

Beset by oil blackmail, strikes, Ukraine risks loss of nationhood

by Konstantin George

The mass strike wave sweeping Ukraine that began with a strike of coal miners on June 7, has brought the republic to the brink of a national calamity. As a result of the strikers' political demands, raised by Moscow-manipulated strike committees in the predominantly ethnic Russian Donetsk (Donbass) Basin mining and industrial hub of eastern Ukraine, where the strikes have reached the level of a regional general strike in the Donetsk and Lugansk regions, Ukraine is facing a crisis of national existence. The strikers are demanding the resignation of President Leonid Kravchuk, the simultaneous dissolution of Parliament, the holding of a referendum of "national confidence" in the President, and early parliamentary elections.

The Donetsk region strike committee is also demanding that Donetsk and neighboring regions such as Lugansk, also heavily ethnic Russian, be granted complete autonomy, akin to that already granted to the Crimea, which has an ethnic Russian majority. These demands are correctly seen by the Ukrainian national opposition Rukh movement as the first steps in a Moscow-steered plan to institute a "regionalization" of Ukraine, as a transition to the goal of imperial forces in Moscow of having regions such as Crimea and Donetsk secede from Ukraine and join Russia.

On June 14, with about 100 industrial enterprises on strike in addition to 228 of the 253 coal mines of eastern Ukraine, and a strike-caused national industrial shutdown perhaps days away, the Ukrainian Parliament went into extraordinary session to discuss the strikers' political demands. As they convened, the strikes were acquiring nationwide dimensions, and had spread to embrace most heavy industrial plants in Kharkov, Ukraine's second largest city, and to the central Ukrainian regions of Dnepropetrovsk and Zaporozhe, including the iron ore miners of Krivoi Rog. Isolated coal miner strikes were also reported in western Ukraine.

Push for separatism

Also on June 14, over 60,000 workers rallied in the city of Donetsk. They applauded the local strike committee demands that the region become "autonomous" and bypass Kiev, in order to institute "sovereign" decisions and to establish "close links" with Russia. This was just short of calling for outright separatism.

On the following day, workers at industrial plants

throughout Ukraine, including in Kiev, the capital, met to decide on whether to join the strike. In a desperate attempt to placate the strike committees, President Kravchuk addressed the Parliament and proposed to hold a referendum of "national confidence" on himself. He added that the "people" should also decide whether they wish to keep or abolish the office of President. Kravchuk also proposed early parliamentary elections, and suggested a December date for the referendum on the President, and January 1994 for parliamentary elections. Parliament refused to vote on the Kravchuk proposals, offering to "study" them and, at an unspecified time, put them to a vote.

The day began with a blunt speech by Prime Minister Leonid Kuchma, who demanded that Parliament restore to him the power to rule by decree that they deprived him of in May. He said: "This government needs extraordinary powers. We still have time, but only barely. Otherwise we will have to do it within a dictatorship, within a month." He told the Parliament that the only alternative to the government legally acquiring extraordinary powers or usurping them to save the nation, is "economic disintegration" and total national chaos and anarchy.

Ukraine has had no effective government since May 20, when the Ukrainian Parliament, a holdover from Soviet days and dominated by old communists, refused the demand of Prime Minister Kuchma to extend his powers to rule by decree on economic policy, even though the country was in an economic breakdown crisis. The Parliament also rejected a proposal by President Kravchuk that he take over the government and rule by decree, and rejected the resignation of Kuchma. The net effect was to keep the Kuchma government on as a lame duck regime, powerless to do anything. When the strike wave hit, the resulting rudderless government was unable to respond.

Who will control the strikes?

The fate of Ukraine will be decided by whichever grouping—the Ukrainian national opposition Rukh movement, or the Donbass region strike committees manipulated by Moscow—gains control over the current mass strike process and defines its political demands. Rukh, which controls the Ukrainian Federation of Trade Unions, has tried to deflect the destabilization by supporting the economic demands of

the strikers, and has put forward the political demand of early elections for a new Parliament to end the Parliament's sabotage of the Executive's authority. Rukh leader Vyacheslav Chornovil, while justifiably livid at Kravchuk's incompetent mishandling of the crisis, has tirelessly stressed that the strike committee demands are part of a Moscow plot to destroy Ukrainian independence. On June 11, for example, he called on the miners to "resist agitation by forces trying to earn political capital on the people's protest." He warned that "a simultaneous resignation of the President and dissolution of Parliament will inevitably lead to a lapse in authority and anarchy in the country." He appealed to Kravchuk to "use his last chance to Ukraine's benefit."

In line with the Rukh attempt to defuse the crisis in accordance with Ukrainian national interests, Chornovil presented a motion to Parliament's extraordinary session on June 14 calling on Parliament to adopt a new electoral law, fixing early parliamentary elections for December. However, correctly, he emphatically rejected any presidential resignation "in order to avoid anarchy."

Kravchuk vacillating

The sabotage of an effective Executive by the Ukrainian Parliament's old communist majority, and the vacillation of President Kravchuk, have allowed the crisis to reach the brink of a national calamity. As for the coal miners' strike itself, the strike which triggered the national crisis, all media coverage of the strike has stressed that it was caused by huge price hikes in early June. That statement is only true in the sense that the price hikes were the "last straw," in terms of the collapse of workers' living standards, which provided the objective basis for easily mobilizing hundreds of thousands of miners and industrial workers into strike and protest actions.

However, the Donetsk strike committees had already planned the strikes in May, a fact known to Kravchuk and Parliament. The strikers' plans, and their political demands, were formulated before the price hikes, and before anyone in Donetsk region knew they were coming. The Parliament's crippling of the government on May 20 also played a direct role in setting up the miners to strike. The Kuchma government was well aware of the spearhead role that the miners could play in a mass strike, and given the strike committees, what a destabilizing factor that would be. One of the economically minor but politically crucial needs that was always met as long as Kuchma ruled by decree, was to ensure that the miners' pay never went into arrears. That was the case through April. In May, the government was crippled, and one consequence of this was that no one could order that the money be sent to the miners. Most of the miners received no pay in May and again in June, and it was this, together with the price hikes, that brought the Donetsk region to the point of explosion.

During the critical pre-strike phase where the miners were

not being paid, and the imminence of a strike was anything but a secret, Kravchuk did nothing. This do-nothing posture continued throughout the first week of the strike. It wasn't until June 14 that Kravchuk finally met with Ukrainian trade union leaders. Olexander Mryl, a leading Rukh member and chairman of the Independent Trade Union of Ukrainian Miners, said after Kravchuk's delay: "The situation in the Donbass is out of control." Mryl was referring to the region's Russian-dominated strike committees' de facto separatist demands, and their demands to terminate both President and Parliament.

On the basis of his proposals to Parliament the next day, agreeing with a referendum of "national confidence," and even going so far as to propose a vote that could eliminate the office of President, the words of Rukh to Kravchuk fell on deaf ears.

Kravchuk's weakness before the Parliament however was not a sudden "turn," but one of a series of disastrous concessions to the forces who are seeking to destabilize Ukraine. These concessions included his naming of Yefim Tsviagilski on June 10, after the coal strikes began, as Ukrainian first deputy prime minister. Right before his appointment, Tsviagilski, as head of administration in the Donetsk region, publicly endorsed the political demands of the strike committees: "If I were in Kiev, I would insist on a referendum vote of confidence for both the President and the Parliament."

On June 14, Kravchuk appointed Tsviagilski as the government representative to conduct direct talks with the strikers. Other points of the Kravchuk decree were laudable in and of themselves, as part of his promise to meet all "reasonable demands" of the strikers. But what could have been highly effective in the first days of the strike was, by June 14, too little and too late. Another example of his weakness was his imposition of stiff sanctions on banks which slow transactions, which prevent workers from being paid on time and cause unnecessary losses for enterprises. This could easily have been done before the strike, and thus at least have blunted it.

The demands of Prime Minister Kuchma for extraordinary powers are the minimum required for the republic to maintain stability and avoid a plunge into chaos and anarchy, leaving it susceptible to dismemberment. As he told Parliament, anything short of that will leave Ukraine no alternatives except dictatorship or anarchy. This threat is occurring to a nation of 52 million, which has the scientific, technological, industrial, and agricultural capabilities and potential, under a competent Eurasian development program as outlined by American economist Lyndon LaRouche, who is widely known and respected in Ukraine, to become an economic power of the rank of France. This national calamity is wrecking a nation, second only to Russia in importance in all of eastern Europe. Should the destabilization succeed, the crisis in this region will make the Balkans look like a side-show by comparison.