

NOV 9 1992

Nizhny Novgorod

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I visited Nizhny Novgorod with Tom Bradley. We planned the trip to N. Novgorod because it has a free trade union of ship-builders at the "Krasnoe Sormovo" plant. The trade union is not large - only 157 members at present, and up till now it is the only trade union in the city. N. Novgorod has possibilities for the extensive growth of the trade union movement.

N. Novgorod - is a big city (1,250,000 people) on the Volga river. It is an old city (founded in 1221) which was famous all over the world for its fairs; during the Soviet era all this became history. The city has been a large industrial center for many years. The action of the novel "Mother", the most famous work of literature, by the most famous Soviet writer Maxim Gorky (which all students had to study in all schools in the former Soviet Union throughout its whole history) takes place in the settlement of Sormovo outside N. Novgorod at the ship-building plant, built in the middle of the nineteenth century. The novel is about the start of the workers movement at the plant on the eve of the First Russian Revolution (1905-1906). Maxim Gorky was born in N. Novgorod, that is why the city changed its name into Gorky in 1932 and it became N. Novgorod again only in 1991.

The "Krasnoe Sormovo" plant (25,000 workers) is one of a number of large plants in the city, which is packed with large enterprises, mostly machine-building, belonging to the military-industrial complex. Up till now N. Novgorod was a "closed" city. That is why the city was chosen to be the place of exile for A. Sakharov. The apartment, where the Sakharovs lived, is a museum now. The director of the museum is a former political prisoner, Sergei Ponomarev. The Sakharov Festival of classical music was held in conjunction with the renewed fair of N. Novgorod during our stay there. Famous musicians from all over the world came to the Festival. Unfortunately, we did not have time to visit the concerts.

We arrived to N. Novgorod on the over-night train at 7:30 am on August 29, 1992 and I left the city for Togliatti on the same day at 9:30 pm.

We started our day in N. Novgorod with a visit to the free trade union of ship-builders at Krasnoe Sormovo. We knew the deputy chairman of the union, Semen Bulatkin, before - we met him at the meeting of the representatives of the Russian free trade unions, which had been set up by I. Shablinsky on August 22nd. It was then that I recorded the interview with S. Bulatkin for the Radio Liberty. The interview was about his trade union and about himself.

The trade union was set up in February 1992, but really July 1989 should be considered the beginning of the workers movement

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Post-It brand fax transmittal memo 7871		# of pages > 16
To Lyuba Frankel	From Irina Khasin	
On 6745 words	Co.	
Dept.	Phone #	
Fax # (202) 314-5210	Fax #	

at Krasnoe Sormovo. It was then that the political discussion club "Dialogue" was organized at the plant (about 100 members). Since then Bulatkin has been the chairman of the club. Here is what S. Bulatkin had to say about his plant, his club and his trade union:

S.B. The political club was organized at a purely worker's club. In several months it became the political club not only for the workers, but also for engineers and technicians working at the plant. In several months, more workers, engineers and intelligencia belonged to the club, which became the Sormovo political club.

L.A. It is better, is it not when everyone has a chance to talk?

S.B. Yes, it probably is better.

L.A. And what did you do in the club?

S.B. We organized meetings at plants against "black Saturdays" and meetings to remove party committees from the enterprise territory. We were under serious pressure: we were invited to the director's office (as a means of punishment - I.K.) and to the procurator's office. There were some women among us. Invitations to offices of their bosses and police made them very nervous. This was the initial period of stirring up the Russians, and workers specifically. The major problem was to help the workers leave the communist party. The first appeal to the workers to leave the communist party was made in Novokuznetsk (at the Conference, which set up the Confederation of Labor). Then it was on the television - and this was the idea of our political club.

L.A. Did this provide any response?

S.B. Yes, it did. I can give my plant as an example. Almost every day workers and foremen from my shop would come to me and ask me to help them write applications for leaving the CPSU.

L.A. Did a lot of people at your plant leave the party?

S.B. A lot of people from our plant did then leave the party. Finally, the local CPSU organization at my shop collapsed.

L.A. How many people were there in your local party organization when you started the whole campaign?

S.B. Originally we had about 110 people. At the end the chairman of the organization (partorg) was the only person left, but he kept sitting in his room with his safe with Lenin's portraits all over it. He continues to keep the party organization documents in the safe, and sits waiting for the turning point when he will again invite workers to his office and start handing

them party-member documents.

L.A. What does he and his family eat meanwhile?

S.B. He is a pensioner, so he gets his pension, and he also receives a salary as a foreman who supervises seven workers.

L.A. Is it fake? Is he really a foreman?

S.B. Once I asked the editor of our plant newspaper to go and see for himself if our shop has a local party organization chairman at a time when it has already been announced about the departisation of the plant. In my presence the editor asked the director of my shop: "Do you really still have the party organization chairman?" The latter answered: "Well, we are going to find him some other work soon". And all this did not happen many years ago, it happened recently.

L.A. But let's go back to the political club. What are its members doing now?

S.B. Now the Sormovo political club serves to deter panic, anger and discontent, and we foresaw it.

L.A. And what is the panic about?

S.B. Life is difficult. I'll say even more - it is on the verge of social explosion (including in Sormovo). Who is to be blamed for that? The democrats who have taken over power. All the Philistines and conservatives are shouting about it. The thing is the mass media in Sormovo is still under the control of the conservative forces and former apparatchiks.

L.A. And have you got "Trudovaya Russia", "Trudovoye Sormovo" or "Trudovoy Nizhny Novgorod" parties?

S.B. No, we do not have all this here, but we can hear the echoes from Moscow - we get stickers at the bulletin board of our club "Dialogue". We have neobolsheviks or neocommunist - Socialist Party of the Workers and even All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks.

L.A. At the plant and in the city?

S.B. No, only in the city. If we have it at the plant it is an underground organization. We do not have enough guts to go public. And only six months ago they would organize meetings at the plant under the slogans "We will not let Russia slip down to capitalism". "No to President Yeltsin" and so on. By the way, it was due to our political club that 82% of the Sormovo population voted for Yeltsin. And now as Russia finds itself in a very difficult position, there is a lot of dissatisfaction among

people, and I think this dissatisfaction is fair. Our position is to explain the situation to the people - that there is no way to avoid the unfavorable consequences after the drastic changes, connected with the fall of the empire and principal changes in economy. I tell them that, thank God, it is not as scary as it could have been.

I knew that among "outside the plant" members of the "Dialogue" club is Boris Nemtsov - Governor of N. Novgorod. Mr. Nemtsov is a physicist, worked at Radiophysics research Institute. He was thirty at the time. He is the youngest of all the Russian oblast leaders and he has very radical views on economic reforms. I asked S. Bulatkin to tell me about this member of his club.

S.B. He was a member of our political club and very often during meetings he would stand at the rostrum waiting to be invited to speak, waiting to be handed the microphone. He was known for his radical views, but they were much more radical before he occupied his present post. I have never had anything against him. He was a very bright member of our club and I do not reproach him now. He is limited by his relationship with the military-industrial complex and directors. At present we do have some grudges against him, but we understand under what kinds of circumstances he has to work.

My next question to Mr. Bulatkin was about his plant and city, and how much have they changed since the times described by M. Gorky in his novel "Mother" (i.e. from the beginning of the century).

S.B. There have been almost no changes. Everything is the same: the same shops, harbor, streets and people. There are, however, some changes too: in buildings, in peoples' behavior and in work.

L.A. How about the equipment?

S.B. The equipment is old. The plant is over hundred forty years old and it is still operating. There are a few pieces of new equipment, which were installed in recent years, but it still needs to be adjusted. Sormovo deserved more of a change in people and equipment. Our plant is a ship-building one, but everybody knows that those were warships; ours is a military plant. we produced cannons, rockets and submarines.

L.A. You said that the plant and the people deserve better conditions. Isn't that the reason for the organizing of an independent free trade union at the plant?

S.B. It is not, however, the main reason.

L.A. And what is the main reason?

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S.B. The main reason is that for seventy years the people have been excluded from the progressive development of mankind. They lived in what can be described as almost slavery. Our major loss during those years is the loss of the human cast of mind. Those years could have been enough for our people to become like workers of foreign countries, and I have to say that now our people are really backward. The life of workers is still the same: hard work during the day; then they go home, sit in front of the television set and drink vodka; next morning everything is repeated from the beginning.

L.A. According to M.Gorky it was even more scary - hard work and vodka, without any television sets.

S.M. Maybe so. But we activists know when it is worthwhile to watch television, when we have to propagandize to improve our life, and when to have a drink in our spare time.

L.A. There is nothing wrong with that.

Here is S.B.'s story about the establishment of the independent trade union in Sormovo:

S.B. In the course of several days we organized meetings in seven shops and persuaded about 250-300 people to join the free trade union. After several weeks, however, there were only 157 people left - these were the people who did not give up under pressure from the administration.

L.A. And people left because of the pressure?

S.B. Very serious pressure. We achieved a 157 person membership because we acted quickly. If we acted gradually over a two-week period we would have achieved nothing, because the administration came to life and in one week prohibited the holding of meetings in shops and prohibited meetings between the workers and activists of the free trade union. At meetings of the plant committee and STKs, decisions were made not to provide the space where workers could meet with activists of the free trade union and to prohibit the holding of meetings for setting up a new trade union. They said that the plant has the official trade union and there can be no talking about setting up a new one.

L.A. When was that?

S.B. After the constituent meeting at the rolling-mill shop on February 25, 1992.

The major problem of the new trade union according to S.B. is the lack of an office. " When we have an office we shall raise the question about having a full-time trade union official, providing communications, and installing a safe. All the information would

come to the office, all the documents. This would be the place for our accountant. It will have a sign on the door, saying that this is the office of the independent trade union. People will be able to come here to see us during the work hours and after."

The second question is a complicated one, about transferring social security money to our bank account. The administration and the accounting department are hindering it and say that there is already a trade union at the plant and that we want them to transfer money to some other trade union. We have appealed to the Committee on Legislation of the City Soviet (Council), and to the Procurator's office. (We have a special procurator's office as well as a special court). These organizations have helped us a little - they send a document to the administration of the plant, which said that according to the law a plant can have more than one trade union organization, but there have been no further activities further.

This is what S.B. told me about the official trade union.

S.B. The official trade union depends upon the administration of the plant and does not talk about serious issues. When the director announced that all pre-school facilities would be closed for two months, the official trade union did not say anything. Only we voiced our concern, but our voice was rather weak.

S.B. is sure that people do not leave the official trade union only because they are afraid of being discharged as the plant tries to reduce the number of employed. The discharge of workers has begun already. The old trade union does not try to protect its people from discharge, but we do try to protect them. Oleg Kiselev, member of the free trade union committee was fired. He is an artist and designer. S.B. thinks that the reason for trying to get rid of him is that the trade union has asked him on several occasions to draw cartoons, including the cartoons of the director, who supported the coup last August. The local court of law decided in Kiselev's favor, but the director appealed to the Supreme Court of Russia. After my return from Russia, I called N. Novgorov and asked about the decision of the Supreme Court. Unfortunately, it reversed the decision of the local court. Representatives of the free trade union were not present at the hearing - they were not allowed to take time off from work to do that. The free trade union did not agree with the decision to discharge Kiselev, but its opinion was not requested. The director received permission to fire the man from the official trade union chairman, even though Kiselev left the official trade union long ago. This is not the only case when members of the free trade union were fired, but the union did not consider it possible to appeal other discharges as it agrees that the administration did so for good cause: the workers used to drink a lot of vodka. But the free trade union does not agree with Kiselev's discharge. They have worked out a whole program of

actions to defend Kiselev: appeals to Yeltsin and Nemtsov, and meeting at the entrance to the plant against the plant administration to demand restoration of Kiselev at his work. They collected money for his family, and they set up a protest group against the arbitrary rule of administration.

Other members of the free trade union are also in a fix. On the eve of our coming to N. Novgorod they picketed the building of the plant administration demanding "Office - for the committee of the free trade union!".

The local media disapproved of the picketing. The picketing was said to be unlawful and the demand itself was said to have no grounds. The plant administration announced that it was going to sue the picketers, but meanwhile the director has left for vacation (in Italy) and nobody is implementing the threat. On August 29th there were only about 30 people who came to meet with Tom. But this was not a good day for that - Saturday and at the end of August people are collecting potatoes at their gardens. These days almost everybody has gardens outside the city and almost everybody has planted potatoes, as they understand that the winter is going to be difficult and potatoes are going to be the main food for the workers; or maybe the only food for those who get fired.

Tom was mostly asked questions about how to overcome pressure from a plant administration, and what does AFL-CIO do in those occasions. People definitely hoped that the American trade unions would help them in their struggle with plant administrations, although the workers themselves have no idea about how this can be done. While listening to the workers I understood what Bulatkin meant when he was saying "the people are backward." Really, the level of consciousness, both political and general, is very low.

Next we visited Governor Boris Nemtsov (his official title, since the oblast soviet voted for it). He is an impressive young man, 32 years of age. Until 1990 he was a research associate at the radio physical institute in Nizhny Novgorod. Starting from 1988, he took an active part in the public life of the city: he was a member of the discussion club "Dialogue" at the "Krasnoye Sormovo" plant. In 1989 Nemtsov's name was on a ballot for a people's deputy of the USSR, but his candidacy was not approved by the district election commission. In 1990 he became the people's deputy of Russia and in 1991 was appointed by Yeltsin to represent the president in Nizhny Novgorod and in the oblast.

Nemtsov is widely known for the energetic implementation of the economic reform, as well as for his original and bold decisions. For example, when the government failed to provide the oblast with money to pay salaries to the employees of the budget sector, Nemtsov made an appeal to the Constitutional court. According to the Labor Law of the USSR which was still not canceled by anybody, the government is obligated to pay the salary on a monthly basis. The court satisfied the suit against the government, and the oblast immediately received its 1 billion rubles.

Starting from September 1, a month long project of free trade will be held in Nizhny Novgorod, the purpose of which among others is to draw new merchandise into the city and to lower the prices (during this month there will be no local taxes imposed on salespeople).

We were given an hour for the visit. Nemtsov said that he had read my book Soviet Dissent and that he is a big admirer of radio "Svoboda". His unstable position in the oblast he described in a slightly coquettish way: his prominence is, in the most part, based on the fact that Yeltsin favors him for being the youngest among leaders of this scale and for being the only person among those who are close to the president who is taller than Yeltsin. Nevertheless, it is highly unlikely that Yeltsin's protectionism will be sufficient to save him from the local bureaucrats, who will probably eat him alive in the forthcoming months, when the unemployment from implicit (unpaid vacations, etc.) will become explicit. It needs to be noted that the press admires Nemtsov's ability to avoid conflicts with the regional soviet which is very rare in Russia. As for now, the area manages to make the ends meet (which is also very rare), but, according to

Nemtsov, it can handle 3% unemployment (in other words, provide food for people), while there may be more than a 10% unemployment rate which will result in a disaster.

It has been more than a year since Nemtsov started warning everybody about this issue. 60% of all industry in the city belongs to the military-industrial complex (MIC), and Yeltsin has cut the subsidies for VPK (Russian for MIC) by 68%. To be fair, the executives had several years to start the conversion but they have not done anything, and now, with reduced subsidies, they cannot do anything, since conversion requires large investments. The situation with agriculture is also very bad: the region produces only 50% of the necessary food supply. Aware of all these dangers, Nemtsov invited Grigory Yavlinsky with his team called "EPIcenter" (he did not tell me about it, I got this information from the press). Yavlinsky is the author of "500 Days", the program of economic reform which was blocked by Gorbachev to weaken Yeltsin. Another one of Yavlinsky's programs entitled "Agreement To Take A Chance" was created in Harvard with the help of American economists. It was not implemented, since it was drafted with the singular center in mind and by the time it was completed this center did not exist. Now Yavlinsky suggests initial implementation of market reforms through regions with consideration paid to their distinctive characteristics. He agreed to start from Nizhny Novgorod because the region is headed by Nemtsov who has been working there for almost a year. Yavlinsky entered Nemtsov's office during our visit and Nemtsov introduced us.

Nemtsov explained the problems that Yavlinsky and his EPIcenter are facing right now in Nizhny Novgorod. In order to get the region through the crisis, EPIcenter has to come up with suggestions for financial stabilization and means to save the social sphere and the agriculture, as well as to make economic predictions. For the purpose of implementing the program of EPIcenter, Nemtsov set up seven working groups which include representatives of oblast administration and experts from EPIcenter with voice but no vote. These groups have done a lot. There are regular auctions held in Nizhny Novgorod every week to facilitate the sale of small and medium-size enterprises. Two thousand enterprises—mostly those that provide services—have been privatized through these auctions. 60% of these enterprises became the property of their working bodies. In the near future, the entire cargo river fleet will be privatized. One of

the groups that is involved with the implementation of the economic reform is the group that deals with public organizations. Nemtsov is very interested in programs which aim at retraining the workers of the military-industrial complex. He would like to work on it together with AFL-CIO, but it is important to start as soon as possible.

Nemtsov's English is pretty decent but the comprehension is slow and he explained everything in Russian. However, he said that Tom could speak English (it could be that he was showing off). I am not sure that he understood everything. Tom explained to him the position that AFL-CIO takes with regard to Russia and asked him to help the independent trade union of shipbuilders in getting office space. Nemtsov said that Zharkov, director of "Krasnoye Sormovo", is very dependent on him and that Markov, who was at the Nemtsov's with us, should write to him and ask for premises. He, Nemtsov, will call the director and, hopefully, it will help. In response to my question about why directors are opposing the creation of new unions at the plant, Nemtsov said that the explanation is in the forthcoming unemployment. Directors already feel threatened by unions' resistance.

After visiting Nemtsov we invited Markov and Bulatkin for dinner, as well as the deputy of the city soviet Nikolaj Ashin whose responsibility there is the privatization of small and medium-size enterprises, and Igor Elman, editor of the independent newspaper "Russian Club" (both of them were recommended to me by the guys from "Panorama" as big experts on public life of Nizhny Novgorod).

At the dinner Tom talked with Markov and Bulatkin and I talked with Ashin and Elman. Markov told Tom that the free trade union of shipbuilders hopes to use its vouchers to buy a river vessel from the plant and to open up a restaurant on this ship. This way they will become owners, and the union will have money. There is also another plan: to buy a cargo river vessel and make it a collective property. He suggested to Tom that AFL-CIO should become a co-owner. Both Ashin and Elman, men who I was talking with, became part of democratic movement of Nizhny Novgorod from the very start. Ashin took part in the editing of a stand newspaper of the radio technical institute where he worked in one laboratory with Nemtsov. Nemtsov also edited this newspaper and they were friends. In the fall of 1987, when this newspaper of democratic opposition

was first published, there were only 8 associates in the laboratory. Now there is only one left. The rest went into business or politics. In March 1988, the Nizhny Novgorod section of "Memorial" was founded, and Ashin and Elman became its members. That was the time when other public groups were founded. In July 1988, they held a general meeting, got to know each other, and ever since then, according to Ashin, this group of key people who are active in public sphere remains virtually unchanged. All of them were active in pushing Nemtsov to the governor post (Elman, by the way, is his cousin) but now they are very disappointed in him: they are depressed because of the moral atmosphere, or, rather, amoral atmosphere among oblast authorities. Nemtsov promised to them that, once he becomes a governor, he will get rid of former nomenclature, but he preserved its backbone, and new people who are close to him are, according to Ashin, much worse than party activists who became influential in Gorbachev's time, in both an intellectual and a moral sense. Ashin commented that "what happened in Moscow happened here." Elman became so disappointed in democrats since they came into power that he completely withdrew from the political arena and assumed the role of an observer. Ashin is trying to do everything he can to increase the number of owners in the city and in the oblast. He thinks that this is the only way for achieving real democracy. Some of his undertakings have been quite successful: he worked out the project aimed at the privatization of housing which was approved for the implementation. There are also many accomplishments in the sphere of privatization of trade enterprises. Both of them talked about an unprecedented level of corruption and the dominance of racketeers in the city. I left by car for Togliatti—a city 750 km. away from N. Novgorod—the same night and arrived there Sunday early in the morning.

TOGLIATTI

The population is 750,000 people. The city was built in the 50s, at the same time as the Volga Automobile Plant (VAZ) which was built by "Fiat" (an Italian company) There are 120,000 employees at the plant, 100,000 of whom are factory workers. There is a free trade union at VAZ. There are several other plants in the city with several thousand workers at each of them, but VAZ is the only one with a free trade union.

I did not have high hopes of finding anybody there, since I arrived in Togliatti on Sunday (the very same potato gathering). Contrary to my expectations, I reached