceptions, but they were too few and isolated to affect the overall outcome.

Unfavourable Objective Circumstances

The distinction between "objective" and "subjective" conditions is at best relative but it is nevertheless useful in presenting the context in which post-Soviet trade unions have operated. "Objective" factors are those over which the unions can have little or no immediate influence; while "subjective" factors are within the immediate power of the unions to influence, mainly their strategic and tactical choices and the quality of their leadership.

One of the negative "objective" factors was, and remains, the legacy of more than half a century of totalitarian rule, during which workers could not organize independently. Gorbachev's liberalization changed that, but that period was too brief for most workers to have gained experience of independent organization and action. Moreover, the political opening came initially as a gift "from above"; it was not wrested in struggle. Referring to the Soviet era, the president of the minority union at the Volga Auto Factory (maker of Ladas) observed that "there was no working class; only isolated people in the same situation."

The first workers' meeting that was had not been convened and was not directed by management or party authorities took place in September 1989 to discuss strike action, the first organized collective action ever at this plant of over 100,000 employees. Only two and a half years separated the coalminers' strike of July 1989 [6], labour's first major appearance on the public scene, from the system's collapse.

E.P. Thompson argued that a working class "makes itself" as much as it is formed by circumstances. [7]

This assault took the form of "shock therapy" in Russia and Ukraine. [8] This policy, a key element of which was the rapidity of its execution, was conceived by the G-7 and actively promoted through the IMF [9]. Speed was politically

necessary to exploit the "window of opportunity" presented by popular inexperience and credulity to undermine the potential for resistance and to create a situation of no return from a form of capitalism that fit Western interests.

Virtually overnight, the government ended decades of economic security for workers, who, despite modest living standards, had enjoyed full employment and free or subsidized provision of housing, health, education, cultural and leisure services and basic consumer goods. In a matter of months, the very structure of economic life and the basic values of society were transformed. The profound insecurity that resulted became a major obstacle to collective resistance, as most workers were caught up in the individual struggle for survival, trying to adapt to the new conditions rather than to change them.

The international context was also unfavourable. Almost everywhere, labour was (still is) retreating in the face of capital's offensive. The former Communist countries, and even those still under Communist rule (except Cuba and North Korea), were busy restoring capitalism. Nowhere (except for Brazil and South Africa, but not for long) was there a significant labour movement marching under the banner of socialism.

Even domestically-oriented capitalist development had been virtually squeezed out as a political option by the triumphant "Washington consensus" and "globalization." In these circumstances, when the ideologues of the "free market," who had come to dominate the Soviet mass media in the last years, told workers "who were convinced they had already experienced socialism - that "free-market" capitalism is the only "normal" system, that seemed to make sense to them. After all, they lacked any realistic knowledge of capitalism, another legacy of the totalitarian system.

The nascent Soviet labour movement played an important, perhaps crucial, role in shaking the foundations of the Soviet system, which proved remarkably fragile beneath its impressive totalitarian superstructure. But it failed to develop the organizational and ideological independence that would have allowed it to influence the subsequent course of events.

Russia

The overwhelming majority of Russia's unionized workers are affiliated with the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia (FNPR), Russian successor to the Soviet-era federation. In November 2001, it claimed a membership equal to fifty-four per cent of the salaried work force, down from seventy per cent in 1991, but still a high level of union density. [\[10\]](#)

Almost all of its affiliated unions were similarly inherited from the Soviet period. There are virtually no unions in private enterprises that were not created on the basis of former state plants.

The FNPR and its affiliates are strongly attached to "social partnership." Despite the profound transformation of the socio-economic system and the privatization of most of the economy, they continue in practice to act as junior personnel departments for management. They also continue the Soviet practice of including managerial personnel in their ranks, including sometimes even the enterprise's general director.

And it is still not unusual for local union presidents to move on to top managerial positions, often to the post of assistant director for personnel. The major difference is that in the past subordination to management was justified by the "socialist," non-antagonistic nature of the society, while today union leaders cite "social partnership." They also point to the depressed situation of most industrial sectors. This, in their view, calls for "showing understanding", that

is, for concessions to management. Workers and management, so the argument goes, are in the same boat and must row together to save the enterprise and jobs.

The leaders' concern to maintain good relations with management is so strong that most refused to sue management for not transferring dues to the union that had been automatically deducted from workers' pay — a widespread managerial practice in the mid-to-late 1990s — even though suing was effective for the rare unions that attempted it.

In reality, the experience of the first post-Soviet decade made very clear that management was more interested in getting rich through stripping the enterprises of their assets rather than in trying to restoring them to health and saving jobs, a daunting and onerous task in the circumstances. This orientation has not substantially changed since the "oligarchs" at the head of Russia's banking and resource conglomerates began buying up manufacturing plants in the late 1990s: investment outside of the resource sector has been minimal, although the pillage of the plants has become somewhat more orderly.

There has been little union response to the all-out attack on living standards and workers' rights on the part of state and management, which began with the launching of "shock therapy" in 1992 and continues to this day, despite the economy's return to growth after the financial collapse of 1998. Thus, in the spirit of "partnership," the president of the union of a St. Petersburg tractor factory explained that "we meet with the assistant director for finance and the head of the planning bureau each week and we ask: 'Is there a possibility for indexing wages or raising them? The need for pressure does not arise. If the possibility exists, management itself does it' [raises wages] [11].

An analysis of the correlation of forces has no place in the strategic thought of these union leaders. and since pressure is claimed to be unnecessary, they attach little importance to informing, educating, mobilizing their members or to promoting union democracy and rank-and-file participation. Indeed, such activities, by arousing workers, could endanger harmonious union-management relations. Union leaders typically speak of themselves as "buffers" or "middlemen" [12] between workers and management, rarely as representatives and leaders of the workers.

The resistance that has occurred has overwhelmingly been isolated in individual plants, sometimes even shops. These struggles receive little support from the national branch unions or from the regional and national federations. To be fair, the national offices lack resources to be of much help, since they receive only a tiny share of the dues collected, sometimes as little as two per cent. But they rarely afford even symbolic support to struggles, since conflict is considered harmful or, at best, unfortunate and of no use.

In reality, despite national leaders' constant complaints, their tiny share of membership dues is a direct consequence of their unions' adherence to "partnership." For if workers are solidary with their bosses, they will not be solidary with fellow workers in other enterprises, with whom their own might well be competing. The dispersal of union resources among local unions in Russia is a reflection of an abysmal level of solidarity: plant leaders refuse to pool their members' dues with those of other plants in order to strengthen their national organization.

But isolated struggles can at best achieve only partial and temporary victories when workers face a state-led offensive and when their sector is depressed. Clearly, national strategies are called for. But on this level, too, "partnership" reigns supreme. Magical thinking reached a high point in 1997 when the four metalworking unions tried to organize their directors (because of the dispersal of ownership at the time, directors exercised de facto ownership powers) into an employers' association in the hope that it would negotiate a sectoral agreement with the unions that would be binding the members of the association. Despite the utter futility of these efforts, which were substantial, union leaders even today have not given up hope: "I'd like to work with a strong union of employers," sighed the vice-president of the Auto and Farm-Machine Workers' Union. [13] On the other hand, they gave no thought to organizing workers in their affiliated local unions to force employers to sign a meaningful national or pattern agreement.

On the political level and in parallel fashion, the FNPR formed a series of electoral alliances the directors' organizations, all of which failed miserably to attract votes. Then in 2000, the federation's political wing joined the recently-form United Russia party, a party whose programme boils down to support for President Putin. Thus, on the political level, too, the unions have restored old practices in new forms: once again they are under the fatherly wing of the state. Protests organized by FNPR have become rare. After all, as a partner to the pro-government coalition, the federation would in effect be protesting against itself. (In February 2005, United Russia organized a protest in support of the government as a counterweight to popular protests against cuts in social spending. [14])

The major exception to the prevailing orientation is the so-called "alternative" unions, which arose towards the end of the Soviet period and in the years following. Initially, they restricted their independence to relations with management. Politically, they supported the Yeltsin regime. This changed around 1998, when they shifted to social-democratic positions in opposition to the government's neo-liberal and undemocratic policies. However, the "alternative" unions on the whole are weak, constituting not more than three per cent of the organized labour force. Indeed, their very survival is a major feat in face of constant managerial harassment and repression, often supported by the local FNPR affiliates.

They also have to deal with a corrupt, hostile judiciary and with a new labour code, adopted in 2002 with the FNPR's support, that deprived minority unions and workers of many of their previous rights.

Ukraine

In most respects, the Ukrainian labour scene has resembled that of Russia. The head of the Ukrainian Federation of Trade Unions (FPU) until the end of 2004, O. Stoyan, was a former advisor to Ukraine's first president and he did his best to prevent or undermine labour protests directed against the government. On his fiftieth birthday, the government awarded him the medal "for services rendered." Stoyan was candid in explaining his refusal to oppose the government, stating that his first concern was for the federation's real-estate holdings, which might otherwise be jeopardized. [15] As in the case of the FNPR, these holdings are substantial, and the federation's leadership has largely avoided accountability for their management to the affiliates, let alone the rank and file.

There was, however, at least one important difference from Russia: the Auto and Farm-Machine Workers' Union, created in 1991 on the basis of existing local and regional unions that had formerly been directly affiliated to a national office in Moscow. This union elected a president, Vladimir Zlenko, who was committed to a policy of fostering "class independence." He was also a convinced socialist (non-Stalinist, that is, democratic socialist), another rare phenomenon on the post-Soviet scene.

Zlenko gave active support to all local struggles in his union and held them up as examples for emulation. He nudged, cajoled and pressured his central committee, consisting mostly of plant and regional presidents, to amend the union's constitution to bar managerial personnel from membership. He finally achieved that in 1998, though enforcing the amendment was another matter. He also obtained an amendment ensuring greater representation of rank-and-file workers at union conferences, congresses and councils. He tried, and failed, to organize opposition to Stoyan in the FPU and he convinced his own union to support the Socialist Party, which at the time was a left social-democratic party opposed to the government.

Zlenko had some active support among his local and regional leaders, especially in industrial region of Kharkyv. But it was not enough to move the majority of local unions away from "partnership." Realizing that, he tried to follow a strategy aimed at supporting and generating pressure "from below" on the conservative, "conciliationist" leaders. To reach the membership, he published a monthly national paper and promoted rank-and-file education. But his capacity

to do this was limited by local leaders' refusal to share more than five per cent of their dues with the national office. This was twice as much as what the parallel office in Russia was receiving but far short of what was needed. In addition, the union's economic sector was being destroyed at a faster pace than in Russia: it lost almost three quarters of its jobs between 1991 and 2003, and of the 129,000 remaining workers, many were not fully employed or receiving wages regularly. [16]

At 60 years of age, after two mandates, Zlenko stepped down as president, believing he was leaving the union in trusted hands, those of his long-time vice president. But it did not take the latter long to shift the union into the predominant "partnership" mold, meeting little serious resistance from the rest of the union on the way. Zlenko, however, did not give up the fight. He helped to found the School for Worker Democracy, which offers rank-and-file education imbued with "class independence." Under his leadership, the school has developed a working relationships with some major unions, including auto, defence, radio-electronics and textile. This, too, sets Ukraine apart from Russia, where a similar school has been failed to illicit interest from FNPR-affiliates and works exclusively with the "alternative" unions. (These are even weaker in Ukraine than in Russia.)

Belarus

In Belarus, the smallest of the three countries, the issue of "class independence" posed itself in the most original manner. The two large industrial unions, Auto and Farm Machine and Radio-Electronics, entered the post-Soviet era with the greatest potential. The majority of their members had participated in an almost month-long, spontaneous, general strike in April 1991 that shook up the unions' leadership, as well as the local and central political establishment. As a result, the rank and file was relatively active, and there was a significant force pushing to end the tradition of subservience. Another favourable circumstance was the high concentration of union membership in large industrial plants in the capital and its region. And while radio-electronics, which had been mainly producing for the Soviet army, subsequently lost most of its jobs, employment in the auto and farm-machine sectors fell by only twenty per cent between 1991 and 2002 (to about 150,000), a much smaller drop than in Russia or Ukraine.

The was largely thanks to the government's rejection of shock therapy (unique among post-Soviet regimes), a choice in which the unions initially played a role. Even today, industry has not undergone large-scale privatization, and the state conducts an active industrial policy. [17]

Both unions elected national leaders in 1991 who were committed to "class independence." This was particularly evident on the political level. In 1993, they founded the Belarussian Labour Party along social-democratic lines, and in 1996, when President Lukashenko, following a referendum, illegally amended the constitution to reinforce his powers at the expense of parliament, reduced to an obedient tool, both unions adopted strongly oppositional positions. Under their prodding, the Belarussian Federation of Trade Union itself eventually also joined the opposition, and in the 2001 presidential election, its president, V. Goncharik, unsuccessfully ran against Lukahsenko as the candidate of the united democratic opposition. [18]

Union policy, however, was rather less clear on relations with management. In a minority of factories, the April 1991 strike had resulted in the election of new, independent union committees. But in most plants, the pressure "from below" had not been sufficient to oust the old leaders committed to "partnership." In some of these plants, minority alternative unions were formed. The national leadership maintained informal ties with them and, at least initially, was committed to supporting the local forces pushing for union independence.

But the national leaders eventually made peace, in practice if not officially, with the subservient plant leaders. This occurred as they focused their energy on the political struggle. On the face of it, it made sense to focus on the

government, since it owned the enterprises and still largely determined wage policy. The problem was, however, that this led the national leaders to reconcile themselves to the persistence of "social partnership" in the plants. In return for the tolerance of union subservience to management, the plant leaders gave their support to the political campaigns of the national leaders, voting for them in the Central Council.

But when it came to mobilizing the membership for these campaigns, the local leaders did little or nothing, because management, under pressure from the government, instructed them not to. The local unions that really mobilized were those that had broken with "partnership" and they regularly brought out a large proportion of their members, despite intimidation by management and the political authorities. But these local unions were a minority. As a result, the national leadership was unable to build a sufficiently strong correlation of forces against the government. Indeed, as time passed, active support among the rank and file for the unions' political actions fell off.

Another obstacle to mobilizing the rank and file against the government was the unions' failure to offer their members an economic programme with which they could identify. Although the national leaders demonstrated their independence vis-B-vis the government, they failed to develop independent positions vis-B-vis the bourgeoisie, in this case the G-7 and its Belarussian allies. While the Labour Party's programme called for a strong social safety net, it was vague on economic policy. Its advocacy of "economic freedom" for enterprises could not help but raise doubts among workers who were well aware of the disastrous results of neo-liberal policies in Russia and Ukraine. One of the unions' leaders was, in fact, quite candid: "We'll let them [the liberals] do their job and we will defend the workers." Workers' misgivings were only heightened when the Labour Party joined an electoral alliance in the 2001 presidential elections with rightwing liberal parties under the aegis of the US embassy. The plan was akin to what had occurred earlier in Serbia and what would happen in Ukraine's "orange revolution". But the Belarussian situation was different. Despite his arbitrariness and authoritarianism, many workers saw Lukashenko's rejection of shock therapy as defending the country's economy and so their livelihoods from the destructive forces that the West wanted to unleash against it. [\[19\]](#)

When the political showdown came after the elections, Lukashenko had little trouble crushing the political opposition of the unions, since their leaders could not mobilize significant rank-and-file support. In a number of plants, subservient union leaders, on orders from management, encountered no active resistance when they transferred the membership (which was not consulted) into new, state-sponsored unions. At the end of 2003, the leaders of those plant unions who had remained in the the Auto and Farm-Machine Workers' Union organized a putsch, replacing the national president with a Lukashenko loyalist.

Despite significant sympathy for the deposed national leaders in union ranks, only a small minority has remained loyal to them. They are now themselves in an "alternative" union, working with what remains of the other "alternatives," struggling heroically to survive against government repression. This is a hard fight, since workers who openly support them risk their jobs.

Why "social partnership"?

If "partnership" made defeat inevitable, why is it still so predominant? As argued above, this ideological orientation has its roots in the real dependency of workers on capital that is inherent to capitalism. The more dependent workers are on capital because of "objective" conditions, the stronger the hold on them of "partnership," which reflects their lack of confidence in their collective ability to change conditions in their interest. The paradox is that by effectively subordinating union action to management's interests, "partnership" acquiesces to and reinforces weakness, further contributing to the demoralization and blocking the sort of action that could rebuild confidence and solidarity.

It is not hard to understand the attraction of "social partnership" for union leaders who face aggressive employers and governments and whose membership is demoralized. In these conditions, leaders run a high personal risk if they try to mobilize the membership to confront management or the state. The chances of failure are considerable, and defeat might well lead to the leader's removal by an angry management or a dissatisfied membership and even to the union's destruction. On the other hand, since the leaders are subject to little pressure "from below," their chances of coming out ahead personally are much better if they act as junior "partners" to the administration. Management will likely tolerate the continued existence of such cooperative unions and might even make minor concessions to help them maintain their credibility among the membership.

This kind of reasoning, perhaps in less crude form, can appear quite legitimate in the eyes of union leaders. But the members might ask why they need a union to move backwards. Even if this strategy protects the union's existence, of what value is that if the price is the workers' continued weakness? In a moment of candor, an official in one of Russia's largest unions confided that it might be better if his union did not exist, since workers would have no illusions and they might begin to organize. (This was said at a time when non-payment of wages had reached epidemic proportions, and the union was unable or unwilling to do anything about it.)

Often, however, more blatant forms of corruption are also at work in influencing the strategic choice of union leaders. Those who "show understanding" can count on management's support in keeping their jobs. In post-Soviet circumstances, when the membership is divided and largely passive, the director's support is decisive. Moreover, most industrial union leaders are former engineers. The law formally protects them from dismissal after leaving their union positions, but management can make life very miserable. Besides, after several years away from production, they become de-skilled. (This is one reason why workers tend to make more committed, militant leaders. But they are quite rare among union leadership.) Last but not least, management generally offers cooperative union leaders substantial material rewards, including the perspective of a well-paying managerial position.

Union leaders themselves cite their members' passivity in justification of "partnership," arguing that in a confrontation with management they would be left hanging out to dry by an indifferent, fearful rank and file. But this argument is disingenuous, since these same leaders make no effort to overcome demoralization among the membership. On the contrary, they actively discourage spontaneous collective actions by workers to defend their interests and cooperate with management to extinguishing them when they happen.

Widespread demoralization is a fact. It is the major source of labour's weakness which has its roots in the "objective" conditions outlined at the beginning of this article. But workers are not robots. their actions are not mechanically determined by their "objective" conditions. It is impossible to accurately gauge the potential of rank-and-file members for solidary, militant action without trying to organize it. Gramsci put it this way: "In reality, one can 'foresee' to the extent that one acts, to the extent that one applies a voluntary effort and therefore contributes concretely to creating the result 'foreseen.' Prediction reveals itself thus not as a scientific act of knowledge but as the abstract expression of the effort made, the practical way of creating a collective will." [\[20\]](#)

The point is not, of course, for the union to launch blindly into adventures, rejecting all concessions as a matter of principle. It is legitimate for a union to decide to cut losses when it judges the correlation of forces unfavourable and not subject to significant change in the acceptable future. But this calls for a genuine analysis of the actual and potential correlation of forces and it has to follow a serious attempt to resist. And a critical element of that attempt is a leadership that displays a will and determination to lead the members, offering them realistic tactics and goals. None of this is part of the practice of unions wedded to "partnership."

The defeat suffered may indeed have been the most probable outcome. Nevertheless, it was not inevitable, certainly not in the disastrous form it took, which has taught capital around the world a lesson in how far workers can be

pushed backwards. Despite widespread insecurity, weak solidarity and demoralization, a significant minority of workers in all three countries have displayed over the years a will to resist in the form of strikes and civil disobedience. These actions often attained positive results for the workers involved, but because they remained isolated, their gains were limited and they failed to make a tangible impact on the overall situation of the working class.

Things could have been different had leadership emerged prepared to unite and lead these isolated struggles. The active minority, which for the most part was socially indistinguishable from the others, might have developed into critical mass, strengthening the confidence of the rest. Union leaders who support "partnership" cannot avoid a share of responsibility for the defeat by citing unfavourable conditions. Many of these leaders do not even admit there has been a defeat, let alone attempt their role in it.

Class Independence and Socialism

In post-Soviet conditions, any leader who opts for "class independence" has to be something of a hero, that is an individual with a rather selfless commitment to the workers' cause, since this course is a very difficult one and personally very risky. Historically, when the immediate perspective was bleak, such leaders appeared from the ranks of the socialist movement. They were sustained by their political commitment and their long-term historical perspective. The weakness of the "class-independence" orientation in the union movement and the virtual exclusion of socialism from the post-Soviet (indeed, world) political-ideological spectrum [21] are thus closely linked.

But they are linked in an even more fundamental way. Under capitalism, workers are dependent on capital, and no union or left political leader can ignore this. "Class independence" is an ideological orientation, an independent worker's ideology, not a state of affairs that can exist under capitalism. But "class independence," like socialism, rejects capital's legitimacy and inevitability. It views capital's power as a usurpation that must be tolerated only because the balance of class forces will not presently allow it to be overthrown. However, the strategic perspective is constantly to encroach on capital's power, to try shift the balance of forces until capital's domination can be overthrown and replaced by democratic management of the economy. Unions that try to follow a strategy of independence from management but that accept capital's legitimacy ultimately get entangled in their own contradictions (for example, when they become lobbyists for government subsidies to their employers).

"Class independence" is, of course, not a panacea that offers a blue-print to victory. It is an ideological orientation whose strategic goal is to end capital's domination. Capital today is very dominant, and workers are highly dependent on it. The confrontation of this strategic orientation with capitalist reality does not always make for obvious and simple choices of goals and tactics in concrete situations.

But it is an orientation that at least holds out the possibility for workers to move forward, even if the strategic goal of emancipation from capital at present seems only a distant hope. On the other hand, the accumulated experience with "social partnership" supports the observation that "Capitalist society without a socialist alternative is very likely to downgrade to barbaric forms of social life." [22]

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/davidmandel.jpg>]
David Mandel

[1] "Working class" is defined here broadly as all salaried employees, except for those exercising managerial functions.

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[2] The most famous case is probably the "Japanese model," whose reality is succinctly presented in P. Briggs, "The Japanization of British Industry," *Industrial Relations Journal*, vol. 19, no. 1, 1998. For the U.S. experience, see E. Leary and M Menaker, *Jointness at GM: Company Unionism in the 21st Century*, Woonsocket, R.I, New Directions Regions 9A, n.d., and M.Parker and J .Slaughter, *Choosing Sides: Unions and the Team Concept*, Boston, South End Press, 1988.

"Partnership" schemes should be distinguished from forms of "dual power," notably workers' control, that arise in periods of labour offensive. These are, however, inherently unstable and lead quickly either to capital recovering the power lost or else to its expropriation.

[3] On the international level, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions is one of the strongest proponents of "social partnership. See "The ICFU Statement on the Global Compact," For an excellent analysis of the ideology of the "social pact" in the union movement of Western and Central Europe, see A. Wahl, "European Labour: the Ideological Legacy of the Social Pact," *Monthly Review*, Jan. 2004, pp. 37-49. In the U.S., the monthly newsletter *Labour Notes* has been devoted to combatting "partnership" in the labour movement for the past two decades.

[4] Goskomstat Rossii, *Rossiiskii v tsifikrakh 2003*, Moscow 2003, p. 97. This is an official Russian source. The average fall in wages was greatest in Ukraine, less in Belarus. Real wages began to rise again after 1998, but despite several years of relatively strong overall economic growth (from a very low point), the progress of wages has been remarkably slow.

[5] The reference here is, of course, to bourgeois democracy, where the competition is free, though highly unequal. The verdict is still out on whether the "Orange Revolution" of December 2004 in Ukraine will improve on the highly "managed" and thoroughly corrupt "democracy" of the previous years. The social and political situations of workers in the three countries are presented in my *Labour After Communism*, Montreal: Black Rose, 2004, chs. 2, 6, and 9. The analysis in this article is based largely on material presented in that book.

[6] See D. Mandel, "Rebirth of the Soviet Labour Movement: The Coalminers' Strike of July 1989," *Perestroika and the Soviet People*, Montreal: Black Rose, 1991, pp. 51-78.

[7] E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, London, Penguin 1991, p. 8. But Soviet workers had little time to "make themselves" before facing a massive assault by the new "democratic" states they had only just helped to create.

[8] For a presentation and critique of this policy from a keynesian point of view, see J. Stiglitz, *Globalization and Its Discontents*, N.Y.: W.W. Norton, 2002, pp. 133-65.

[9] For the role of the "West" in promoting this policy in Russia, see P. Reddaway et D. Glinski, *The Tragedy of Russia's Reforms*, Washington, U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 2001, pp. 172-82; 290-98; 414-26; 537-9; 563-70.

[10] S. Ashwin and S. Clarke, *Russian Trade Unions and Industrial Relations in Transition*, Houndsmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2003, p. 86.

[11] Interview with the union president of the Kirov Tractor Factory in St. Petersburg, in B. Maksimov, "Kuda vedut lidery," unpublished article, 2000.

[12] Thus, according to V. Savel'ev, the newly elected president of the Yaroslavl regional union federation, "a trade-union leader has to be a talented middleman." Saveliev spent most of his professional life in top managerial positions in the auto sector. om Yaroslavl. See M. Obrazkova, "Predsedatel' dolzhen byt' muzhikom," *Solidarnost'*, no. 3, 2005, p. 2.

[13] The National Vice-President of the Union of Automobile and Agricultural-Machine Building Workers in *Golos profsoyua*, Feb. 2002.

[14] RTR Russia TV, Moscow, 1100 gmt 12 Feb 05, from Johnson's List, Feb. 13, 2005.

[15] I. Shagnina, "Prosoyuzy Ukrainy: davajte druzhit', no ne trogajte nashe imuschchestvo," *Narodnaya volya* (Minsk), no. 15, 2001, p. 8.

[16] "Report of the President to the Central Committee," Apr. 10, 2003. (unpublished)

[17] For a relatively balanced analysis, see K. Haiduk et al., *The Belarussian Economy at a Crossroads*, Moscow, ILO, 2004.

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[18] It is generally recognized that a majority voted for Lukashenko in that election, although the extent of his victory was smaller than what was officially announced. As an incumbent with vast power, Lukashenko enjoyed a major advantage of his opponent. But that was also true of Yanukovich in Ukraine, who was finally unseated in December 2004 by Yushchenko in the "orange revolution." The U.S. and European Community played similar roles in both campaigns.

[19] Lukashenko's rejection of the "Washington consensus" helps to explain the hatred of Western government's for his regime, even while they tolerate more repressive dictators in other former Soviet republics.

[20] Q. Hoare and G. Smith, Selections from the Priuson Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci, N.Y.: International Publishers, 1971, p. 438.

[21] Despite their names, the Communist parties are reconciled to capitalism. They are also strongly tainted by forms of chauvinistic nationalism.

[22] A. Boron, State, Capitalism and Democracy in Latin America, Boulder, Lynne Rienner, 1995, p. 243.