

Strike at Russian Ford plant—a sign of renewed struggle by Russian workers

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Workers at the Ford auto plant in Vsevolozhsk, in the St. Petersburg district, carried out a one-day warning strike on November 6—the eve of the 90th anniversary of the 1917 October Revolution. The action was symptomatic of a renewal of militant struggle by the Russian working class.

The large majority of workers at the factory—some 1,700 out of 2,300—participated in halting the assembly line.

The workers' demands included a wage increase and a more humane work schedule, in particular, a one-hour reduction in the night shift.

The trade union representative, Aleksei Etmanov, said that if management did not meet the workers' demands, the union would launch another, possibly indefinite, strike on November 20.

Currently, workers at the Vsevolozhsk plant receive between 16,000 and 25,000 rubles (\$600-1,000) a month. They are asking that the average wage be raised to 28,000 rubles (\$1,100) a month.

This is not the first strike at this factory this year. A previous strike occurred on February 14 and was partially successful. Management agreed to raise wages by 14 percent, although the workers had demanded an increase of 30 percent. A new contract was agreed, which expires on February 28, 2008. However, the workers decided to demand an increase in their wages prior to the expiration of the current agreement.

It appears that the strike this fall by General Motors workers in the US played a role in the decision of the Russian workers to launch another action. That struggle was betrayed by the US auto union, the United Auto Workers, leading to a contract that imposes a massive cut in wages and benefits.

The Russian Ford workers decided to act preemptively. They were also influenced by a one-day strike last August by auto workers in Togliatti against AvtoVAZ, the largest Russian carmaker. This enterprise was the flagship of Soviet auto production. It was hard hit in the 1990s by the semi-criminal privatization process that followed the breakup of the USSR.

Two years ago it was transferred to the control of the state corporation Rosoboronekспорт. This company is the primary Russian weapons exporter on the world market and is headed by a personal friend of Russian President Vladimir Putin, Sergei Chemezov.

Harsh actions were taken against the AvtoVAZ strikers—a number of those leading the strike were fired and management ignored all of the workers' demands. The former director of the factory became the mayor of Togliatti, thereby strengthening the influence of the factory management at the regional level.

Similar pressure is now being exerted on the Ford workers in Vsevolozhsk. The company asked the St. Petersburg district court to declare the strike illegal, on the grounds that the factory management was not officially informed of the planned strike.

The company also cited supposed dangers from production equipment to demand that any strike be postponed for a month. The court ruled in favor of management. Nevertheless, the Ford workers are considering expanding their action.

Nezavisimaia OrGazeta Moscow that 9; there gathering strike movement in the country." Describing the general situation, the newspaper wrote: "For four days, dock workers at the oil port in Tupas [on the Black Sea] were on strike. Currently, the workers at Ford are carrying out a warning strike. Next week, dockworkers at the seaport of St. Petersburg are threatening to shut down operations. A protest action of thousands of employees at an enterprise owned by the chemical corporation Bor was prevented only by long and complicated discussions between the unions and the leadership of the company."

The article in *Nezavisimaia Gazeta* reflects the anxious mood that is growing within the ruling elite of Russia in the face of the increasing activity of the working class, particularly in the period leading up to parliamentary and presidential elections. The newspaper reproaches "the managers and owners of the enterprises" for acting with "entirely unnecessary harshness," and for their intransigence.

Nezavisimaia Gazeta advises the owners that "the dialog be carried out in a civilized fashion." This is unlikely under conditions where the workers are deprived of any rights and living conditions are worsening due to inflation, and the destruction of the Soviet-era welfare state.

The macro-economic successes constantly reported by the government have practically no impact on the mass of workers. The billions of dollars of oil money coming into Russia goes into the pockets of business oligarchs and representatives of the bloated state bureaucracy.

According to official statistics, the past period has witnessed a rise in wages. This year, leading Kremlin officials reported that the average wage in Russia had reached \$500 a month. In reality, the wage gains affect a relatively small number of those who depend on wages, and they are overshadowed by the social consequences of the dismantling of the social welfare benefits that existed under the Soviet system.

The monetization of all aspects of social life in Russia, which has unfolded at a particularly rapid rate under the Putin administration, has of necessity led to a certain increase in monetary compensation among substantial sections of the population. However, sociological data clearly demonstrate that this monetary increase does not make up for the decline in living standards experienced by a significant portion of the population.

A survey conducted by the All-Russian Center for the Study of Public Opinion (VTsIOM) showed that 41 percent of Russians spend between 50 and 74 percent of their income on food. Today, only 5 percent of Russians spend less than a quarter of their family budget on food. Sixteen percent of respondents reported that they spent almost their entire income, 75 percent or more, on food.

Every second Russian family that has one child lives in poverty, or on the edge of it. Among those families that have two children, the number climbs to 65 percent, and it reaches 85 percent for those with three children. Furthermore, the real numbers are much higher because the official poverty line is not set at a level that allows people to eat properly, much less meet their other needs.

The gap between the incomes of the top 10 percent and the bottom 10

percent of the population in Russia has continuously grown over the course of the post-Soviet period. At the end of the Soviet epoch, the ratio was 4.5. In 1994 it grew to between 8 and 9. In 2005 it reached 15, one of the highest in the world. However, this is really the mildest assessment of the situation. According to other assessments, the ratio between the wealthiest and the poorest is somewhere between 30 and 50.

Despite government propaganda, the period of the Putin administration is in no way an exception to this general tendency. Rather, it constitutes a new stage in the growth of social inequality.

Speaking in October of this year in Moscow at an international forum about the problem of the welfare state, a representative of the Russian Constitutional Court, Valerii Zor'kin, noted that in Russia there are four million homeless people, three million destitute, five million abandoned children, and four-and-a-half million prostitutes. According to a report by the government newspaper *Rossiiskaia Gazeta* on October 15, the aforementioned categories consist of 16.5 million people, or 11.3 percent of the country's population.

This fall, the rise in prices once again showed that the stabilization about which Kremlin propaganda speaks is only one side of the story. In September, with official inflation standing at 8 percent, particular categories of goods experienced inflation of up to 25 percent. The cost of the average basket of goods has risen by 18 percent since the beginning of 2007, while transport costs increased by 14-18 percent.

As the establishment newspaper *Vedomosti* was forced to acknowledge on November 8, the current rise in prices particularly affects the poorest layers of the population. Citing the assessment of the Institute of Complex Strategic Research (IKSI), the newspaper reported that between January and October prices increased by 9.3 percent. For the poorest Russians, however, inflation stood at 11.5 percent. For the richest layers, it was 9 percent.

Basing itself on an assessment of the income levels of the population, the IKSI came to the conclusion that "for half of the population of Russia, inflation is 1.5-2.2 percent higher than the official statistic." It is, moreover, well known that real inflation is significantly higher than official data indicate, which means real inflation for the poor is even higher.

These objective tendencies in the socioeconomic sphere have political consequences—in particular, the growth of mass discontent with all government structures at the federal, regional and local levels, deepening dissatisfaction with the results of the privatization process of the 1990s, the growth of activity in opposition to various aspect of Russian reality, and an increasing demand for an improvement in living conditions.

The growth of strikes and trade union activity is only one element of this general process. Over the past several months there have been protests by people who were defrauded in the purchase of housing shares. In the Moscow region of Butov, there is resistance among residents to exchanging their homes for apartments valued at less than market price to make way for new construction projects. There is growing sympathy among the citizenry for the fate of victims of terrorist acts in Dubrovka, Beslam and other places.

According to a survey conducted by the Levada Center, 60 percent do not agree that privatization was necessary and 24 percent would like to return to a planned economy. Noting these statistics, the liberal daily *Novaya Gazeta*, which is a "soft" opponent of the current president, noted on November 1, with some anxiety, that one could describe the present social mood in the following manner—"more socialism."

According to the leading analyst at the VTsIOM, Mikhail Bokov, "Among the electorate, social justice is the most widespread and popular idea. Leftism has gripped all indiscriminately. Even among those parties of the liberal democratic stripe, the situation is not dominated by those on the side of 'the priority of the market and democracy.'"

Bokov noted that people want "equal rights, material well-being, and

support for the defenseless layers of the population." He said, "In mass consciousness, social justice means respect for honesty and the value of every individual, as well as the absence in social life of lies, deception and violence."

Such a reorientation in mass consciousness is occurring under conditions in which the ideological, political and, one might add, moral-psychological effect of Stalinism has still not been overcome. None of the official establishment parties, including the Communist Party, in any way express the interests of workers, but rather function as instruments in the hands of the oligarchic-bureaucratic clans of the new ruling elite.

Official propaganda attempts to channel growing mass discontent in the direction of Russian nationalism and chauvinism; all the problems of the country are declared to be consequences of a "geopolitical catastrophe" and the "national humiliation" of Russia in the 1990s, as well as the lack of a desire on the part of the Western powers to acknowledge the rightful place of Russia on the world market.

The relatively high personal ratings for President Vladimir Putin are an expression of the disappointment of the population in all the remaining structures and institutions of the "new Russia." As a result, the stability of the regime is beginning to depend entirely on the continued existence of faith in the population in the "good Tsar."

This dangerous situation is practically openly acknowledged within ruling circles. All the discussions about the fact that Putin needs to remain in office for a third term or preserve his influence over political decisions in the Kremlin after he formally resigns are an expression of the fact that without Putin, everything could be lost.

Does this mean that the stability of the regime depends solely on one person?

It would be naïve to maintain such a point of view. Insofar as the working class is unable to advance its own independent political perspective—which can only be a revolutionary and international socialist perspective—and to construct, on this foundation, its own independent political party, the ruling elite will find a thousand means to disperse opposition to it and to bring the working class "to order."

The authorities are continuously preparing for this. For example, based on labor legislation enacted at the beginning of 2002, there has been a concentration of power in the hands of entrepreneurs, as it is practically impossible to legally organize and carry out strikes in Russia.

Another example is the decision by many companies to create private armies; Russian oil companies obtained the right to create such armies on the basis of a law enacted in August of this year by Putin.

Now the security divisions of such giants as Gazprom and Rosnetf can acquire and use weapons. Under this law, private security forces have the same rights as the security divisions affiliated with government structures, including the right to detain people and carry out searches. In other words, private security companies have acquired state repressive functions that can be used against their workers.

Recently, in the public sphere, Russia citizens have been deprived of the right to participate in referendums and of the right to register a vote of "against all" in elections.

According to new anti-terrorist legislation, any person can be labeled an "extremist" by any representative of the government authority.

If one believes the government propaganda that the majority of citizens of Russia support their president and his sociopolitical policies, how can one explain all of these repressive measures?

It is clear that the ruling elite senses that, as a whole, workers feel very differently toward them. Thus, they are prepared for mass repression.

As was recently reported by VTsIOM, up to one third of provincial residents are prepared to take part in mass protests, while 21 to 24 percent of the population in cities and 31 percent of the rural population are also prepared to engage in such activities. In Moscow and St. Petersburg, the number of such people is lower. However, this does not change the

general portrait indicating a radicalization of the mood in society.

Russia is entering a period of new social tensions and class struggles.



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