

Global Labor Notes / Russia invades Georgia – and the labour movement is silent

Eric Lee

Russia, it was said, was still reeling from the loss of its empire. It had formally accepted the right of countries like Ukraine to self-determination. But among its leaders, some sought ways to bring the 'near abroad' back into the fold. As a result, all the countries on Russia's borders were actively seeking the protection of European powers and America. This, in turn, was interpreted by the Kremlin as a kind of encirclement. Tensions with Poland were running especially high. And then the Russian army invaded Georgia.

The response of the trade union movement and the democratic Left was swift – universal condemnation of a blatant act of aggression, an obvious attempt to seize control over a country whose independence Russia had recognised. Georgia had no better friend than the international labour movement which stood by its side at a difficult moment.

That was in 1921 – not 2008.

The parallels between the two invasions – the one organised by Stalin behind Lenin and Trotsky's back, and the one Putin organised behind Medvedev's back – are too numerous to list.

And of course there are differences too. The regime in Georgia back in 1921 was something unique in history, a genuinely revolutionary democratic socialist society, dominated by a mass social democratic party, trade unions and cooperatives. Georgia today, though a democracy, is run by a right-wing party and promotes liberal, free market values.

Russia today is not the Russia of 1921 – certainly no longer making the claim that when it sends its troops into neighbouring countries it is somehow promoting a better future for all mankind. Stripped of Leninist-Stalinist ideology, Russian aggression directed against Georgia (and other neighbours) increasingly resembles

LEE | Global Labor Notes / Georgia: Why is Labor Silent?

the imperial foreign policy of the tsarist regime.

One of the biggest differences between the Russian invasion of Georgia in 1921 and the one that took place this summer has been the reaction of the Left around the world. Of course the knee-jerk anti-American Left instantly blamed George Bush for the war, and looked for evidence of sneaky neo-cons putting in appearances in Tbilisi in the days leading up to the outbreak of fighting.

One expects no more from the Chomsky-Galloway Left, but the reaction of the mainstream trade union movement was muted, to say the least. Especially when contrasted with the vigorous defense of democratic Georgia that unions and their labour parties in the 1920s carried out.

Regardless of Georgian unions' dislike for Saakashvili and his right-wing, anti-union policies, they united in defense of their homeland when faced with the bullying and then the open aggression of Putin's Russia.

Many leaders of the Georgian unions volunteered to join the country's armed forces – armed forces which like those in 1921 were quickly routed by a far superior Russian force.

The head of the Georgian Trade Union Confederation (GTUC), Irakli Petriashvili, issued an appeal to the unions of the world in which he wrote, 'I am writing to you to draw your and international trade union movement's attention to the unprecedented fact of aggression that is being carried out by the Russian Federation against the independent state of Georgia and that has already taken away the lives of hundreds of civilians among them ordinary working men and women, members of trade unions affiliated to GTUC.'

Petriashvili pointed out the deaths of dockers, union members in the port city of Poti. He mentioned that unions in countries bordering Russia (particularly the Baltics and Ukraine) had already indicated their solidarity with Georgia.

And he ended his appeal by saying, 'We would appreciate very much any help in this crucial moment from the international trade union movement that would alleviate the consequences of this catastrophe.'

Democratiya 14 | Autumn 2008

I don't think this was just an appeal for humanitarian assistance. The Georgian unions were expecting their brothers and sisters in other countries to offer them political support and to condemn the Russian invasion.

In late August, Georgian unions held a rally at a Russian checkpoint at the village of Igoeti. 'You cannot bring Georgia to its knees with bombing,' they said. 'There is no place for aggressors in Georgia.' Petriashvili spoke at the rally and said the unions would hold protests every day until the occupiers leave Georgia.

So, how did unions – and in particular the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), to which the Georgian unions are affiliated – react?

The response of the international labour movement so far has been to call for humanitarian aid – and not to say a negative word about what Russia has done.

The ITUC, which claims to represent 168 million workers in 155 countries, initially called on all sides to cease firing and to withdraw to their positions prior to 7 August.

But when Russia blatantly violated the European-brokered agreement and kept troops inside Georgia (and then recognised the breakaway provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia) the ITUC had nothing further to say.

One reason why this is happening is that unions in Russia – which are also ITUC affiliates – have not come out against the aggression committed by their government. The ITUC finds itself between a rock and a hard place, not wishing to take sides when two of its affiliates are having a little spat.

In normal times, that might make some sense. Even in conflicts, the historic role of the international trade union movement has been to play the role of honest broker – and has done an excellent job, especially recently, with Israeli and Palestinian unions.

The fear of saying something controversial, of alienating or angering the Russian unions – or perhaps the fear of angering the Putin regime, which might then take it out on Russian unions – has immobilised the international labour movement.

LEE | Global Labor Notes / Georgia: Why is Labor Silent?

Instead of leading the way as it did in the 1920s, unions have lagged behind politicians. The British and French foreign secretaries – both socialists – have been outspoken in their expressions of solidarity with Georgia when faced with Russian aggression. But the unions are saying nothing.

Back in the 1940s, a book was published in New York called *The Russian Menace to Europe*. It was a collection of articles explaining how Russian aggression was built-in to the nature of the regime, and needed to be answered by collective security in the West.

The authors of the book were Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. The editors, themselves democratic socialists, argued that Stalin's Russia was continuing the aggressive, expansionist policies of the tsarist regime.

What was true of Stalin is even truer of Putin. The only difference today is that the ideological nonsense of Leninism-Stalinism has been stripped away and all that remains is naked Russian aggression.

The Russian Menace to Europe deserves to be reprinted – and its message passed on to a new generation on the Left and in the trade union movement.

As Russian tanks crossed into Georgia in August, commemorating the 40th anniversary of the invasion of Czechoslovakia by re-enacting it in the Caucasus, the silence of the international labour movement was and is unacceptable.

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