

# Russian teacher fired after criticizing low salaries

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On January 31, Viktor Makarenko, a teacher, was fired from the Taganrogskii metallurgical technical school in Taganrog, a city in the Rostovskaia oblast in southern Russia. Along with several other teachers at this institution, he previously signed a letter protesting against the low salaries teachers receive in the region. The letter was sent by the teachers to regional and federal agencies, and eventually to Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev.

In the letter, which was signed by a total of 10 people, the teachers asked Medvedev to investigate why the Labor Code of the Russian Federation was, as they put it, “systematically” being violated in the region.

The teachers wrote that in 2017, their monthly wage was 8,289 rubles, the same amount as in 2012. “The country has experienced a double-digit inflation rate within these years, which has totaled more than 50 percent,” they wrote. “And where is the indexation [of the salaries] article 134 of the Russian labor code provides for? According to the data provided by Rosstat, a minimum of over 10,000 rubles (\$175) is required per month to survive in the Donskoi region. With a rate of 8,289 rubles (\$145) per month, only 7,211 rubles (\$126) remain after taxes... If the absolute salary hasn’t increased by a penny within 5 years under conditions of a double-digit inflation rate, then the real income has significantly decreased...”

The letter went on to state that the May 2012 decrees by President Vladimir Putin, in which he proposed, among other things, that every Russian should receive a living wage, were being “successfully sabotaged” by the local authorities.

Makarenko was fired under the fraudulent and transparent pretext of “cases of misconduct.” According to one local news outlet, these “cases of

misconduct” remain to be proven.

Makarenko has worked at the school for four decades without a single disciplinary action taken against him. He has been given numerous medals and awards, including the “designated teacher of the Russian Federation” award and the “best educational worker in the Don” citation.

Makarenko is also a member of the miners’ union, which has a traditional stronghold in the Rostovskaia oblast, one of the former centers of Soviet and Russian coal production.

It seems that any warnings of “misconduct” Makarenko received came after he publicly voiced criticism of the low wages. Makarenko told the local online outlet *161.ru* that in November, the teachers’ collective that had signed the letter met with the educational minister of the Rostovskii oblast, Larisa Balina.

“We were at a personal reception with her,” he said, “but after that it only became worse. A commission of nine people from the [regional] ministry came to the technical school and found all kinds of inadequacies in our work. On the basis of this conclusion, the director issued warnings to four pedagogues, including myself. This was one of the ‘cases of misconduct.’”

This also indicates that the school administration fired him at the behest of the local, if not the federal, authorities.

Makarenko’s case, first reported only by the local media, has since become a subject of broader discussion on the Internet. Many people have voiced sympathy with Makarenko and denounced his firing.

Meanwhile, Makarenko has announced that he will challenge his dismissal in a Taganrog court. “At this point,” he said, “I am not considering any alternatives out of principle, I want to restore justice and return to

my previous place of work, to the technical school.” A local lawyer has reportedly offered to represent him pro bono.

Both the aggressiveness of the local authorities and school administration, and the widespread discussion of the case are symptomatic of the heightened social and political tensions in Russia. Even official statistics now acknowledge that real wages have been declining for years.

In 2016-2017, real wages declined by an average of 1.7 percent. The previous year, they declined by 1.8 percent. Teachers are particularly poorly paid. While their salaries vary greatly depending on the region in which they work, their incomes barely suffice to cover even the most basic living expenses.

The salary Makarenko and his colleagues receive ranks them, even by the standards of the Russian government, as extremely poor. Without help from relatives or partners, they could not cover basic expenses such as medication, rent and food. The number of those ranked as “extremely poor,” who have to live on 9,828 rubles (less than \$174) a month or less, increased from 15.4 million to 19.6 million (13.4 percent of the population) between 2014 and 2016. Many of those affected are working full-time.

The deputy prime minister, Olga Golodets, went so far as to state that poverty was the chief reason for weak economic growth. “These days, it’s the population’s income that’s the most basic constraint on the development of demand and, consequently, sustained economic growth,” she declared. In an effort to prop up his weakening popularity in the run-up to the March 2018 presidential election, President Putin has announced plans to raise the minimum wage this spring.

Under these conditions, the letter by Makarenko and his colleagues must have provoked enormous nervousness. On the surface, their letter did not make any far-reaching or radical demands. The appeals by the teachers to Medvedev, Putin’s May decrees and the Labor Code of the Russian Constitution have lent it a moderate framework.

Nevertheless, everyone who has ever lived and worked in Russia is well aware of the corruption that exists at all levels of the Russian state, as well as the infighting between regional and federal authorities. The fact that teachers receive shamefully low wages is also

well known.

Under conditions of extraordinary social inequality and political instability, the fact that a group of teachers openly raises these issues and demands a response from the state authorities, despite the personal repercussions, has evidently raised alarms within the school administration and the local authorities. The firing of Makarenko, who was probably one of the most vocal signatories of the letter, is intended to intimidate other teachers and workers against taking any steps to oppose the outrageous conditions they confront.

Russian teachers face the same basic social and political questions that confront the entire working class in Russia and internationally. The victimization of Makarenko is reminiscent of the case of the American teacher Deyshia Hargrave, who was arrested for speaking out at a local school board meeting in Louisiana against salary increases for school officials in the midst of a wage freeze for teachers. We urge Russian teachers to subscribe to and read the WSWS Teachers Newsletter and share it as widely as possible with their colleagues.



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