Russian marchers demand Yeltsin's resignation

A reporter
8 October 1998

An estimated one to two million people marched in cities and towns across Russia on Wednesday demanding President Yeltsin's resignation and the payment of unpaid wages and pensions. It was thought to be the largest demonstration against the Yeltsin regime since the liquidation of the Soviet Union in 1991. Workers also held strikes and stoppages.

Protests have been held on this day annually but this year's numbers swelled because some 57 percent of Russian workers are now owed back pay. Soaring prices for food and other essential items have devastated millions, with inflation hitting 67 percent since the collapse of the rouble and Russia's financial markets in August.

Those participating in the rallies included industrial workers and miners, students, pensioners and politicians. They were watched by thousands of riot police. The Interior Ministry said 157,600 people joined in meetings and rallies in 157 places across the Far Eastern, Central and Volga regions. However, Yeltsin's deputy chief of staff Oleg Sysyuyev said about a million protested.

A diverse range of organisations joined the marches, with the red banners of the Stalinists of the Communist Party intermingling with the blue flags of the Federation of Independent Trade Unions. Among them were banners of smaller unions, as well as those promoting fascists. Some carried photos of Vladimir Lenin, the leader of the October 1917 Russian Revolution, while others had flags from the czarist era.

In the Siberian city of Krasnoyarsk, the extreme nationalist and former military general Alexander Lebed made himself prominent on the march. Lebed, who was briefly Yeltsin's security adviser and who is currently the governor of the vast, mineral-rich territory of Krasnoyarsk, backed calls for Yeltsin to step down, on the grounds that Yeltsin had lost the confidence of both the people and the financial markets. 'Today Yeltsin is alone,' he said. 'People are pushed to the extreme. Western investors have become fierce and are angry with him.'

In order to bring together such a coalition, the protest organisers limited the slogans of the marches to Yeltsin's departure and the payment of wages. Nevertheless, expressions of intense hostility to the social disaster created by the regime were common. 'Yeltsin made a beggar out of me,' read on banner tied to a hangman's noose near the Kremlin. 'Hang Yeltsin,' it said. Students in Moscow burnt a portrait of Yeltsin and in the early evening young protesters scuffled with police near the Kremlin but were soon dispersed. Russian media reported that police detained about 20 people.

Organisers had predicted a turnout of 40 million for the rallies, which were originally called three months ago when Yeltsin was still clinging to the administration of Prime Minister Kiriyenko. Now the leaders of the Communist Party have been called in to attempt to stabilise the government, serving in key posts under Yeltsin's most recent nominee for Prime Minister, former Soviet foreign envoy Yevgeny Primakov.

Speaking on the eve of the rallies, in his first address to the nation, Primakov called for 'calm and concord' and 'stability and discipline' in the face of the economic crisis. 'I understand that many of those who are going to demonstrate tomorrow have grounds for dissatisfaction,' he said. 'But I want to urge everyone, don't rock the boat we're all in--the sea today is too stormy.' Accordingly, the Communist Party also called for calm and cancelled plans for separate marches.

Primakov pledged to repay pensions and wages due

© World Socialist Web Site

'to the last kopek' and start paying current salaries on time in full. He also claimed that Russians would be 'fully provided' with food to see them through the coming winter. Yet it was clear he had no coherent program for battling the intensifying crisis, which is forecast to see Russia's economy contract by a further 5 percent this year, with inflation reaching 200 percent.

'August's collapse of the rouble resulted in a major drop in food imports, which amounted to almost half of the products on the market in recent years,' he said, adding that the government was negotiating with Ukraine and Belarus for payment of part of their debts to Russia with food. 'A program is taking shape, there will be a program,' he promised, while saying that the financial side depended on Russia's negotiations with creditors and investors worldwide.

While Stalinist officials, led by Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov, were taking part in the protests, they had just voted for Primakov to head Yeltsin's cabinet. Their representative, Yury Maslyukov, is now deputy prime minister in charge of economic policy. Even as the marches were underway, Primakov gave Maslyukov broad powers over the new cabinet's economic course. Maslyukov, who served as the last head of the Soviet central planning agency, will be in charge of economics and trade ministries and various other bodies. He will oversee talks with the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and other international lenders.

With Yeltsin, 67, ailing in health and politically wounded after being forced to give up his bid to reinstall Viktor Chernomyrdin as prime minister and prospective heir, many politicians are predicting that Yeltsin will step down before the next presidential election in mid-2000. They include a prominent tycoon, Boris Berezovsky, who has said that Yeltsin's daughter, Tatyana Dyachenko, shares this view.

Under Yeltsin's constitution, the president has far-reaching decree-making powers of a dictatorial character. The Stalinists' candidate to replace Yeltsin will almost certainly be Zyuganov, who ran second last time.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site