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Review

David Mandel's 'Labour After Communism'

- IV Online magazine - 2005 - IV365 - March 2005 -

Publication date: Saturday 26 February 2005

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The collapse of the Russian economy in the early 1990s, brought on by marketisation sponsored by the rich capitalist states, plunged the Russian labour movement into the Dark Ages. Since then, little information has been available on the conditions and struggles of Russian workers.

David Mandel's 'Labour After Communism' breaks the silence. Co-founder of the School for Workers Democracy, which conducts rank-and-file labour education in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, Mandel shares his unrivaled knowledge of the union movement in these countries, drawing on innumerable discussions with workers and worker activists.

Shock Therapy

Mandel shows us a Russian working class as devastated by economic collapse and the fierce onslaught of bosses and government—a class still groping to find the path to an effective response.

[https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/ru_demo_11.jpg]

The “shock therapy” applied in Russia after 1991 led not to a capitalist flowering but to a social catastrophe whose depth and duration is without parallel in any industrialized society. Mandel marshals the key statistics: industrial production down 55%, capital investment down 80%, research and development down 90%.

Only the resource sector has been integrated into the world market, he notes. Elsewhere, investment is practically nil and the human capital necessary to revive industry has been dispersed.

During the last few years, Russia has experienced a slow economic recovery, but Mandel questions whether it is sustainable.

Russia's present social order, vividly portrayed by Mandel, lacks the mainspring of a capitalist economy: profitable private investment in the production of goods and services. Instead, the Russian “bourgeoisie” is “essentially [a] rent-seeking class, intimately linked both to the corrupt state administration and to the criminal underworld.” Indeed, as the recent jailing of Khodorkovsky, the oil baron, demonstrates, “in Russia, the state appoints the millionaires and billionaires.”

The scale of personal wealth is greater, but otherwise, all this is reminiscent of the Stalin-to-Brezhnev era. So too is Mandel's statement that “to workers, the new bourgeoisie is not a class of wealth-generating ‘captains of industry’ but a gang of rapacious pillager.”

Mandel does not attempt to characterize Russian society today. But it appears that some of the barriers to capitalist restoration erected by Russia's 1917 October revolution have survived, even if in highly distorted form.

Labour's Decline

The economic collapse after 1991 shattered the labour activism of the final Soviet years. Suddenly workers faced mass unemployment, a 2/3rds fall in real wages, and a decline in living conditions so stark that male life expectancy decreased five years. Workers were hampered by the consciousness inherited from the Soviet era, which in Mandel's view was marked by submissiveness, cynicism, and "a weakly developed sense of dignity." Nor could they, during the years of "Neo-Liberalism" triumphant, draw inspiration from the example of labour upsurges in other countries. As a result, Mandel says, the work force is deeply demoralized.

Under these conditions, it is not surprising that labour activism has followed a downward curve over the last 13 years. Nonetheless, Mandel argues that in factories where workers have found a way to fight back, they have won significant gains.

The same lesson can be drawn from his detailed discussion of conditions in Ukraine and Belarus. His Ukrainian examples show that the socialist consciousness of even isolated individual militants has a great impact. Belarus provides a "control," where shock therapy was not applied, the Soviet-era economy is still largely intact, and investment and production levels have been largely maintained.

Focusing on the auto industry, where international outreach by the Canadian Autoworkers provided him with a wealth of contacts and information, Mandel points out that militant workers in Russia have very rarely been able to utilize the structures of their official trade unions for resistance. These unions found it easy, in the early nineties, to transfer loyalty from the Communist Party to their factory administrations, and function in most respects as company unions.

Mandel's vivid anecdotes show how the ideology of "social partnership" with the employers works its way through all levels of the union, eliminating it as a vehicle for shop-floor resistance. For the North American reader, this portrayal awakens a bitter reflection: In the weaker sectors of our labour movement, things are not much better. And even our strongest private sector unions see no alternative to going cap in hand to the government, asking for subsidies to the employers.

Yet there is a difference, and it is decisive. North American employers' offer of "social partnership" is patently insincere: they aim to be rid of the unions, and unions that wish to survive must find a way to resist. The Russian ruling elite, however, is too weak to do without its union prop, which has given "social partnership" a shabby stability.

Independent Unionism

Mandel draws hope from the survival, under the most difficult circumstances, of Russia's independent union movement, whose guiding principle is not social partnership but working-class independence.

Denied any legal rights or standing, constantly harassed by the bosses, official unions, and legal authorities, the independent unions have eked out an existence as minority currents made up of the boldest and most committed workers. Mandel profiles one of the most successful of these ventures-Edinstvo (Unity), which counts about 3,000 members among the 100,000 workers in the world's largest auto factory, in Togliatti. Through difficult years it has known ups and downs. But it has been sustained, Mandel tells us, because "its members are convinced of a basic conflict of interests separating them, as workers, from management and they believe that they can defend themselves through independent organization."

The gains have been tangible: wages, for example, are twice as high in the Togliatti complex as in Russia's other major auto factory of this type.

Edinstvo and the other independent unions lack a vision of an alternative, socialist society. Nonetheless, Mandel sees in it a beacon of hope: "Edinstvo has a deeply committed leadership that lives and breathes union and that has refused to let the daily grind of union work stop it from thinking strategically."

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