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Social Attitudes to Miners' Protests during the Transition to Market Relations (1992 – 1999)

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Abstract

On the ground of numerous archive documents and literature the paper provides consideration of the attitudes of different social and professional population groups to protest movement of Russian miners during transition to market relations. The stages are determined; their common and different features are analyzed. The reasons and factors of contradictory relations of Russians to protests of miners are demonstrated, as well as their connection with domestic and foreign policy processes. The struggle of coal industry workers for consolidation of their positions in such an important sphere as public opinion is characterized. The forms of worker and retired employer solidarity are determined. A comparative analysis of attitudes and actions of population to miners' protest movement is carried out and the period of "perestroika" and "shock therapy" are considered. While mass and radical protesting the increasing international solidarity with actions of Russian coal industry workers is emphasized. The activities of bodies of power aimed at decreasing of miners' movement authority in the society are revealed. The key reasons of negative dynamics in public attitude to miners' protest are studied. A conclusion is made that the negatively changing public attitude to miners' protest was one of factors influencing on its dynamic decline.

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1. Introduction

With significant moral support and financial backing of strike movement by soviet workers in 1989 miners could become an important power basis of opposition socio-political forces. However, in the subsequent years, the citizens of the Soviet Union changed their attitude to their regular strikes. Someone considered these strikes as a threat to economic and political stability that is why they appealed to the strikers including their representative bodies and asked to cease the strikes immediately (Lopatin, 1993). The leaders of miners' movement saw changing confidence of population as agony of conservative and communist forces and didn't pay much attention to it. The political success by B. Yeltsin in 1991 filled the miners with the confidence in understanding by public at large. The promises

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of new Russian governing bodies and heartfelt expectations of lots of population created hope of consolidation between the government and the society necessary for solution of key problems in economic and social spheres.

The USSR disintegration and a new vector of statehood development fundamentally changed the principles of labor movement. The public opinion gained a great significance during the transition to democracy and market relations because miners quickly realized their “solitary” position in the system of political relations. In new liberal conditions they could be supported only by the same workers as they were. Miners’ struggle benefited from the fact, that “shock therapy” had caused a considerable impoverishment of various strata of society in the country, initiated the development of protest movement of workers and pensioners in different forms.

The attitude of miners to the society also changed in new conditions of struggle. They began to look for new “points” of public dissatisfaction, representing the interests of vast social groups. These “points” were as follows: the events in October 1993, the first Chechen campaign, financial default and others. In fact, this position was often successful and made miners more authoritative. When any problem was solved by the Kremlin, miners’ actions automatically started losing their popularity.

As the confrontation between the coal mining industry workers and the government was growing, the necessity of support from the ordinary people increased. The reaction of workers and pensioners was an indicator of the state of protest movement, which determined claims, forms and methods of miners’ struggle. Among others the following parameters were important for the complex characteristic of public opinion: participation in joint protests, sympathetic actions of miners with workers and pensioners, demonstration of ideological closeness with miners by mass media, financial support and moral sympathy.

National solidarity with miners enjoyed its ups and downs those years. Market relations changed public conscience, intensified the contradictoriness of public attitudes to social and political processes, including forms and methods of struggle. Worsening economy, rising social differentiation, and competition made people consider miners’ protest movement in a new way. In the period under consideration the labor class – the main support of miners – was subject to serious changes. First, de-industrialization of the country and widening spheres of economic activities resulted in significant fall of specific weight of workers in social and professional structure of new Russia. Second, the labor class became more uncoordinated and “self-seeking”, and its behavior depended on their special, first of all, financial interests (Voejkov, 2008). The concept “solidarity of workers” lost its value and gave place to the concept “market competition”. Therefore, even at peaks of miners’ protest activity they were supported by employees of government-financed organizations but not by workers.

The key reasons of negative public attitude to protests of miners are as follows: 1) contradicting results of strike movement during the “perestroika” years; 2) lack of confidence in serious results of struggle due to the spontaneous character of protest movement, non-availability of clear program of actions and forceful leaders; 3) difficult economic consequences of protest actions in conditions of national economy crisis; 4) the difference in living standards as compared with population of more successful subjects of Russian Federation; 5) fear of possible cataclysms in the society; 6) criticism of protests in mass media controlled by the government of Russian Federation. Public displeasure was the most significant when all of the mentioned above reasons occurred in a complex.

Generally speaking, the attitude of different social and professional groups to miners’ protest during transition to the market had several periods in their evolution. The first phase covers the period of 1992 – 1996, when public opinion tended to support protests, including illegal ones. The second phase (1997 – 1998, July) was a culmination of support of miners’ struggle by workers and pensioners. The third one (1998, August – 1999) was a period when public opinion about miners’ protests got a negative character.

2. The first phase (1992 – 1996)

During the first phase public attitude was evolving from criticism of some protests of miners to mass support of their struggle against B. Yeltsin’s policy. However, this process had a diverse character. During the first years of “shock therapy” the most workers and miners had significantly conflicting views on such important issues as reasons of worsening social and economic situation in the country, goals and objectives of protest movement, position and

importance of “labor class vanguard” in social and political life of the country. As soon as the positions of miners were agreed with the approaches of the majority of population a reciprocal social and political interest showed up.

The society got displeased by the results of “shock therapy” much earlier than B. Yeltsin expected. His constant promises to improve life of ordinary people were not substantiated by real actions. The most population of the country opposed an extortionate liberalization of prices in its first months. Meanwhile, the workers and pensioners became aware of worsening social and economic situation, as well as they realized such political losses as the USSR disintegration, lowering international reputation of the country, restricted opportunities for workers to be in the bodies of state power. It was the miners who were considered as people responsible for these problems because they put their strike movement on a wide scale and influenced on the system crisis in 1989 – 1991.

The coal mining industry workers demonstrated the silent agreement with B. Yeltsin’s – their political idol – policy. The most part of population was annoyed and caused the further growth of anti-miners attitude even among workers. The criticism of perestroika miners’ movement by the mass media in the 1990-s confirmed the changing public attitudes. The criticism was demonstrated primarily on local and regional levels and then on All-Russian scale.

No joint protest actions confirmed the real crisis in relations of miners with other social and professional groups at the beginning of the period under consideration. It is necessary to mention that in 1992 miners’ protests were organized by separate enterprises, while other workers organized mass actions to struggle for their claims. Protest “backwardness” of coal mining industry workers opposed them to employees of other branches of Russian economy and the government-financed organizations.

The significant growth of Russian miners’ protest movement in the mid 1990-s represented mostly by strike struggle didn’t mean the over-all support. At the time the society was split in supporters and opponents of suspicion of industrial processes. In new market conditions strikes and other protests weren’t as efficient as they were in times of command economy. Miners’ strikes caused economic losses of their enterprises and other subjects involved in business activity in coal mining regions as well as in the whole country. Therefore, there were a lot of opponents of strike struggle among employees of the government-financed organizations and workers of other branches of economy. In these conditions miners had to change strategy and tactics of protest movement, orientate to more “painless” for population forms and methods of struggle, for example “underground” and hunger strikes. It didn’t solve the problems which were to be solved by protest movement.

We can’t say that the Russians criticized miners since the first days of “shock therapy” and were displeased by them. Public opinion started supporting miners’ struggle since 1992 due to objective and subjective factors. Miners improved the public attitude to them because they reconsidered their positions both to the domestic policy of the Kremlin and everybody who disagreed with the results of “shock therapy”. They also changed the position to their own protests. The system of values was changed, first of all – the results of strike movement in 1989 – 1991. Self-criticism grew and demonstrated a new concept of miners’ struggle to the society of Russia. Such “repentance” was welcomed and influenced on closer moral and real relations of miners with other workers.

The necessity of ideological solidarity of common people with miners was caused by objective resistance to the methods of “shock therapy”. Workers, employees of government-financed organizations, farmers and pensioners couldn’t overcome the difficulties highlighted in their own protests; they didn’t have reliable fighting partners ready to battle for their interests on the level of the President and government of Russian Federation. They were not as experienced in battling for their economic and political claims as miners were. Hence, in the mid 1990-s nothing could stop different groups of workers to support each other in the struggle against unpopular reforms. In 1996 the coal-mining industry workers were again in the vanguard of labor class.

Public support of miners’ protests had various forms. The most significant one was participation of workers and pensioners in joint protests: strikes, pickets, demonstrations, meetings. The joint protests rallied common people, demonstrated their not indifferent attitude to the crisis in economy and social sphere of the country, and initiated setting up collective claims.

Unassisted protests of workers were of the same significance, similar claims were put forward. Employees of government-financed organizations, primarily teachers, were the most active fighters against anti-popular reforms in the 1990-s. Any rebellion was important for miners, because it demonstrated the systematic failures in the policy of the Kremlin both in the area of coal-mining industry and other branches of economy.

Protest actions of miners, especially radical ones provoked interest of mass media. The most stories and articles focused on the situation in the coal-mining industry of the country demonstrated quite naturally the dissatisfaction of workers and influenced on the public opinion, primarily in coal-mining regions.

Problems in coal-mining industry and decline of living standards of Russian miners worried both Russian and foreign public. Foreign journalists, especially in 1994 helped to consolidate international solidarity with miners, including the official authorities (Vavilova, 1994). Letters and telegrams were received from different countries, especially from those where trade unions were significant participants in the system of social and labor relations – Germany, Belgium, the USA, Canada, Japan, Greece and Italy. The support by such reputable organizations as International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, Miners' International Federation was extremely important for miners.

Moral assistance of miners' protest was the most wide-spread form of the public support. Against the insufficient historical experience of collective protests for labor laws and interests, the laws of capitalism forced creation of new values; individualism was the most important one. However, it was not the only reason why people didn't want to take part in joint protest actions, but it was the most evident. Among the reasons there were also objective ones – not all subjects of Russian Federation were closely engaged in coal-mining, therefore it was difficult to demonstrate a real solidarity.

Thereby, miners could raise their authority over Russian and international public during the first phase. It was a factor of further growth of their protest activity, and consolidation of their importance in social and political processes in Russia.

3. The second phase (1997 – 1998, July)

Presidential elections in 1996 disappointed millions of Russians because economy and social sphere didn't change for the better. The public didn't have illusions anymore, that everything would improve. In the following year and a half the country was paralyzed by the system crisis, and B. Yeltsin was not to be trusted by the Russians. Coal mining regions didn't have any confidence in the policy of the Kremlin (In Zapoljar'e, 1998). It was the period of the strongest protest public opinion of Russians who supported the struggle of miners a lot.

Participation of representatives of different social and professional groups in miners' protests was the most significant evidence of public support during the second phase of protests. The fact that workers and pensioners jointed to their radical and illegal protest actions inspired miners enormously. The number of supporters increased substantially during difficult and critical periods of confrontation, characterized by the fear of using force against miners. The most dramatic events of the second phase fell on the period of All-Russian "rail wars" in May, 1998, when miners unanimously put forward the claims relevant for most Russians. Various social and professional groups participating in "rail wars" made this action dynamic, large-scale and forceful.

Independent mass protests of Russians were a less radical but rather convincing way to support miners' protests. Some actions of workers especially in May 1998 were those of many thousands and had a broad geography.

Financial assistance was also very important for protesting miners support. It was given mainly by local residents although other regions also supplied support. This support was more significant, when miners' actions were slow and exhausting, for example during the "rail wars" and the picket near the House of the Government of Russian Federation. Even small and medium sized business provided financial support.

The second phase was also distinguished mainly by moral support to the protest actions of picketers. It became more significant during the All-Russian protest action on rails in May 1998. According to the data of All-Russian survey, approximately 50 – 60% of population approved blocking railways by miners despite the difficulties it made for population (Gordon, Klopov, 2001). Among people approving "rail wars" there were those who suffered from picketers' actions. People tried to respect miners' claims and to support them (Smyslenko, 1998).

Solidarity with miners was demonstrated not only in silent compassion, but in real actions aimed at supporting their "fighting spirit". While miners were organizing their protests children and veterans were making concerts for them, they were sent letters and telegrams to, a lot of newspapers published articles supporting "fair claims" (Arhipov, 1998).

The high level of protest was clearly demonstrated in mass media. Russian miners received letters from the USA, Canada, Japan and other countries. The popularity of Russian "rail wars" participants in May, 1998, increased the solidarity with them by all opposition parties of the country, and caused the support of their actions by foreign

opposition and organization of human rights protection. The struggle on the rails was supported by International Confederation of Free Trade Unions and in resolutions of Syria, Greece and Italy communist parties (State records of Kemerovo region. Fond 1311).

During the second phase miners attracted attention to themselves by active self-criticism of the measures they took while striking in 1989–1991. It was mainly shown in local and regional mass media (articles and photos), and in leaflets distributed by miners. Meanwhile, the second phase of miners' protests was characterized by important change of public support. The start of this change goes back to summer 1998. The negative attitude to miners' protests was developed slowly and primarily related to actions with considerable damaging effect. As the result of All-Russian "rails wars" both coal mining regions of Russia and a lot of innocent people suffered from economic losses in May 1998.

Protest feeling of miners also changed. In July 1998 only Kuzbass miners blocked the Trans-Siberian Railway. Although the government of Russian Federation was slow in implementing of made decisions, miners of Pechora coal basin and those of Russian Donbass were not interested in radical forms of struggle anymore.

Protest movement of miners was powerful against other destabilizing factors. There is no doubt, that in May – July 1998 the country faced the revolutionary situation. A lot of people were aware of it and were afraid of serious social cataclysms (Serebrjannikov, 1998). The situation was alike that of the end of 1980-s – beginning of 1990-s. People thought that miners fought for better way of development, but in fact we lost the country, national economy was damaged, living standards worsened significantly, the democracy provoked a lot of questions. That's why the Russians were on the look-out to miners' protests.

Alongside with the criticism and self-criticism of strikes in 1989 – 1991 miners and supporting them people found essential differences of labor movement of the time with that of the 1990-s. During "shock therapy" miners' struggle wasn't so organized, large-scaled and attracting attention to itself as that of perestroika. Miners didn't have recognized leaders, definite program of actions and class solidarity. As the consequence many Russians didn't believe in success of miners' protest movement in new political and economic conditions of country development.

Moreover, miners' protests had negative results. Employees of the Trans-Siberian Railways were made the most indignant by these protests in 1998. In their claims they regularly emphasized negative results of "rails wars" for passengers. In May 1998 the railways workers tried to convince the picketers using the words, but in July of the same year they "protected their place of work from picketers' attempts to block the goods traffic" (Fomicheva, 1998). In general, even at the peak of protest movement the solidarity with miners had a declarative character; it didn't seem as support of the whole nation. Protesting miners couldn't show themselves as a single whole and a power able to raise population for struggle.

4. The third phase (August 1998 – 1999)

The All-Russian protest on the rails in May 1994 couldn't implement radical claims of miners despite of its dimensions (resignation of the government and the President, nationalization of coal-mining industry). On the contrary a lot of Russians saw these political claims as an additional key factor to influence on the government and to get back salary debts. The mass protest wasn't finished logically, common interests weren't asserted sequentially, there was no solidarity in the branch, economy of the country was damaged – all this cardinally changed the attitude of Russians to miners' protests.

In May – July 1998 public opinion about miners' protest differs a lot, but since August of the same year it became clearly negative. Miners' attempts to act as a single force able to represent interests of the most working population didn't succeed. Their numerous protests in August – October 1998, including the mass picket at the House of the Government, were less popular. The Russian society principally denied mass and large protests as a measure to solve social and labor conflicts (Anisimova, 2004).

Public opinion was significantly changed by miners themselves who denied the rationality of protests in conditions of developing liberal political and economic relations. Financial default in Russia in 1998 made this attitude even stronger. Coal mining industry workers were looking for independent ways to overcome crisis and keep their jobs more thoroughly. The level of public confidence of Russians to miners' protests was drastically falling and the problem of economic future became evident. Therefore, the authorities of coal-mining regions intensified

measures against protests and for protection of social and economic stability. The key factor in falling popularity of miners' struggle was activity of mass media.

Since August 1998 mass media attacked miners criticizing "rails wars" as a form of protest (Amelin, 1998). The society had a hard position necessitating legal methods of social and economic problems solution. Even the subject of miners' protests was forced out of mass media.

Negative attitude to miners' protests was also influenced by measures to overcome crisis taken by all executive authorities and subjects of economic activity of the country. The level of public confidence to the policy of the Kremlin started increasing in autumn 1998 when coal-mining industry was first supported by the "pink" government headed by E.M. Primakov. At the end of 1998 collective struggle was replaced by separate and short-termed protests. Since then workers and pensioners came to nothing more than moral support of legal methods of miners' struggle.

The year 1999 was also distinguished by that trend. Public opinion was in favor of legal methods of fighting for social and economic interests. At the same time, miners couldn't find a point of mass dissatisfaction of the policy of Russian Federation. Declining protest activity was typical both for miners and other social and professional groups. Since 1999 mass media didn't pay much attention to protests of Russian miners despite being resonance of some of them. During the last phase miners didn't have any financial support moral solidarity started falling. Changing public opinion about miners' protests was one of the factors of their dynamic decline.

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