

# International VIEWPOINT

Issue 221

February 3, 1992

£1.50; \$2.75; C\$3; 16FF

## *Can Cuba survive?*

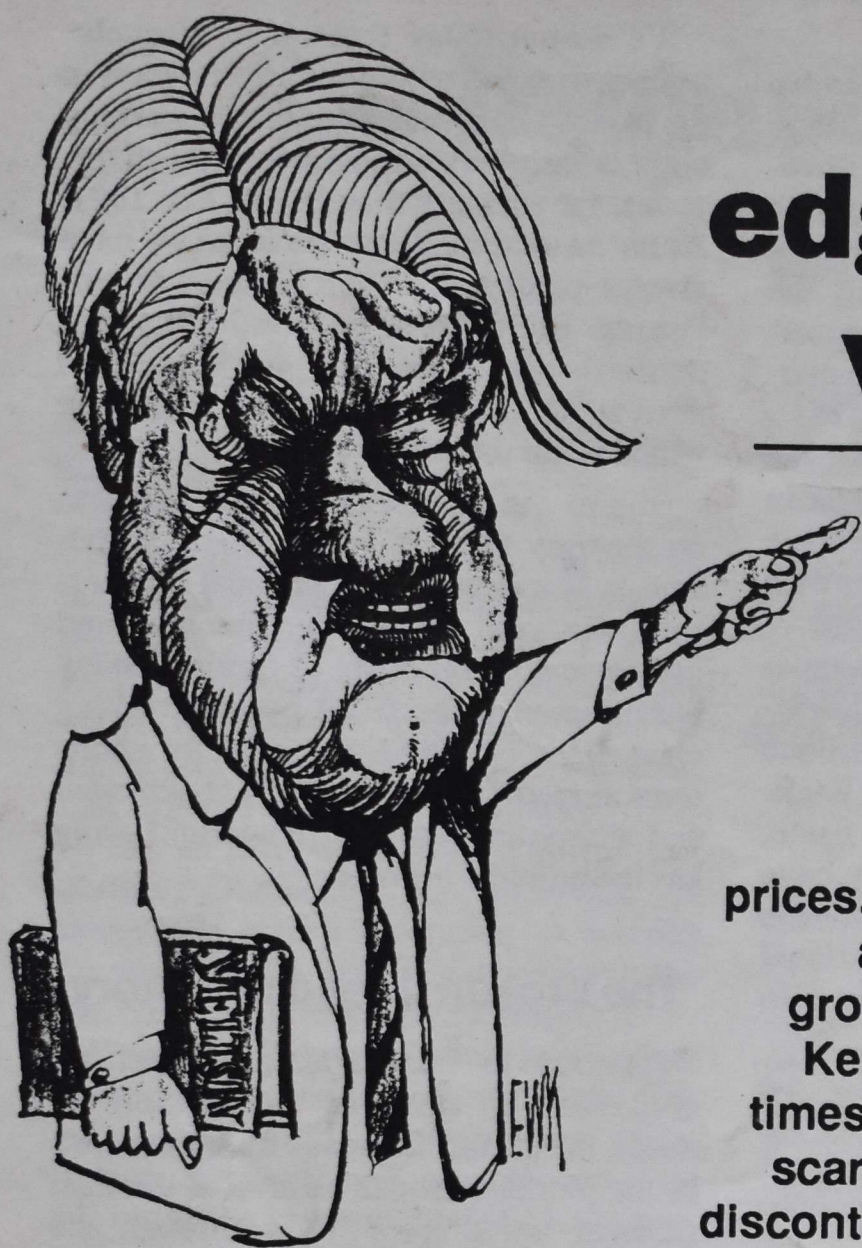


### **ALSO INSIDE:**

- ❖ **Algeria:** *After the coup: on-the-spot report*
- ❖ **Poland:** *Rising wave of resistance to privatizations*
- ❖ **United States:** *Reformers win in Teamsters election*  
*plus: Groundswell of support for labor party*  
*much else besides*

**Morocco:  
Interview with  
Abraham  
Serfaty**

63-1188



## On the edge of the volcano?

**THREE weeks have passed since the main republics of the Commonwealth of Independent States (SNG — the successor to the USSR) liberalized prices. Turmoil in the economy and in social relations is growing almost by the day. Key products (now several times more expensive) are as scarce as before the reform; discontent among the people is growing and has in some regions begun taking on organized forms while the liberal reformers in power seem increasingly divided about how to go forward.**

**POUL FUNDER LARSEN**

**R**USSIAN leader Boris Yeltsin had a taste of popular anger when, during his "American style" campaign tour to explain the necessity of market reforms, he visited a supermarket in the city of Engels on the Volga.

The daily *Izvestiya* (January 9) reported: "The customers kept him for more than an hour. On the counters were sausages at 191 roubles a kilo, marmalade at 92 roubles, sour cream at 78 roubles, and the shop tried to sell butter at 270 roubles a kilo... Who fixes such perfidious prices? 'Nobody should dictate the prices, neither the producers and enterprises, nor the traders — only supply and demand' said Yeltsin, who was himself quite shocked."

It can hardly be the level of prices that shocked Yeltsin, since the president and his team have been well aware of the consequences of freeing prices in an economy totally dominated by bureaucratic monopolies; however, the reaction of the customers may have given him a chilly presentiment of the troubles ahead. Indeed, some republican and regional authorities have already back-tracked on parts of the steepest price rises.

**28** A recent opinion poll showed that confidence in the success of the economic

policies of the Yeltsin government dropped from 53% on January 2 to 42% on January 16. However, a majority of the people still maintains a wait-and-see position hoping that Yeltsin's promises will come true, so that in "half a year the first improvements will occur."

This gives the "democrats" a little room for manoeuvre, but the contradictions within the Yeltsin camp are multiplying with both vice-president Rutskoy and chair of the Russian parliament Khasbulatov openly criticizing the record of the government and (more or less explicitly), Yeltsin.

Recently Yeltsin also had to recognize a major setback for his efforts to centralize powers and create a strong repressive force. The attempt to set up a Russian "Ministry of Security and the Interior" (MBVD) was halted by a decision from the newly formed Constitutional Court of Russia, ruling this an unconstitutional measure.

The idea had been to merge the structures of the KGB and the Ministry of the Interior (MVD) into one extraordinarily powerful body. This aroused strong reactions from many sides (including some of the "democrats") evoking fears of a new structure akin to Stalin's NKVD, which had also united all repressive forces in

one ministry.

However, Yeltsin could be in desperate need of effective means of repression if the despair and spontaneous protests spread and turn into organized action.

There have been several outbursts of protest and riots — with a particularly violent clash occurring in the capital of Uzbekistan Tashkent, where police attacked students protesting against the effects of the price rises on their meagre grants. Some local strikes have been reported — for example, in the capital of Kazakhstan, Alma Ata — but the most important developments so far have been in some of the mining regions.

### "Pre-strike readiness"

In the Western Siberian Kusbass the miners are in "pre-strike readiness" as the contradictions between the government and the strong workers movement in the Kusbass sharpen. Yeltsin can still count on a certain "state of grace" in Kusbass, but this may soon come to an end as railway workers, teachers, health workers and even policemen are announcing strike action.

The situation in the Donbass region of Ukraine and southern Russia is even more tense; the general social crisis of the mining regions is taking its toll and the breakdown of economic links between regions and republics accelerates this process. Some miners in the Donbass have already stopped working: "Life in the Donbass has become 8-15 times more expensive. Not only parts of the production, but whole enterprises and combines [of enterprises] have stopped. Thus on January 13, all mines in the Dzherzhinskugol combine (*obedinieniya*), where 20,000 miners are employed, had to stop the production of coked fuel, because of lack of wood for shoring up the galleries." (*Izvestiya*, January 16).

Meanwhile in the Karaganda field of northern Kazakhstan by early January the miners went on strike over the issue of wages and the sharing of incomes from coal production. According to *Pravda* (January 15), ten mines were on strike, and the strikes were continuing despite the intervention of president Nazarbayev and his prime minister.

In a telephone interview with *IV* on January 21, the Moscow leftwing activist Vadim Damier summed up the situation as seen from Moscow:

"The mass of people are still rather passive, though certainly angry. So far in Moscow, the neo-Stalinists have been in the forefront of organized protests, while the 'official' trade unions have generally not taken major initiatives. The Russian 'official' trade unions (FNPR) are torn between a certain political loyalty to the Yeltsinites and the growing r... below. The left wing, fo... nized some demon... without a mass resp