

Strikes in the Russian auto industry

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Two strikes have taken place in the Russian car industry in recent weeks, showing the extremely tense social relations in the country.

On April 13, workers began an indefinite strike at the Faurecia plant in Kaluga, a center for the auto industry southwest of Moscow. Based in France, Faurecia is one of the world's largest producers of automobile parts. The workers are demanding better working conditions and higher wages.

In November 2011, workers at the same factory undertook a lightning strike, which failed to realise their demands. Since then the mood has remained tense at the factory. The immediate spark for the strike was the actions of one company manager who insisted that employees work through their breaks and threatened those who disobeyed with sanctions and dismissal.

According to the trade union, working conditions at the factory have deteriorated considerably. In addition to the elimination of breaks, workers are expected to work on bank holidays and according to a demanding shift system. No clear information has yet emerged about the further course of the strike.

Just two weeks earlier, workers at the Benteler factory (also in Kaluga) went on strike from March 30 to April 3. The plant employs about 370 mostly young, well-trained workers, and supplies the VW plant located nearby with small parts for auto production. The number of strikers is reported to be between 150-270 workers.

Workers at this plant had already undertaken strike action March 1-5. Their main demands were increases to their wages (currently at 18,000 roubles—around €460), and the signing of a contract with their trade union, the MPRA (“National Union of Auto

Workers”).

Both management and the regional authorities reacted aggressively against the striking workers. When 70 workers assembled to support a demonstration outside the factory, forces from the Putin regime's special OMON unit were sent in. The Security Ministry troops are notorious for their brutal actions against demonstrators and critics of the government. In the event, no arrests were made on that day.

According to the union, the company tried to retrospectively declare the strike illegal on the grounds that the striking workers were “extremists.” After discussions with the union leadership, however, the company withdrew its suit.

The auto workers' union (MPRA) then ended the strike after only three days, arguing that the company had agreed to negotiate. The MPRA celebrated the return to work as a success and proof of the effectiveness of trade union struggles, although workers emerged from the strike empty-handed. They have received neither salary increases nor improved working conditions.

Throughout the strike, the MPRA, which was founded in 2006 and collaborates internationally with unions such as the German public services union Verdi, made no attempt to extend the action. From the start, the policy of the union was aimed at de-escalating the dispute and ensuring that the governor of the region, Anatoli Artamanov, a leading member of the ruling United Russia party, could intervene as an intermediary. The only demand on the part of the union was the right to negotiate with management.

The treacherous policy of the union, which is intent on securing its place at the negotiating table in order to

better repress the struggles undertaken by its membership has been hailed by the pseudo-left group, Russian Socialist Movement (RSB). Ivan Ovsyannikov, a founding member of the RSB and a senior union member, played a key role in the sellout of the Benteler strike.

Both the aggressive response of the authorities and the company and the unions' efforts to de-escalate the situation indicate the anxiety within the ruling elite as social tensions in Russia are stretched to breaking point.

There have been a series of disputes in the auto industry in recent years. In 2007, thousands of workers employed at the Ford plant near St. Petersburg and the AvtoVaz plant in Togliatti went on strike for weeks. Although the strikes were ultimately betrayed by the MPRA, they testified to the militancy of the working class.

The auto industry is one of the most important in Russia, employing directly and indirectly around 3.5 million workers. Foreign companies such as Fiat, GM, VW, Volvo and Renault have stepped up their investment in Russia since 2000 because the cost of wages, raw materials and energy supplies are just a fraction of the comparable costs in Western European countries. But although Russian auto workers earn very little, they are nevertheless under pressure from the car companies to work for wages comparable to those paid in countries like Vietnam and China.

Following a severe recession after the 2008 global financial crisis, Russian auto companies quickly recovered ground to post earnings growth of 20-30 percent in 2010 and 2011. Reports from various car plants suggest that these gains have been achieved primarily through the increased exploitation of auto workers.

At the end of March, a regional newspaper reported on a threatened strike at the Avotor auto plant in Kaliningrad, a subsidiary of AvtoVaz, the largest auto manufacturer in Eastern Europe. According to the report, the company was guilty of repeated violations of labour laws and safety regulations. Productivity at the

plant increased by 60 percent in 2011 alone. One worker told the newspaper that this had been mainly achieved through increased exploitation of workers and the poorer quality of the parts produced. Wages had not been increased despite high inflation rates since 2010.

In the midst of a deepening economic crisis and after the presidential elections, the Kremlin is preparing a comprehensive austerity package to reduce the "high cost of labour" and dramatically cut social spending—in particular, pensions. These attacks on the living standards of broad layers of the population will inevitably exacerbate social tensions. (See, "Kremlin prepares austerity program")

The mass protests that took place after the Duma elections in Moscow and other cities were mainly supported by middle-class layers. Their social composition meant they could be dominated by right-wing opposition parties and they subsided soon after Putin's re-election. The greatest fear of the ruling elite is the emergence of a broad movement of the working class against the Putin regime, carried out independently of the established parties and the trade unions.

Blog entries and comments on the Internet suggest that the recent strikes met with considerable sympathy, although they have received little media coverage. Many comments complained about the "government of the employers" and the "state unions." One posting commented on the use of the Omon against the Benteler strikers, saying: "They're afraid of a national strike, because it would lead to the disintegration of the regime within days."



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