



Crisis in the Trade Union Movement

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The official Czechoslovak trade unions, facing a major crisis in their ranks, have been trying to adapt themselves to the new political situation. They have been challenged by some 6,000 strike committees, which have formed an alternative trade union organization and now represent workers in many industries. It is possible that two distinct trade union organizations will be officially established or that the official trade unions will eventually be absorbed by the new trade union body.

Political developments in Czechoslovakia have caused a severe crisis in the Revolutionary Trade Union Movement (ROH), the official Czechoslovak trade union organization. The Central Council of Trade Unions (URO), the highest body in the ROH, which in the past has coordinated and controlled all industrial trade union activities, has all but disintegrated. Its leadership has been replaced by an action committee, and many ROH members have disassociated themselves from the organization. The ROH has been unable to cope with the challenge posed by the 6,000 or so strike committees that in many industries have taken the place of official trade unions. Negotiations between representatives of the official trade unions and the Coordination Committee of the Association of Strike Committees have not produced a settlement, and either the breakup of the trade union movement or the absorption of the ROH

by the new trade union movement appears a real possibility.

The Crisis in the Official Trade Unions

The current crisis erupted after the Milos Jakes leadership resigned on November 24. Miroslav Zavadil, the chairman of the official trade unions and a Presidium member of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (CPCS), survived the purge of the party leadership but two days later resigned from his post under public pressure. At an emergency plenary meeting of the URO on November 26, Zavadil stepped down as Chairman of the ROH and was replaced by Karel Henes, former Chairman of the Trade Union Council of the Central Bohemian region.¹

The meeting took place one day before a general strike called by the Civic Forum and students to

protest the police brutality on November 17 and force the government to accept the opposition's demands. The ROH did not officially join the strike, although its new leadership condemned the police brutality and even said that some of the opposition's demands were justified. After the meeting of the URO, thousands of ROH members as well as entire trade union organizations in enterprises began to demand changes in the structure of the ROH and expressed their "lack of confidence" in the URO.

The URO was accused of being a parasitic, bureaucratic body that fed off the trade union movement and a tool that the communist party had used to control the trade unions. Some trade union organizations immediately canceled their financial contributions to the URO. Many trade unionists demanded that the ROH simplify its entire organizational structure and that district and regional trade union councils in particular be abolished. More radical demands included the removal of communist party organizations from work places and the abolition of the People's Militia, the party's private army. The calls for the removal of party organizations from work places escalated after November 29, when the Federal Assembly voted to strip the communist party of its constitutionally guaranteed "leading role in society."

On December 5 the ROH daily *Prace* published a draft of an action program proclaiming the ROH's independence from political parties and demanding "pluralism of opinions within the trade union organization." On the same day the new URO leadership joined the opposition's call for a general strike on December 11 to protest the composition of the new Czechoslovak government.² Not even these radical measures, however, were able to diminish the criticism directed against the URO and the ROH. At a meeting of chairmen of Czechoslovak trade union organizations on December 7, delegates severely criticized the URO and demanded that district and regional trade union councils be abolished. The action program of the URO was also criticized for not going far enough.³

On December 9 a plenary meeting of the URO voted to dissolve its leadership and replace it with an action committee headed by Karel Heneš; it also expelled a number of URO members. An "Appeal to All Members of the ROH" that was approved at the meeting stipulated that trade union officials be chosen by secret ballot in multicandidate elections to ensure that the unions remain independent of political parties and fight for the real interests of the

working people. The meeting also called for an extraordinary congress of the ROH at the beginning of 1990. Trade union members were asked to make recommendations for the restructuring of the ROH and the implementation of a number of other plans, including a new law concerning the right to strike.

Strike Committees

Despite all these measures, the position of the official trade unions has continued to deteriorate, largely owing to the emergence of the alternative trade union movement, represented by some 6,000 strike committees and their umbrella organization, the Association of Strike Committees. The strike committees formed spontaneously throughout Czechoslovakia before the general strike on November 27. Believing that a second strike might be necessary, the association's Coordinating Committee asked the strike committees not to dissolve. Most of these strike committees have begun functioning as alternative trade union committees; since entire trade union organizations have joined them, many have become virtually identical with the former official trade union organizations in work places. At their meeting on December 7, many of the trade union chairmen complained that members of their organizations had "defected" to strike committees. Both the official trade unions and the Association of Strike Committees claim to have the support of about two-thirds of the registered trade unionists. As revealed in the December 16 issue of *Prace*, some public opinion polls had suggested that the Association of Strike Committees enjoyed the support of approximately 70% of trade unionists.

Members of the Coordinating Committee of the Association of Strike Committees have repeatedly said that they were not trying to create a new trade union movement, but they had insisted that the official trade unions merge with the strike committees and accept the association's demands. According to committee members, the trade union movement should remain united and there should be only one trade union for every work place. All unnecessary bureaucracy should be removed and trade unionists should be organized into trade union federations representing industrial branches. The federations should become independent, the URO should be abolished, and a small coordinating committee should function both as a spokesman for the trade union federations and as a manager of their common property.

Negotiations

Meetings between the URO representatives and the Coordinating Committee of the Association of Strike Committees have not produced any major agreement on how to merge the official and unofficial trade unions or combine the two trade union movements' agendas. On December 9 representatives from strike committees as well as from many official Czechoslovak trade union committees met in the industrial city of Kladno and decided to call a trade union congress for the beginning of 1990, claiming that the discredited URO had no right to do so. They repeated some of the demands already made by official trade union leaders and stressed, in particular, the demand that the presence of party organizations in work places be ended. They also asked that political parties be prevented from organizing their own trade unions. The program of the Association of Strike Committees, which is entitled "What We Should Do" and was approved at the meeting, was almost identical with the action program of the ROH. Only the past association of the ROH with the communist party has proved a bone of contention between the two organizations.

On December 17 representatives of both trade union organizations met again but did not reach an agreement. In fact, the meeting led to what appeared to be a definite split. A statement issued by the Association of Strike Committees after the negotiations said that the association "terminates any negotiations with the Action Committee of the ROH" and demanded that the committee stop any political activities and limit itself to administrative activities "until a new trade union structure is created." The Association of Strike Committees also said that it would support speedy election of trade union officials in organizations in enterprises. After these elections, conferences of trade union federations representing various industrial branches would take place. Finally, after the conferences, a trade union congress called by the Association of Strike Committees would be held. The association asked the Action Committee of the ROH to make an inventory of all ROH property and prepare the transfer of the property to new "trade union bodies."⁴

The Association of Strike Committees Gains Ground

On 4 January 1990 the Czechoslovak government announced that until a trade union congress could

be held, it would discuss the draft laws affecting workers with both the ROH Action Committee and the Association of Strike Committees. This step has clearly strengthened the position of the Association of Strike Committees since, before January 4, the government was bound by law to discuss new labor legislation only with the ROH.⁵

On January 7 the Association of Strike Committees organized a meeting in the Moravian city of Brno. The meeting was attended by the association's representatives, representatives of the Forum of Coordinating Committees of Working People (the Slovak counterpart of the association), and newly elected chairmen of trade union organizations in enterprises. The participants in the meeting created a new joint committee—the Trade Union Coordinating Center. A resolution that was approved at the meeting demanded that the Czechoslovak government change its January 4 decision and regard the Trade Union Coordinating Center as the only representative of the trade union movement in Czechoslovakia. The resolution also demanded that elections of new officials of trade union organizations in enterprises be completed as soon as possible so that conferences of trade union federations in various industries could be held. The activity of the Trade Union Coordinating Center "will end when the trade union congress is held." The meeting scheduled the congress for March 4.⁶

The creation of the Trade Union Coordinating Center, which was supported by many of the newly elected chairmen of trade union organizations in enterprises, seems to have dealt a serious blow to the ROH and its leadership. On January 16 the Action Committee of the ROH in Slovakia announced that it deemed itself "subordinated to the Trade Union Coordinating Center" and that until the trade union congress it would limit itself to "administrative functions." The Czech and the federal leaderships (action committees) of the ROH have not followed the Slovak example but, despite previous statements to the contrary, agreed to talks between the Action Committee of the ROH and the Trade Union Coordinating Center.⁷

What Is at Stake

Although the resolution passed at the meeting on January 7 declared the Trade Union Coordinating Center to be the only representative of trade unionists in Czechoslovakia, and although the Slovak leadership of the ROH has "defected" to the Trade

Union Coordinating Center, the ROH has not ceased to exist; nor has the conflict between the two trade union organizations. Although strike committees appear to be gaining the upper hand, the real strength of the two trade union organizations is difficult to estimate, as they overlap each other to a certain degree. Many trade union organizations in work places have simply replaced their own leaders with strike committee leaders and begun following the directives of these new people and the Coordinating Committee of the Association of Strike Committees. Although there is a strong possibility that the federal and Czech Action Committees of the ROH will ultimately follow the Slovak Action Committee and join the Trade Union Coordinating Center, two separate congresses of trade unionists could take place later this year and could result in the official establishment of two separate organizations—one representing a minority of workers but controlling a huge amount of property, the other representing the majority of the working people but

owning almost nothing. In fact, the matter of property is the central issue behind the maneuvering on both sides of the divided trade union movement.

If it were not for the question of transferring the property of the ROH to the Association of Strike Committees, the association could simply transform itself into a new, independent trade union organization. Given its long-term association with the Communists, the ROH can hardly be expected to compete successfully with the new organization. However, the buildings, recreational facilities, publishing facilities, and newspapers and magazines owned by the ROH might enable the organization to continue for some time to play a role not commensurate with its real support among workers, thus sabotaging some of the new trade union organization's activities.⁸ In light of the quickly growing authority of the Trade Union Coordinating Center, however, it seems that the split could be avoided, and the ROH is likely to be absorbed by the new trade union body.

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Notes:

1. *Prace*, 27 November 1989, p. 1
2. *Ibid.*, 6 December 1989, p. 1.
3. *Ibid.*, 8 December 1989, p. 1
4. *Ibid.*, 18 December 1989, p. 1
5. *Rude Pravo*, 5 January 1990, p.
6. *Prace*, 8 January 1990, p. 1
7. Czechoslovak Radio, 16 January 1990, 5:30 A.M.
8. The URO has already lost some of its press organs. The editors of *Prace* announced on 18 December 1989 that the daily, which had previously been controlled by the URO, had declared its independence and was ready to serve all trade unionists, regardless of the trade union to which they belonged. Editors from the publishing house *Prace*, which publishes books for trade unionists, have also announced that they are ready to serve all trade unionists, not just one faction of the trade union movement. Both statements were published in *Prace*, 18 December 1989, p. 1.