Given the transient and murky correlation of forces in Soviet Union after the April strikes of miners and consequently rapprochement between Gorbachev and Yeltsin, Pavlov the Prime Minister of U.S.S.R in June, 1991 tried to launch his 'Palace Coup', demanding that the Supreme Soviet give him extra-powers. He was caught on the wrist by Gorbachev, who proceeded to erode the power of his own cabinet. At the end of July, 1991 Gorbachev held a secret meeting with Nazarbayev and Yeltsin, about which Kryuchkov was informed by KGB. In this meeting it was agreed that Nazarbayev would replace Pavlov, and defence minister Yazov and KGB chief Kryachkov would be removed from the government, immediately after the signing of the union treaty. On August 3 Gorbachev issued a decree which gave priority to consumer goods production, against the Pavlov government's insistence that priority should remain with the 'basic' industrial branches. On August 5 Planning for the Coup began. On August 10 Gorbachev issued a decree creating the state property fund, which would be accountable only to the President and the supreme Soviet, and so would bypass the cabinet and take control of all state property out of the hands of the ministries."

"When on August 23, 1991, the world heard the news of the failure of the attempted Coup d'etat, millions of people across the globe
rejoiced at the victory of democracy in Russia. The inhabitants of the country, however, were in a rather less euphoric frame of mind. When Yeltsin gave a strike call against coup "in Kuzbass only 41 mines struck against almost 200 which had spent up to two months on strike earlier in the year, supposedly in the support of Yeltsin... immediate response of the workers was not substantial." Many of those who went in for strike were following the instruction of their mine directors, who explained to their workers that the independence of mines and their hard-won prosperity was at stake.

Although the official propaganda of Russian government spoke of universal love for the President’s reforms, there developed wide spread doubt about the sincerity and democratic credentials of the authorities. Events after August only reinforced peoples’ worst misgivings. The removal of Gorbachev from power as the Soviet president by the Russian government in the de facto manner in the last days of August and then formally at the end of December - did not provoke any protest, despite the fact that the intention of former Soviet Prime Minister Pavlov and Vice-President Yanaev to edge Gorbachev out and take his place in August qualified as treason. No one felt sorry for Gorbachev and the collapse of the President’s power automatically entailed the liquidation of the union as well.
Making an assessment of Gorbachev as general secretary of the CPSU after his collapse in December 1991 Roy Medvedev, a Soviet historian said, "when Gorbachev took power, our country was in a perilous condition. And when we look around us now, six years after Gorbachev began his reforms, what do we see? We are producing less in quantitative terms, and the quality of our output has not improved... The performance of our agriculture has deteriorated... the union has fallen apart, split into a series of separate republics. ...Monetary system is disintegrating, and the rate of inflation is growing... now there is at least a certain democracy, freedom of speech and opinion, and of course this is good. But to a significant degree this occurred independently of Gorbachev; the situation in the country became so bad that people simply spoke out, and could not be stopped... there was talk of a new concept of socialism, as new approach, but this was not followed up... anti-alcoholism campaign helped bring about the collapse of financial system, because government drew a great deal of its revenue from the sale of alcohol, which is a state monopoly... the struggle against unearned incomes did not last long about two months. There was supposed to be a campaign against speculators, but a person who purchased goods from countryside and sold those goods in the towns - an economic agent - was regarded as speculator - this simply stopped market working, and the links between the countryside and towns suffered... the law on cooperation was adopted, along with legislation on the independence of
enterprises. But these moves were not properly thought through. For this reason the cooperatives, right from the beginning, took on a speculative character and not a productive one; they failed to put significant new quantities of goods on the market. The law on the enterprises broke the links between them... in the countryside, Gorbachev sought initially to solve the problems through changes to the system of administration of agriculture, without understanding that the critical thing was initiative from below, from the peasants themselves. Huge, unwieldy new administrative apparatuses were set up - Agropromsoyz, Agroprom of Russian Federation. These colossal administrative structures subsequently collapsed; today nothing remains of them... the 'programme of five hundred days' to shift to market economy was not well thought out. So in the soviet union today no one lives better than they did ten years ago, if we discount the 2 or 3 percent of the population who are growing rich on speculation. The workers and peasants, the intellelgentia, army officers, are all much worse off. .. at earlier stages in the process I was very impressed by Gorbachev, but now I can see that his main role has been to destroy rather than to construct."

After the August coup Gorbachev never convened the meeting of Central Committee of CPSU. Gorbachev, at the same time renouncing his powers as a member of the central committee, issued a decree temporarily suspending the committee’s activity. Yeltsin similarly issued a decree suspending the activity of the central committee and of
the Supreme Soviet of U.S.S.R. This was an unlawful and unjustified decision, and incomprehensible from any reasonable point of view. The Prosecutor's office was entrusted with making through investigations in order to establish the degree of participation by the party in the coup, and the matter was to be handed over to the supreme court. The goal had infact been to dissolve the party.

The triumph of August counter coup resulted in the dissolution of the Communist Party of Soviet Union, whose fate was sealed and its death spelled in national elections of 1989 and local elections in 1990. The party property was appropriated by the new authorities and their hangers-on. Although, the misappropriation of party property by the nomenklatura started from restructuring process itself. The expropriation of party property went ahead as Russian Government ministeries moved into the buildings of the party central committee. This was of course quite illegal. The regional peoples' courts were asked by Moscow mayor to move into the buildings of regional party committees, as in the past they had to put up with very poor premises- they were badly funded and lacked the money for anything better. But most of the people's courts refused to do so, since they were the organs of law enforcement. The communist newspapers were closed and then allowed to reopen, but in the conditions that left them vulnerable to pressure, both political and commercial. The editorial collectives, in fact, had taken over the newspapers as their own property, though the printing works and other
production facilities were the property of the party. The pravda staffs
 calculated how many hundreds of million of roubles the paper had
 contributed to the party, and on this basis they demanded that all the
 buildings and equipment be declared the property of the paper. The
 closing the party papers turned out to be very unpopular step by the
 Yeltsin and the democrats. It was met with outrage even by the people
 who had no love for these publications, by the people who were opponents
 of the party but who maintained that the freedom of press had to be
 general. They were saying: ‘we do not like these papers, but they should
 still be allowed to come out, as opposition newspapers’. So Yeltsin was
 forced to allow all the party papers to resume publications.

The leading representatives of the CPSU in the Congress of
People’s Soviets tamely assented to these measures, only putting up
struggle when their salary was threatened with stoppage. The CPSU was
not the only casualty of August events. The Russian Government
blatantly flouted its own promises and democratic laws. The freely
elected local soviets were deprived of power and their authority was
transferred to the representatives of the President. By the end of the year
representative and judicial organs had largely lost the struggle to control
the executive power... Yeltsin himself occupied the post of President,
Prime Minister and Defence Minister. Indeed, Yeltsin’s arbitrary use of
power alarmed even those like Anatoly Sobchak, the Mayor of St.
Petersberg, who otherwise endorsed neo-liberal line.∗
The Eclipse of Official Unions

The Soviet totalitarian system directed the macro and micro economy as well as politics, ideology, education, the press and other elements of the superstructure. The central committee of CPSU controlled appointments to all important party and political posts in the republics and regions. It also supervised all important administrative and economic appointments. Factory, mine, enterprise, institute directors, chariman of regional and town executive committees, and so on, were always party members, their appointment confirmed in Moscow. Any leader of any republic could be removed by a decision of the politburo. The interests of the centre always prevailed over local interests.

During the Soviet period virtually all workers and employees (including managers) belonged to the official All Union Central Council of trade unions (AUCCTU) which controlled considerable property as well as the distribution of social security and other crucial benefits to its members. Initially the AUCCTU responded to Gorbachev's reform programme with long conditioned, reflective acceptance of changes in party line, promising vaguely to "shield workers from negative consequences." Simon Clark and Peter Fairbrother observed that the All Union Central Council of Trade Unions (VTs SPs/AUCCTU) asserted its 'independence' from the party and government as early as 1987, not as a
progressive but as a conservative force. The VTsSPS increasingly stood out against Government's plans to introduce market reforms, insisting on very substantial social guarantees, high level of unemployment pay etc. as precondition for any agreement on new legislation. This rearguard action was extremely ineffective, and simply meant that the trade unions lost what little impact on policy they had once enjoyed.  

The tensions over layoffs and productive pressures in the early reform period posed some challenges to the union officials, who were well entrenched in most enterprises and generally had a close subordinate working relationship with management and a highly bureaucratic work style with rank and file. Meanwhile glasnost was exposing the lack of mass confidence in and loyalty to the old unions. A survey conducted in March, 1989 demonstrated that more than 75% of urban respondents gave a negative evaluation of trade unions role in "protecting the rights of workers in our country" with 52% assessing the unions' performance "fairly low" or "very low."  

The 1989 miners' strike proved a watershed in the AUCCTU reform. Strike organizers completely bypassed union officials, rank and file miners showed their deep contempt, and central officials used them as scapegoat for poor conditions in the coal basin. Local unions in all affected areas were completely discredited. Most significantly, the rise of
independent miners' committees, threatened the AUCCTU's monopoly, raising the spectre of its repudiation and replacement by a democratic labour movement organised from below.¹²

The union's leadership responded to the strikes with trenchant self-criticism, openly acknowledging its loss of authority and trust among workers; failure to defend their interests, and transformation into an "appendage" of the state structure. At its sixth plenum in September 1989, the union declared its commitment to the "defense of workers' interests and other functions" and threw its weight against economic reforms, demanding a price freeze, return to stringent price control, and severe restrictions on cooperatives and privatization. It also began to engage in more activist politics, organising rallies, aggressively lobbying the Supreme Soviet, and trying unsuccessfully to mobilise anti-reform workers for electoral competition through the united front of working people. This period of obstructionism was, however, short lived.

The VTsSPS (AUCCTU) in October 1990 transformed its structure, moderated its policyline, and sought a 'constructive dialogue' with government as labour representative in the reform process. The leadership replaced the old union centralized structure with the General Confederation of Trade Unions (GCTU) and affiliated Republic level Federation of Independent Trade Unions (FNPR). The reformed union
retained, for the most part, the old union leadership, apparatus, property, functions and membership list (140 million workers), but its politics and tactics were now driven by the need to survive in a democratizing polity.  

The GCTU (VKP) now recognised the need for economic reform and declared its "conditional" support for a market economy with a diversity of ownership forms, but demanded that transition programme should include social guarantees. GCTU also insisted that the state should maintain living standards through regular indexation of wages, pensions and transfer payments to meet inflation, guarantee of a subsistence minimum, and increase in the minimum wage.

By the autumn of 1990 both the union and Russian Republican government had in fact begun holding regular consultation with the reformed official unions over employment, income and other labour and social policies. In October Ryzkhov declared his government's readiness for a "social partnership" with the GCTU, which he acknowledged as representing 140 million workforce. Russian Republican leader Yeltsin and Silayev also met with FNPR chair Klochkov, confirmed the need for close collaboration between unions and new Republican level Government and began a dialogue with it.

Negotiations between GCTU and Gorbachev Government proved tense. By the spring of 1991 the Confederation was frustrated with
Government's foot-dragging over an agreement on employment and income protection. The GCTU and its Republican affiliates threatened more than once to call strikes, but never actually did so.15

In response to the 1991 miners' strike the GCTU (VKP) coordinated its activity closely with the Pavlov Government stressing the need for a new system of collective bargaining within a corporatist tripartite framework, and reaching an agreement with the Government in April, which included a no strike pledge. However, the agreement was not worth the paper it was written up on, because the programme presupposed the existence of a system which had already disappeared and the authority of a body which was entirely discredited. The unions themselves were disintegrating pari-passu with the system itself, as union bodies at every level asserted their independence from higher levels. Following the disintegration of the Soviet union the GCTU (VKP) was reduced to the empty shell, although it still had an ambition to create an international trade unions federation.16

The formation of FNPR itself marked the attempt of the branch unions to distance themselves from the party and the union government, and to weaken the grip of former trade unions centre, and was thus really another expression of the attempt of the enterprises, associations and concerns, with which the official unions identified themselves, to establish their economic independence.
Soon, there was a struggle between FNPR and GCTU as a result of which FNPR allied with Yeltsin in his struggle with Gorbachev on the basis of common interests in undermining the central powers and establishing republican sovereignty while GCTU backed Gorbachev in resisting the miners, the FNPR threatened a general strike if Gorbachev did not back down.

The August Coup and Counter Coup precipitated the crisis within labour camp. During the August Coup attempt GCTU called for "Calm and No Work Stoppages" and while FNPR claimed to have supported Yeltsin, only coal miners answered his call for a general strike. Yeltsin who consolidated his power in the summer of 1991, called for a 'social partnership' between state and labour prominently including the FNPR, the All Union GCTU having all but collapsed in the autumn of 1991 along with the Soviet union. Thus in Russia FNPR remained intact, with its membership, property, apparatus, and virtually monopolitic role as distributor of social security funds and social services, and retained its dominant position as labour representative in the newly independent Russian Federation.
NOTES

1. CDSP, 43, 25; 43, 32; 44,32;


4. Ibid., page 173.


7. For more elaborate explanation See David Mandel, Socialist Register, 1991.


12. L.J. Cook, above cit., page 27.


