

Increasing number of strikes in Russia

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Russian workers have been launching an increasing number of strikes and protests over the past few months.

According to the trade union-linked Centre for Social Welfare and Labour Rights, which has been recording industrial action since 2008, there were as many as 35 workers' protests in April this year. This amounts to almost a third more than in April 2009, when the economic crisis in Russia reached its climax.

Within the first four months of 2012, there has been an overall increase of 30 percent in labour protests compared to the previous year. Apart from the information provided by the Centre for Social Welfare and Labour Rights, no evidence for the development of strike action is available because the government has for years refused to publish the relevant data.

One of the most important strikes in recent weeks was a stoppage involving 180 temporary workers at the Omsk ice cream manufacturer Inmarko, a subsidiary of Unilever. Female workers there went on strike from May 12 to 15 to secure higher wages and better working conditions. The union claims they were earning an average of only 8,000 to 11,000 rubles (€190 to €260) a month.

Such wages are not unusual in Russia. A worker can barely survive on them, let alone feed a family. Furthermore, temporary workers have virtually no employment rights and no entitlement to social welfare payments when jobless. The striking workers complained to the Russian media that the system was "a rip-off".

In recent years, Russian companies have increasingly exploited temporary work contracts, especially in industrial production, to make the labour market "more flexible" and suppress workers' wages. Due to mounting social and financial uncertainty, more and more workers are forced to enter into such precarious working conditions. The size of the temporary

workforce in Russia is currently estimated at approximately 100,000 and the number is growing.

According to the Kelly Services temporary employment agency, a firm that served Inmarko, there had never been a strike by subcontracted workers prior to the one in Omsk.

As the number of strikes grows, it is becoming increasingly clear that the trade unions are doing their best to undermine them.

Typical of this development was the strike in Omsk that was ultimately stymied by the Confederation of Labour of Russia (KTR). The workers had begun the strike independently from the unions, initially receiving absolutely no support from them. Apparently, however, an independent trade union group was established on May 14, which on the very next day joined the International Union of Food Workers (IUF), a collaborator of the KTR in Russia.

The union then negotiated with the company, agreeing to a deal that ended the strike and provided for a pitiful 4 percent wage increase. This might just be enough to compensate for the inflation rate that was just below 4 percent in April 2012. Even the business magazine *Expert*—which welcomed the intervention of the IUF—had to admit that the strike could "hardly be called successful".

A spokeswoman for Inmarko has now announced that the company will try to open court proceedings to have the strike declared "illegal" on the basis of Russia's reactionary industrial action laws. At times, the company management has also threatened the striking workers with dismissal.

Backed by the state, companies regularly engage in the brutal suppression and intimidation of workers and union activists in order to prevent, or crack down on strikes. In 2002, the right to strike in Russia was drastically reduced with the support of the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia (FNPR).

The FNPR had emerged from the Soviet bureaucracy's trade union confederation in 1990. Far from being a body representing workers' interests, the FNPR is a de facto state body, cooperating closely with the ruling United Russia party and President Vladimir Putin.

The KTR, which intervened in the Inmarko strike and is a member of the most important automobile union, the MPRA, constitutes the supposed "left wing" of the FNPR. It works closely with the Stalinist Communist Party and the social democratic Fair Russia party. It strives to cooperate with firms to dispel industrial disputes at the negotiating table as quickly and smoothly as possible.

The MPRA is especially important due to its role in the auto industry, where strikes erupt more frequently than in other industries. It is headed by Alexey Etmanov, who founded the union together with a group of like-minded functionaries following his 2006 expulsion from the FNPR owing to allegations of "extremist activities".

The MPRA is associated with, among other unions, the United Auto Workers (UAW) in the US and regularly sells out workers' strikes whenever it can. Etmanov is a deputy for the Fair Russia party in the legislative assembly of the Leningrad region and has close ties with the state apparatus.

In April, the MPRA betrayed striking workers at the Benteler and Faurecia plants in the Leningrad region (See: "Strikes in the Russian auto industry"). The Benteler strike, still celebrated by the union as a major success, was terminated when the company declared its willingness to negotiate with the union. The employees now have to work for poverty wages of 18,000 rubles (€430) a month, without having achieved any improvement in working conditions.

At the end of May, the MPRA cancelled at short notice a previously announced strike at the Ford plant near Leningrad. One of the most important and protracted strikes in Russia in the last decade had been waged there in 2007. The union justified calling off the strike by citing the company's "readiness to negotiate", although it had to admit that the concessions made by management "fell far short of our initial demands and expectations."

The union has also been trying for weeks to prevent a strike at the Nissan plant, located in the same region.

The global economic crisis has hit Russia hard. It was unable to recover from a massive 8 percent decline in economic output in 2009. Meanwhile, recessionary tendencies are increasing, primarily due to the euro crisis.

A recent study by the Russian Sberbank and the Bank of America's Merrill Lynch subsidiary concludes that a breakup of the euro zone would burden Russia with a sharp rise in unemployment, stagnant wages, a weakening of the ruble and a fall in oil prices to US\$60 per barrel on the world market. Approximately 50 percent of the Russian state budget derives from oil and gas export revenues. A balancing of the budget requires an oil price of around \$120 per barrel.

The government is using the economic crisis to further the systematic undermining of social and economic rights of the working class that began with the restoration of capitalism.



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