

Russian truckers' strike enters third week amid police crackdown

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Russian truck drivers have been protesting fee hikes for two weeks, since March 27, and are determined to continue. The police have arrested numerous strike leaders and have threatened strikers with a crackdown. The strike is finding substantial support among broader layers of the impoverished population and is an indicator of the extreme social tensions building up under conditions of a deepening economic and political crisis.

The truck drivers are protesting the doubling of a fee imposed on truckers using federal highways under a road-tax system known as "Platon". The introduction of the fee in 2015 had provoked a general strike, the largest labor action in Russia in years. Starting April 15, the fee is supposed to double from its current 1.53 rubles to 3.06 rubles per kilometer for vehicles exceeding 12 tons.

Truck drivers in Russia make an average of 40,000 to 60,000 rubles a month (\$700 to \$1,050 at the current exchange rate). Since they own their trucks, they have to pay the fee—as well as other travel expenses and taxes—out of their own pocket. The truckers demand the total abolition of the Platon fee.

According to media reports, the Platon fee has contributed to the rise in food prices across the country.

The Russian population has been faced with skyrocketing food prices and fees, particularly since the onset of the Ukraine crisis in early 2014. The imposing of drastic economic sanctions by the US and the EU in combination with the low oil prices have crippled the already fragile Russian economy. In the past two years, food prices have gone up by an average 36 percent, and utility fees by 28 percent, while real incomes declined by 15 percent. For much of the peasant population and significant sections of the working class, feeding their families is possible only with the help of home-grown

food.

The transit fee is especially loathed because everyone knows that the official reason for the fee—to fund repairs of Russia's decrepit highways—is a hoax. While further impoverishing broad sections of the working and middle classes, it serves to fill the pockets of government officials and multi-millionaires and billionaires. Although the income from the fee formally goes to a federal agency, it was developed and is managed by the company RTITS, in which Igor Rotenberg has owned a majority share since 2014.

Igor Rotenberg is the son of Arkadi Rotenberg, who is listed as the world's 782nd richest man in this year's Forbes list, with an estimated fortune of \$2.6 billion. He and his brother Boris Rotenberg (who is worth another \$1 billion) are considered among the closest friends and allies of Russian President Vladimir Putin. Last year, it was revealed that, based on the contract between the Russian government and RTITS, Igor Rotenberg is annually receiving 9.9 billion rubles (\$129 million) from the federal budget thanks to the Platon fees.

The general strike by the truck drivers started on March 27, one day after tens of thousands of people protested against the pervasive corruption in Russia. According to the trade unions involved in the strike, about 10,000 truckers from another 80 of Russia's 83 regions have joined the strike. Truckers across the country are blocking highways and squares for sit-in protests. While coverage of the strike in the liberal and state-owned press in Russia has been minimal, with most articles appearing in local and internet-based publications, the strike has received wide sympathy and support among the broader population.

The strike is centered on the Caucasian republic of Dagestan in the south of the country. Dagestan is one of

the poorest republics in Russia with an average monthly salary of 11,000 rubles (about \$193). It is still dominated by agriculture and has an extremely poor social and transport infrastructure. In this republic of 3 million, the truck drivers carry a particular social weight as trucks are the only means to transport goods within the mountainous region.

Truckers in Dagestan make significantly less money than the national average—instead of 50,000 or 60,000, they only make 30,000 rubles a month (\$527 based on the current currency exchange rate). The strike has found broad support among the local population, with bus drivers and other workers supporting them openly by placing anti-Platon signs on their vehicles and joining the truckers at their sit-in protests.

Fearing that the strike might get out of control, Russian Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev announced just before the beginning of the strike, on March 23, that the fee hike would be limited to 25 instead of 50 percent, meaning that the transit fee would be increased to 1.91 per kilometer. The truckers, however, rejected this offer and nevertheless went on strike. A meeting between union leaders and the ministers of internal affairs and the vice prime minister of the republic of Dagestan on April 4 also failed to put an end to the strike. In interviews, truckers stated that none of the government officials they met had “taken steps toward us.”

In interviews, numerous truck drivers expressed extreme discontent not only with the massive social inequality and corruption prevailing in Russia, but also the political establishment.

Thus, one Dagestani truck driver argued in a YouTube video that the Duma deputies were issuing laws only for their own benefit. “Not one of the leaders, not from a single party, has come out since the beginning of the strike and said that the Russian people are on strike. But once there will be elections, they will come and say, ‘We are with the people’. ...We are only asking for the possibility to earn money.” Interviewed truckers insisted that “we will stand until the end,” and called upon other workers and residents to support their protest.

From the beginning of the strike, the truckers have faced a crackdown from the Russian police. In St. Petersburg, Andrei Bazhutin, one of the strike leaders, was arrested the first day of the strike and sentenced to

14 days in prison. A court then reduced his sentence to five days. Another strike leader in Novorossiisk was arrested on March 25 and sentenced to 10 days in prison. Further arrests targeted the leader of the truck drivers in early April and numerous strikers in other cities of the country, including Voronezh and Tiumen.

According to accounts by truck drivers, the police have also tried to block the protests on the railways by forcing truckers to leave the streets. On other occasions, police intervened at assemblies, searching for weapons so as to have a pretext for further crackdowns and arrests. In other cases, alleged repair works on the roads were suddenly launched at precisely the same locations that truckers assembled for their protests.

The only reason a full-fledged crackdown on the strike has not been launched yet is that the Kremlin fears that it could lead to protests and a strike movement by broader sections of the working class.

There is no question, however, that discussions on a possible violent suppression of the strike are taking place. Thus, Ruslan Akaev, an advisor to the Minister of Press and Information of Dagestan, stated on a social media platform: “National Guard! Butcher these truck-driving freaks! Turn them to dust! Confiscate their vehicles! Break their brash faces!”



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