

# Perestroika vs. the lazy bear

Soviet citizens are frustrated, fed up and mad as hell over their nation's growing economic mess. Soviet contacts with whom I met last week report a sharply rising increase in demonstrations, riots and criminal attacks against state property.

Goods are scarcer than ever, quality has gone from shoddy to awful and Russia's endless waiting lines have grown even longer. So far Mikhail Gorbachev's much-heralded economic reforms have produced lots of confusion and speechifying but not a single new link of sausage. Soviet consumers are far more interested in consumer goods than they are in the greater freedoms of expression and movement that have been Gorbachev's most significant internal achievements.

Perestroika, or national restructuring, is not working because it has become bogged down in the swampy character of Soviet society.

Think of the Soviet Union as a giant version of our own wretched Canada Post. Russian workers loaf and drowse through the day. Many show up for work drunk, or don't come in at all. Bureaucrats ignore their work while gossiping over tea. No one gets fired and everyone is guaranteed a job. Since everything is subsidized by the state, costs like rent and food are artificially low.

Medicine, which is pretty poor, is free and so is education, which is quite good. No one goes homeless or starves in the Soviet Union. The pace of life is slow, meandering, unstressful and secure.

And terribly inefficient. Just, in fact, like Canada Post. Sullen workers won't work, managers can't manage. All is pervaded by an attitude of cynicism, sloth and chicanery. In the Soviet Union the way to get things



**Eric ARGOLIS**  
in New York

done is by giving gifts, bribes and patronage. Even the KGB can often be bought off by an offering of western products.

A frustrated Gorbachev finds that while all of his easy-going countrymen may want more consumer goods and bigger flats, they are not ready to work any harder to get them. Like Canadian voters, they demand more goodies from their governments without being ready to pay for them through higher taxes.

Making creaky Mother Russia more efficient means eliminating the Sargasso Sea of bureaucracy that is smothering the economy. But you can't really fire people in the USSR so the redundant clerks must be found new jobs—but where?

Cutting down the 5.1-million-member armed forces is just as big a headache. Keeping men in the army is the cheapest way of dealing with unemployment. Russian soldiers get only a few rubles pay a month and live in frigid barracks on fish head soup and black bread. Where will the jobs, come from for one or two million demobilized soldiers?

Like all communist nations, Russia has massive overemployment: Five people do the work of one. Dedication to full employment can reach absurd limits. I

recall meeting a talented painter in Moscow who was forced by regulations to teach art in primary school since being an artist was not a legitimate occupation.

To remedy some of this sloth and inefficiency, Gorbachev has promoted the co-operative movement which allows small business to run service industries like restaurants, repair shops and food producers. Most are wildly successful—so much so that they are soaking up all the scarce better-quality materials on the market.

Co-ops are also producing a bumper crop of envy. Soviets have been brought up for 70 years to despise profit and anyone who makes more money than you do. Some successful co-ops have been burned down or their owners ostracized. Many are denounced to the police for imaginary violations.

Managers and workers who try to implement Gorbachev's reform programs are, like harder workers at Canada Post, threatened, abused or put into isolation. The average Soviet worker sees no reason at all to work more or with better efficiency when there is nothing to buy with his harder-earned rubles. Soviets want salami now, not promises about the next Five Year Plan.

My sources tell me there is growing conviction among Gorbachev's associates that trying to prod and cajole Soviet citizens to harder work simply won't work. Like past Russian reformers from Peter the Great to Alexander I, Gorbachev has run smack into deeply reactionary, slow-moving character of his countrymen.

What's really needed in the USSR is not persuasion but compulsion. Stalin knew how to get things done. More and more of Gorbachev's advisers are telling him this and urging that he lay the knout on the backs of him loafing countrymen. Moscow spring may soon be over.