

Russian miners protest again, as they did 15 years ago

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The series of miners' strikes that swept across many parts of Russia (the Rostovskaya and Chelyabinskaya regions, Primorye, and the Republic of Komi) during April and July of this year are a harbinger of a new period of mass struggle by the working class for its rights and interests.

The significance of the miners' strikes lies in their exposure of one of the myths most actively propagated by the government—that living standards for the Russian masses are rising. In reality, while the Putin administration talks about the successes of the Russian economy, large sections of society are experiencing increasing difficulties and struggling with the constant threat of destitution, hunger, and disease.

The conditions faced by Russian workers, after almost 15 years of capitalist "reforms," are far worse than those that existed at the end of the 1980s. In a situation already characterized by desperate living conditions and a sharp curtailment of civil rights, wide layers of the population are beginning to sense that all they can expect from the existing administration is further attacks.

The miners' protests took the desperate form of hunger strikes because of the absence of any real means to express discontent within the framework of the legal system, as well as the lack of a clear political perspective.

Although to a large degree a full picture of the protest wave was concealed by the mass media, the actions attracted widespread public attention and the workers were ultimately paid their wages. For their part, the authorities were forced to intervene in an industrial conflict and, acting outside the framework of existing laws, seek out money to satisfy the demands of the miners.

Criminal prosecutions were brought against a number of mine owners—particularly after it became known that they admitted to grossly violating the procedures for paying wages. However, this resulted in largely symbolic punishment, taking the form of minimal fines.

In this way the authorities showed their disdain for the problems of the miners and their just demands for the punishment of the culprits. The Kremlin and the regional governments are fearful of the miners' issues growing more prominent in the public mind, and are attempting in every way possible to mitigate the political effects of the recent events.

* From April 15 to April 27, a hunger strike occurred at the Yeniseyskaya mine in Chernogorsk in the Republic of Khakasiya. Fifty-nine miners participated in the hunger strike, including eight women. The miners, who had not been paid since October 2003,

demanded their back pay, which collectively amounted to 8.5 million rubles (\$283,333). Over the course of the protest, 54-year-old miner Anatoliy Sitkin died, an additional five miners required hospitalization, and on the last day of the hunger strike, another miner experienced chest pains.

Speaking about the death of Sitkin, Alexander Merkurev, one of the leaders of the protest, stated, "He was killed by the hopelessness of the situation in which we have all ended up." The local prosecutor refused to acknowledge that Sitkin died during the hunger strike, claiming instead that he left the mines for a period of time to care for his sick mother.

* From April 15 to April 17, the miners at the Zapadnaya-Bis mine in the Republic of Komi (region of Vorkuta) refused to come to the surface and accept food, demanding that the leadership of the mines and the city decide the fate of the Zapadnaya-Bis and Kapitalnaya mines, which had been declared unprofitable and subject to closure. However, the head of the city administration of Inta, Vladimir Shakhtin, refused to sign the document through which financing is allocated from the federal budget for the liquidation of the mines' assets, the resettlement of the mining communities and the payment of social benefits.

On April 26, after the Ministry of Property Relations declared that it was necessary to close the unprofitable mines in Inta, an additional 80 workers joined the hunger strikers, which brought the total number of participants to 300 for a short period of time.

On April 27, the miners ended the hunger strike and came to the surface, believing the promise made by the head of the Republic, Vladimir Torlopov, regarding "the effective appropriation of fiscal means to resolve the problem of the fulfillment of social guarantees and the closure of the mine in a civilized manner."

* On May 10, miners from the Rakovsky pit in the Primorsky region began a hunger strike. The miners are owed 16 million rubles (\$533,333) in back pay.

* On May 15, miners at the Yeniseyskaya pit in Khakasiya resumed a hunger strike. In the aftermath of the previous hunger strike, the authorities had paid the owed wages only to those who had personally participated in the protest. The remaining miners had been denied payment. One hundred fifty-five miners, including 41 women, participated in the second protest. The authorities promised to meet their demands, after which the protest action was ended.

In June, 53-year-old Valentina Shestakova, who had participated in the hunger strike, died from a stroke. "Over the course of the

protest she lost a lot of weight, becoming a walking skeleton,” said the chairman of the Profkoma (Trade Union Committee), Aleksandr Atyukov. “Personally, I think that she died as a result of the hunger strike. But the doctors never acknowledge this,” he told a correspondent from *Izvestia*.

* On May 22, approximately 300 injured former miners from the bankrupt OAO Obukhovskaya pit in the Rostovskaya region blocked the local railroad, demanding back pay in the amount of 7 million rubles (\$233,333)—money that the owners of the mine had not paid them since 1997. In addition, they demanded an additional 20 percent compensation for the loss of their ability to work, which by law they are supposed to receive until the age of 70. Pressure was placed on the miners by the authorities and the police. Five of the leaders of the protest were threatened with 15-day jail sentences and 17 participants with criminal prosecution.

* At the beginning of June, more than 30 workers from a mine equipment factory in the city of Shakhta in the Rostovskaya region began a hunger strike. They were later joined by 30 workers from the Shaktinskiy SMU and Autoworks Number 5 in Novoshaktinsk. The workers in these enterprises are owed 27 million rubles (\$900,000) in back pay. Management promised to pay the debt in August. The sale of the assets of the mining company Rostovugol is expected to provide the money to compensate the workers. However, according to unofficial accounts, even if all the Rostovugol mines are sold, there still will not be enough money to completely cover the wage arrears. The hunger strike ended on June 21.

* On July 7, 22 miners from several enterprises in the city of Shakhta (Rostovskaya region) began an indefinite hunger strike, demanding approximately 5 million rubles (\$166,666) in back pay. The liquidation of many subsidiaries of the company OAO Rostovshaktostraya had led to the dismissal of all of the enterprises’ workers, with the employees receiving neither a severance payment nor back pay owed. Many workers had not received their wages for more than a year. On July 19, 30 workers from the bankrupt OOO Mining-Passage Building Administration expressed readiness to join the hunger strikers. On August 17, the *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* reported that several thousand people in the region had not received their wages, with around 300 firms owing their employees back pay. The total amount of back pay owed is approximately 700 million rubles (\$2,333,333). The *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* stated, “The ranks of hungry in the Don will grow. Because, as practice has shown, hunger strikes are the most active and, at times, the only means to receive a wage.”

The government says that the size of wage arrears is falling sharply, drawing a comparison with the situation that existed in the mid-1990s, when millions of people did not receive their salaries for months. However, when examined more closely, this argument proves to be a fraud.

When the question of payment of wages is raised, the discussion largely revolves around the obligations of the federal government, as opposed to other levels of government. However, regional administrations regularly withhold wages, justifying their actions on a dearth of tax revenues. (The majority of Russia’s regional governments are insolvent. With revenues rarely exceeding

expenditures, the regions depend on support from Moscow.)

Moreover, statistics regarding the fulfillment of wage obligations cover only the state sector. The situation among private companies is generally worse.

The office of Gosinspektsiya Truda (State Labor Inspection) reports that during the first few months of 2004 it conducted more than 15,000 inspections relating to the non-payment of wages in the non-state sector. Some 8,800 employers were determined to be withholding wages. Six thousand employers were called to account, the maximum sentence being a fine of 5,000 rubles (\$167). The Gosinspektsiya Truda “found” 2.2 million rubles (\$73,333) in back pay, which was returned to workers in 560,000 enterprises from different industries.

The government is able to claim that it has already dealt with all of the wage arrears accumulated during the 1990s thanks to one essential factor—the August 1998 default, during which the ruble declined by a factor of 5 in relation to the dollar. In as much as government income was based on export revenues in “hard” currency, while its expenditures (including wage arrears) were valued in rubles, Putin’s Kremlin solved the back pay problem by robbing the workers, who never received the real value of the money they had earned.

As of May 1, one out of every eight state workers in Russia (4 million people) was affected by wage arrears, which, according to the government, amount to 24 billion rubles (\$800,000). This sum is equivalent to 7.4 percent of total monthly wages.

Speaking before the Duma in the spring of this year, the minister of public health and social development, Mikhail Zurabov, was forced to acknowledge that “a system for defending the interests of citizens has not been created in Russia.”

In this context, the revival of protest activity by workers appears absolutely natural and necessary. This tendency will grow because all the measures being carried out by the government (in particular, the transformation of the social benefits system from a form of “payment-in-kind” to a form of monetary compensation) signifies an escalation of the attack on the living standards of the masses.



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