

Russia: The political significance of the strike at the auto plant in Togliatti

Vladimir Volkov
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On August 1, workers at AvtoVAZ, the largest Russian producer of automobiles since Soviet times, carried out a warning strike. The action pointed to growing social and political ferment among workers in Russia.

For several hours on the day of the strike, incomplete vehicles came off the assembly line, and a massive meeting was held by the main gate of the factory. According to varying accounts, from 400 to 2,000 people took part in the meeting.

As their basic demand, the workers at AvtoVAZ asked that their monthly wage be raised to 25,000 rubles. The current pay is about 7,000—approximately half the average level for the industry and for manufacturing as a whole in Russia, according to official statistics.

According to Peter Zolotarev, chairman of the Unity trade union, who spoke on behalf of the strikers, additional detachments of police were assigned to the factory that day. Representatives of the factory administration tried to force the workers to start work and assured them that there would be no victimization.

On the next day, the administration announced that no strike had occurred and that 150 men had simply violated labor discipline. Soon, the leaders of AvtoVAZ officially issued reprimands to 170 workers and accused them of violating labor law and refusing to work. Two were fired.

Although the strikers had not managed to halt the main assembly line at the factory or to achieve any improvement in their situation, their protest has become an important political event and has attracted the attention of the mass media. Even on the eve of the strike, the majority of Russian newspapers published material about the impending action and then continued to follow its consequences. The names of the main organizers of the strike have become known nationwide.

AvtoVAZ is one of the symbols of Russian industry, being the largest automobile manufacturing plant in the country. It was built at the end of the 1960s in Togliatti—a city on the banks of the Volga with a population of more than 700,000, named after one of the leaders of the Italian Communist Party. It was designated for the production of the Zhiguli (Lada), based on the technology of the Italian Fiat. AvtoVAZ was the flagship of Soviet automobile production. Up to the beginning of the 1990s, the plant produced 2,000 cars per day.

Even now, despite the decline of former Soviet industry and growing difficulties faced by the enterprise because of its relatively outmoded technical base and competition from world producers, the factory employs around 100,000 people. About 700 automobiles leave its assembly line every day.

Vladimir Kadannikov, the director of AvtoVAZ for many years who left his post two years ago, was a typical Soviet economic boss. Having become assistant head of his department in 1967, he quickly rose through the factory hierarchy to the top position. In the years of Gorbachev's "perestroika," Kadannikov was considered one of the most "contemporary-minded" directors who supported market reforms; as such, he was appointed by Boris Yeltsin in 1996 as first vice-premier of the Russian government, spending a few months at this post.

In the post-Soviet period, AvtoVAZ maintained its status as a symbol, but in a somewhat different form—as an example of the ruthless plundering of the former state property by a new layer of greedy "businessmen." The factory became a sinecure for Boris Berezovsky, the "disgraced oligarch" now living in London, who laid the foundations for his multibillion-dollar fortune by appropriating for himself profits derived from the plant's production.

At the start of the 1990s, Berezovsky founded the firm LogoVAZ, which received exclusive rights to sell the Zhiguli. Among the main stockholders of LogoVAZ were the upper managers of the factory, including Kadannikov. By organizing a system of fictitious sales and tax evasion, enormous sums were drained from the factory at a time when concern about production was completely cast aside and the workers went without pay for long periods.

In his book about Berezovsky, the American journalist Pavel Khlebnikov (murdered in Moscow in the summer of 2004) wrote that in the mid-1990s, "the factory could not meet tax obligations, could not pay for electricity or cover the workers' wages. The Yeltsin government did not declare the factory bankrupt for one reason: At that time it would have been necessary to admit that the largest industrial enterprise in Russia was insolvent" (*The Kremlin Godfather, Boris Berezovsky, or the History of the Plundering of Russia*, Moscow, 2001, p. 95 [Russian edition]).

Being the most important element in the empire of one of the Russian oligarchs turned out, however, not to be the last role for AvtoVAZ. As part of the course begun by President Vladimir Putin to establish government control over the major natural resources and industrial companies in Russia, AvtoVAZ ended up in the sights of the state corporation Rosoboroneksport [RussianDefenseExport], and at the end of 2005 was absorbed by it.

Rosoboroneksport is a semi-secret structure with many branches, and is the main exporter of Russian arms on the world market; it simultaneously strives to expand its role in the Russian economy as a whole. In 2006, the income of Rosoboroneksport from the sale of military technology was \$5.6 billion, and for the first six months of this year, \$2 billion.

Enterprises making up the corporation, which is headed by Sergei Chemezov, a personal friend of President Putin, include the Perm Motovilikhinskie Factories (which manufacture the artillery systems Smerch and Grad and oil industry equipment), as well as virtually all the plants that produce Russian helicopters.

When it was bought by Rosoboroneksport, the annual profit of AvtoVAZ was 4.6 billion rubles. The inclusion of AvtoVAZ into the state corporation resulted in an increase in the capitalization of the factory over the last year or so by a factor of four (reaching almost \$3 billion). The new heads of the factory have announced large-scale projects in collaboration with major world auto producers—Canada's Magna, France's Renault and Italy's Fiat.

It is clear that a strike at such a plant, even apart from its immediate scale and results, is capable of serving as an example to be imitated at

many other enterprises throughout the land. Moreover, it affects the most sensitive interests of the new ruling elite of Russia. In an objective sense, the protest of the AvtoVAZ workers is a political challenge to the leading bureaucratic-oligarchic clans of the Kremlin, headed by President Putin.

Vladimir Artyakov, the president of the AvtoVAZ Group, is one of the regional leaders of the pro-Kremlin party "One Russia" and a deputy of the Samara Provincial Duma. He conducted his campaign under the slogan of raising the pay to 25,000 rubles. Having issued this slogan as their main demand, the strikers at AvtoVAZ have exposed the rhetoric of Russia's main party of power as sheer demagoguery.

These circumstances explain the enormous interest in events at AvtoVAZ and the ruthless efforts of the local authorities and the administration at the factory to end the strike and punish the participants.

Even before it was launched, the action was condemned by the official factory trade union, which belongs to the FNPR—The Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia (a structure formed on the basis of the former official unions of the Soviet bureaucracy).

Anton Vechkunin, an activist in the independent union Unity, was stopped on the street four days before the strike by the police and held for three days in a temporary detention center in the city. One other worker at the factory, Aleksandr Dziuban, who is chairman of the union committee at the machine assembly department, was detained on the eve of the strike and arrested at the entrance gate without any explanation. He was carrying some 200 union leaflets into the factory.

In connection with the strike, Pavel Kaledin, a journalist with the leading national newspaper *Kommersant*, was also punished. Under pressure from the administration of AvtoVAZ, the regional representatives of the media company to which *Kommersant* belongs accused the journalist of biased coverage of the events at the plant and demanded that he be fired.

In addition, a few days before the start of the strike, 5,000 copies of the newspaper *Workers Democracy* were confiscated in Moscow. That issue contained material about the situation at the factory and the strike that was being prepared; it had been specially published for shipment to Togliatti. *Workers Democracy* is published by the centrist Revolutionary Workers Party (RRP), which calls itself Trotskyist. The Moscow Ministry of Internal Affairs for railway transport announced that it seized the paper under suspicion that its material contained extremist views.

The authorities used the incident to test recent changes in legislation that allow virtually any expression of dissatisfaction in printed or oral form to be classified as "a public call to carry out extremist activity."

Coverage of the strike in the mass media bore a dual character. Part of the liberal media described the events in relatively objective terms. The pro-Kremlin media aggressively attacked the strikers, predictably accusing them of being greedy and lazy.

The *Izvestia* journalist Boris Klin wrote in his commentary of August 2: "Many wish to 'not do a damned thing, but to receive a hell of a lot.' But such a dream cannot come true, even if it is achieved by political means. Moreover, such attempts should rightly result in the opposite of what they intend."

Cynically playing on the fact that the quality of the Zhiguli lags behind world standards, the author continued: "On the contrary, all that has been gained by the Togliatti activists should be confiscated and their pay should be reduced to the bare minimum. They must be made to understand that their pay should grow not because they feel like spreading black caviar on white bread, but only under one condition—that the cars which the factory produces are genuine cars, and not 'buckets of bolts.' "

It is worth noting that Boris Klin writes in *Izvestia* as the fervent defender of the Russian Orthodox Church. He fights for elevating its political authority in society, supports the idea of introducing lessons on the foundations of Orthodox culture into the schools, and argues that government laws are nothing more than the exposition of divine precepts

given from above in the Bible.

His example is one more illustration that apologies for social oppression inevitably go hand in hand with the most reactionary theories and religious obscurantism.

Another line of attack on the AvtoVAZ strikers has been the idea that they acted not independently, but under the control and financial support of interested political forces.

A representative of the Samara governor, Konstantin Titov, declared that supporters of the party "A Just Russia," another pro-Putin party, are to blame for the sudden outburst of social activity among the workers. "A Just Russia" is headed by President Putin's friend and speaker of the Federation Council, Sergei Mironov. The spokesman for the Samara governor suggested that, since practically all the top managers of AvtoVAZ are in "One Russia," the social conflict at the factory was inspired by their factional opponents from a competing pro-Kremlin clan, who sought to exploit it during the pre-election period.

Leaders of the strike have repeatedly denied such suspicions, insisting that the action was an expression of the spontaneous protest of workers, which was supported by the Unity trade union.

The reason for such speculation in the mass media is transparent. Behind it stands the desire to convince public opinion that there can be no independent expression of the working masses and no political alternatives to the social crisis outside of those proposed by the various parties of the ruling establishment.

The strike of the AvtoVAZ workers is not an isolated phenomenon. It occurred under conditions of a growing wave of strike and protest activity in Russia that began in the fall of last year and has embraced ever-newer regions and areas. This includes the protest action of oil workers in the Khanty-Mansiisk autonomous region in October of last year, the strike at the Russian Ford factory in February of this year in Vsevolozhsk, near St. Petersburg, the protests of Heineken brewery workers in St. Petersburg in April, and that of the workers at the Mikhailovcement works in the Riazan area, as well as other actions.

They indicate that the period of apathy and confusion that lasted for 15 years after the fall of the Soviet Union is coming to an end. The realities of capitalist Russia have brought social devastation, poverty, illegality, war and disease. The working class of Russia is beginning to recognize that within the framework of the existing situation, it serves as a source of cheap labor and as a manipulated "electorate" that must submissively vote every four years for one or more of the protégés of the oligarchy and state bureaucracy.

Deepening social inequality and the growth of the authoritarian "chain of command" are creating the conditions for new acts of social protest. The miners' strikes of 1989-1990 have not been forgotten; they showed how powerful the working class can be when it begins to move.

The course of events raises the question of political perspectives with a new intensity. What was sadly lacking with the miners and other detachments of the Soviet working class in the years of "perestroika" was a clear understanding of the source of their past social gains, of the foundations of the October 1917 revolution, and, correspondingly, of how the social gains growing out of this revolution could be defended.

The great experience of the October Revolution of 1917, once again confirmed in negative form by the bitter experience of the last 20 years, shows that it is impossible to resolve a single one of the fundamental social and economic questions in the interests of the workers (a) without building an independent party of the proletariat, and (b) without an international revolutionary program.

It is important to understand that the political continuity that links our time with the epoch of three Russian revolutions passes through the struggle of Leon Trotsky and the Left Opposition against the Stalinist degeneration of the Bolshevik Party and the Soviet state in the 1920s-1930s, and through the creation in 1938 of the Fourth International.

The fight to introduce this understanding into the consciousness of the Russian working class, and for the assimilation of the main lessons of the international struggles of the proletariat of the twentieth century—this is the task to which the most conscious workers, students and representatives of the intelligentsia in Russia must direct their strength.



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