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The Rostov General Strike of 1902

Study of the Russian Revolution of 1905 in the West has been overshadowed by the more earth-shaking events of 1917. The story of the general strikes in Rostov-on-Don in the fall of 1902 and in several cities in the Ukraine and Transcaucasia in the summer of 1903 has been even more neglected. However, these early outbursts were important landmarks in the development of a revolutionary working class movement in Russia. In form and content the strikes prefigured much of what emerged in 1905. The combination of strike activity with political meetings and demonstrations, the spontaneous and chaotic movement to form organizations, the initial growth of support and subsequent alienation of non-proletarian "society," and the close interlinking of economic and political grievances were all to some degree characteristic of these walkouts.

The first of these events, the Rostov General Strike of November, 1902, brought this sizeable provincial center to a total economic standstill. Beginning in and emanating out of the city's large railroad workshops, the Rostov strike was a phenomenal occurrence at the time. Just as the debate over Economism was approaching its climax, as the labor movement declined under the impact of the economic depression, and as the Social Democrats seemed to lose a mass following, the Rostov General Strike revealed once again the possibility of a proletarian revolutionary movement. More important, the Rostov strike was perhaps the first instance in which that long-cherished goal of the Russian Social Democratic intelligentsia—the merger of a spontaneous labor movement with the strivings of the educated classes for political change—approached practical reality.

In 1902 Rostov-on-Don could look back over a century of impressive growth. From a relatively small frontier port of 1,600 inhabitants in 1782, the city had grown by 1900 into a regional center of commerce and industry with a population of more than one hundred thousand. Unlike some of the other southern industrial centers, Rostov's significance as a nexus of transport, trade and manufacture dated from the pre-emancipation era. The city was a major center of the Urals iron trade during the first third of the nineteenth century. In the 1870s, however, the city took on added importance when the railroad linked it first with Kharkov in 1870, then with Voronezh in 1871, and finally with Vladikavkaz in 1875. The railroad lines radiating out of Rostov developed chiefly in the service of agricultural trade and the port. The main workshops of the Vladikavkaz Railroad, a private rather than a state-owned line, opened in Rostov-on-Don in 1873.

By the end of the nineteenth century the city's industrial development had proceeded very rapidly. Outside the port, the main industries were tobacco and railroading along with a number of small and medium-sized ironworks. In 1900, factory inspector's statistics covered 140 industrial enterprises in Rostov. Among the largest were the Asmalov Tobacco Mill which employed 2,200 workers in 1899, and the Main Workshops of the Vladikavkaz Railroad, with some 2,600 workers in 1902. In addition to the main shops, several thousand railwaymen found work in several smaller workshops and in the depot and stations in and near the city. About 30,000 workers of all categories were employed in Rostov-on-Don at the time of the general strike. Of these, 14,500 worked in industrial enterprises surveyed by the factory inspectorate, while about 15,000 labored on and around the docks.

Among the factory workers of Rostov there was a clear distinction between workers in the tobacco industry and the men of the railroad workshops. The tobacco workers were a brutally oppressed sub-stratum, consisting mainly of women, often recent immigrants from the countryside. They were poorly paid, overworked, ill-fed and ill-housed. Virtually all were illiterate. Com-