

"REACTIONARY" was the word used by a visiting Soviet academic to describe a local trade unionist's worry that Soviet workers were being suppressed under *perestroika*.

Moscow State University professors Irene Filatova and Appollon Davidson have been in South Africa for the last two weeks as the guests of the Institute for a Democratic Alternative for South Africa (Idasa). They are the first Soviets to address a public meeting in South Africa in the last four decades.

While in Pretoria and Johannesburg they met a large group of academics from Unisa, Rand Afrikaans University and the universities of Pretoria, Western Cape, Stellenbosch and Cape Town. They also met township residents and members of various organisations.

Davidson and Filatova said they gained the impression that South Africa and the Soviet Union, however different, "shared the multiplicity and complexity of their problems".

Filatova received a standing ovation when she addressed the Conference for a Democratic Future held at Wits University last weekend.

Five years ago, before Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms and when PW Botha was still in power, such an event

Two visiting Soviet academics scoff at the notion that the Soviet Union has gone 'capitalist'.

would have been unthinkable. Their presence here reflects changes in South Africa and the Soviet Union.

"It's a period of change for them and for us. Perhaps we have to react accordingly," said John Maré, deputy director, Eastern Europe, in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Replying to a question regarding striking workers in the Soviet Union, Filatova said the strikers had not been suppressed by the government.

"It seems to me you get all your information from a very reactionary source," she told the trade unionist.

She said the Soviet government had met leaders of the strikes and engaged in negotiations with them.

"Our Supreme Council prohibited the strikes in the important industries like railroads and coal mines.

"Where strikes continued there has been no suppression."

Responding to the allegation from a member of the audience that the Russians had sold out their ideals of socialism to the capi-

talists, she said that a move away from a party monopoly should not be seen as introducing capitalism into the Soviet Union.

In an unusual twist of logic, she quoted Lenin to show that *perestroika* is a process intended to strengthen and improve socialism.

"It was Lenin who said that every monopoly leads to stagnation. Whether it's political or economic monopoly, we've had enough. We don't want it anymore," she said.

Davidson and Filatova described how, as academics, they have been directly affected by new Soviet openness.

They are now allowed to choose what to teach and are free to express personal opinions in lectures without fear of punishment. Literature of all types is freely available to students who "vote with their legs" in choosing whether to attend lectures.

Davidson and Filatova were exercising the academic freedom flowing from *perestroika* in speaking here, said Alex Borrairie of Idasa.

Many whites have a picture in their heads of Russians as people with "horns on their heads", said Borrairie. "With so much change in the Eastern bloc, it is important for South Africans to get first-hand impressions."

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