

# AT THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

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## Leningrad's Democratic Activists

Anger is gripping the people of Leningrad, who have grown weary of the sluggish local bureaucracy. This dissatisfaction has boosted the growth of the city's independent political life, led by informal groups which sprang up after the 1987 amnesty for political prisoners. In 1989, Leningrad voters dealt establishment Communist candidates a humiliating defeat in elections to the Congress of Peoples' Deputies, resulting in the removal of the Leningrad Party secretary. The great mass of the population so far shuns a more organized role in city politics, but a core of workers, journalists and rank-and-file Party members is mounting a challenge to the dominant conservatism of the Leningrad Party organization and its subordinate institutions.

One such activist is Ivan Dashkevich, a member of the Leningrad People's Front (LPF) and founder of the independent trade union *Spravedlivost* (Justice). Dashkevich led a roundtable discussion at the Harriman Institute February 2, 1990, focusing on independent movements in the Russian republic. He emphasized that they are still much weaker than the people's fronts which have emerged in the other republics. "The Leningrad People's Front now has six to seven hundred members," he said, "and this is, unfortunately, the largest people's front in Russia."

### Liberalization to Democratization

A number of organizations have formed with the intention of becoming future opposition parties. These include the Democratic Union, established in late 1988, and the Leningrad People's Front, which organizers began to form two years ago but which only held its first meeting in June 1989. The democratic movement has been hampered by philosophical differences. Moderates, made up of liberal communists, opposed confrontation with even the local party authorities. The radical wing claimed that such conflict is inevitable.

Dashkevich notes that the opposition is becoming more effective. "The elections to the Congress of Peoples' Deputies

moved the country from liberalization to democratization," he said. "In Moscow, Leningrad, the Baltic republics and the industrial centers, which are the most politically conscious and democratically inclined, the official candidates lost." The vocal debates broadcast on national television inspired many who had maintained a silence of uncertainty. The LPF is still small, but determination rather than size may prove valuable in this time of upheaval.

The formation of such groups is especially significant in Leningrad, where the Party organization is resisting reform. It held a rally in November 1989 at which officials roundly criticized *perestroika*. In response, the Leningrad Party Club, the LPF and the Democratic Union turned out a crowd forty thousand strong demanding the resignation of Leningrad Party Secretary Boris Gidasov and an end to the Communist Party's monopoly on power.

### Revolution or Reaction?

The LPF and other independent political groups now receive support from the liberal Inter-Regional Group, which represents one-fifth of the members of the Soviet parliament. The LPF also forged links to the Baltic fronts, striking miners and Polish Solidarity leaders. In response, the Leningrad Communist Party tried to discredit the LPF. It brought in Russians from Estonia to address workers about new laws there that they say discriminate against Russians. This tactic was successful and the front lost some of its local popularity, a troubling sign that the Party can drive wedges between Russian workers and the democratic movement.

When asked by audience members to gauge the potential of the Russian workers for revolution or reaction, Dashkevich conceded that a prognosis at this point would be difficult to make. Certain events, for instance violence against Russians in the republics, could swing workers to the right. However, he rejected the image of workers as anti-democratic, anti-Semitic militant nationalists. Referring to well-known right-wing groups, he asserted that "The United



Workers Front is connected to the Party and the factory management whom the workers blame for the falling standard of living. *Pamyat* and *Patriot* have even less support and influence... The [1989] elections in Leningrad will give you an idea of the mood." Dashkevich pointed out that *Pamyat's* candidate, who ran at the city-wide level and received television air-time, received only seven thousand votes. "Out of three or four million, that's not very much."

With the economic and political situation increasingly unstable, Dashkevich sees a general strike as inevitable. "It is only a question of time before a repetition of the Polish situation in 1980," he warned. "People are fed up with words." The standard of living is falling, and with rumors of coming price increases, the level of dissatisfaction is high. Events in the non-Russian republics, he said, would play a major role in determining the shape of the eruption.

## Union Blues

Dashkevich spent two years in jail as a conscientious objector and then worked in construction. In late 1987, he and a group of workers started a club for the democratization of the official trade unions, which are under the control of the conservative party apparatus. Dashkevich ridiculed union officials: "Those who proved themselves too incompetent for real party work got sent to run the trade unions."

The group developed a program to defend the rights of

workers and called for reelection of the union leadership. In the spring of 1988, about fifty of them went to see the chairman of the Leningrad trade union administration for the purpose of getting an office. When he would not receive them, they occupied the meeting hall of the Palace of Labor and refused to leave for three hours until he came out and spoke to them. Talks on official recognition proceeded for a year without much effect. "We eventually got an office," Dashkevich said, "but we had to employ similar commando tactics."

Frustrated by the trade unions' unwillingness to become a political action bloc, Dashkevich eventually gave up on the idea of reform from within and founded the independent trade union *Spravedlivost*. He has so far been able to attract only one hundred workers because most do not want to lose the benefits distributed by official trade unions. Dashkevich admits that his organization, like the rest of the workers' movement in Russia, is very weak. "The miners' strikes were an exception due to the awful conditions there," he said.

How does the head of an independent Soviet labor union feel about *perestroika*, which may lead to price hikes and unemployment? Dashkevich said that price rises and unemployment were only tolerable to workers if they were implemented "responsibly," meaning with significant safeguards attached. He also refrained from endorsing worker-elected management, since "the cultural level of the workers is still too low to be able to elect good new administrators."

*Reported by Jeff Zerkowitz*

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