

# Miners shaft the system

**W**orkers in the Soviet Union don't need to strike because they run the nation, and make its laws and economic decisions. Such was the approved Soviet party line—until recently.

"Why on earth would workers strike against their own interests?" explained one Soviet official when I asked him about the danger of labor unrest in his country.

So much for Bolshevik theory. Late last week, 110,000 miners in Siberia's vast Kuznetsk coal fields dropped their picks and walked off the job in the biggest strike since the 1917 Communist revolution. They were demanding decent food, better apartments and the right to manage their own industrial affairs—rather than having their work quotas and schedules dictated by bureaucrats in far-away Moscow.

Perhaps most poignantly for a nation that plans to land a man on Mars, the miners, black from soot and coal dust, were protesting that there wasn't even soap in the stores. Revolutions are started not by political theory but by lack of soap and bread.

The rest of the world, watching la hoopla in Paris, at first paid little attention to the strikes. Not so in Moscow, where alarm bells went off and a top-level Politburo delegation rushed off for talks with the miners. No wonder. The strikes could be the gravest challenge yet faced by Mikhail Gorbachev. Labor unrest is even a greater threat to the USSR than flaring ethnic troubles, the latest of which has left 16 dead in Georgia.

Worse news for the Kremlin arrived on Monday when thousands of coal miners went on strike in Ukraine's Donets Basin. The two strikes have now cut Soviet coal output by about 48%. Announcing solidarity with Siberian miners, the Donets strikers demanded similar reforms and, most important, more food. The miners were not asking for more money. In the USSR, money is almost useless since there's nothing in the stores to buy.

The spread of the coal strike into Ukraine poses three enormous dangers to the Kremlin.

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□ First, labor unrest could infect other industries, like steel, railways—even agriculture. It could also spark massive protests from consumers furious over shortages of everything but promises.

□ Second, a major strike in Ukraine has explosive political overtones. Long-suppressed Ukrainian nationalism is boiling up again. So far, it has been largely confined to intellectual circles. Labor unrest could quickly combine with nationalist passions to produce demands for autonomy or even, as in the Baltic, independence.

□ Third, in the highly centralized Soviet economy, if one cog breaks, the machinery of the state economy threatens to grind to a halt. If the strike goes on for long, steel mills and power plants, deprived of coal from the Donets and Kuznetsk, will shut down. Factories, short of steel and electrical power, will close.

There are few alternative sources in Soviet industry, and the coal strike is said to be costing the cash-poor Kremlin \$600 million a week.

Coal miners, no matter under which country they dig, are always the most militant of workers. Coal strikes often ignite widespread social and political unrest. The obvious, most recent and certainly most chilling example for Soviet leaders is Poland. It was Poland's miners, not the much-publicized shipyard workers, who began Poland's labor unrest more than a decade ago.

Coal strikes led to national strikes and protests. Solidarity formed, almost overthrew the Communist regime and then was crushed by the army. Today's remarkable joint power sharing in Poland between newly legalized Solidarity and the Communist party can be traced directly back to striking miners.

Just before this latest crisis, Mikhail Gorbachev published a letter to the rich-man's summit in Paris in which he rather cheekily asked that the USSR be admitted. Sorry. Countries whose miners are striking because they don't have enough food or soap need not apply. Or nations that lack a fully convertible currency.

Nobody wants rubles, either in Russia or outside. Until the ruble is convertible into other hard currencies, the USSR will remain economically isolated. Imports will have to be paid for in gold, oil or gas. If gold miners, gas workers or roughnecks ever walk off the job, the Soviets won't be able to import as much as a peanut.

The next few weeks will determine if the strikes spread or die out. Gorbachev will no doubt make good use of the unrest to further hack away at the petrified Communist party apparatus that is strangling the Soviet economy. But the situation is so potentially explosive that even the nimble Gorbachev may not escape getting burned.

Watching all this, it strikes me the USSR looks more like it's sliding back into the Depression era than marching into the 21st century.

