

Russian workers strike against social misery and austerity

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The past few months have seen a number of walkouts and hunger strikes by various sections of the Russian working class to protest their growing social misery and exploitation. The vast majority of these strikes are organized independently of the trade unions, which are closely integrated with the Russian state apparatus and oligarchy.

Among the most significant were strikes in late October by 99 gold miners in Kamchatka, a region in Russia's Far East. Kamchatka is home to some of Russia's largest gold mines.

Miners reported that the required minimum they had to produce had risen significantly, which resulted in a significant decline in their premiums. In a video showing a meeting between the striking workers and management, one of the workers said: "I get the same salary as back in 2005. I now don't even get \$1,000. And in 2009, I would get \$2,000 or even \$5,000. But the gold hasn't devalued, has it?"

The strike occurred in the Ametistovoe field, which is the largest in the region, with reserves of 52.6 tons of gold and 175 tons of silver. It belongs to the conglomerate "Zoloto Kamchatki" (Gold of Kamchatka), which employs a total of some 2,000 people and is owned by Viktor Vekselberg, one of Russia's biggest oligarchs, with an estimated fortune of over \$12 billion. The mine is considered of strategic significance for the economic development of the region and the company enjoys significant tax benefits.

Almost as soon as news of the strike broke, workers at a nearby field declared their readiness to strike as well. An amateur 10-minute youtube video that cheered the strike as a "rebellion" and called on its viewers to spread the word about it amid a general media shut-down has received over 900,000 views. Over 8,000 people commented on the video, expressing their disgust with the oligarchs and the government.

In an indication of the enormous nervousness and fear within the oligarchy of a spread of strike activity, the government immediately intervened to put an end to the miners' strike. The regional governor, Vladimir Ilyukhin, who officially ranks as the fourth richest governor of the country, promptly ended his vacation and flew back. He

reportedly met with miners and told them to not speak to the media.

The internet was shut off at the plant and workers reported being threatened by police. Just a few days after the strike began, by November 3, 54 of the 99 strikers had been fired and Vekselberg's company announced it would initiate a lawsuit with the aim of declaring the strike illegal, which would make all workers involved liable for criminal prosecution.

The official trade union apparatus of the FNPR solidarized itself with the crackdown on the strike, cynically declaring that it was "unable to do anything" because the miners were not unionized.

A few weeks after the suppression of the strike in Kamchatka, some 200 workers launched a strike at SK Sever, the biggest supplier of the Russian gas monopoly Gazprom. The walkout took place on the Yamal peninsula in Russia's Arctic region. Like the oligarch Vekselberg, the leadership of Gazprom belongs to the inner-circle of oligarchs around President Vladimir Putin.

The workers, many of whom had come to the region to work in the mine, were striking because their wages had not been paid for four months. The company was in arrears to the tune of some 15 million rubles (\$225 690). The workers reported slave-like conditions: they had not been fed for months at their workplace, they had no means of getting home, and their work contracts had been taken away by management.

Almost as soon as the strike was launched, the region's governor, Leonid Dyachenko, called an emergency meeting of his anti-crisis staff, which included the region's police, the siloviki (state security forces such as the FSB, the Russian equivalent of the FBI), and the head of SK Sever, Alexei Pestriakov. The authorities quickly put an end to the strike, arguing that the demands of the workers had been met.

Around the same time, in the neighboring region of Vorkuta, between 16 and 17 SK Sever workers declared a hunger strike over unpaid wages and abuse by management.

One of the strike activists was beaten up the same night by what is generally believed to be a thug sent by the company.

Following the walkout in Vorkuta, a cab driver in Moscow declared a hunger strike over intolerable working conditions and low pay. He told the press that the strike was the result of his despair over the long hours he and other drivers had to work and the ever decreasing pay.

“We drive 500 kilometers every day,” he said. “We work for 12, sometimes 14 hours. Some work 24 hours straight.”

He was soon joined in his protest action by dozens of other drivers. On social media, Moscow cab drivers are trying to organize another strike during the Christmas holidays.

Similar hunger strikes were held in different cities earlier this year by firefighters and paramedics. (Both are legally banned from engaging in strike action).

Strike law in Russia is extremely restrictive. It is very difficult to declare a strike and very easy for management and the authorities to declare a strike illegal and victimize workers both with layoffs and criminal charges.

Large sections of the working class in critical sectors of the economy, including doctors and paramedics, teachers, rail workers, electrical workers and telecommunication workers, are entirely banned from striking. It is also virtually impossible to go on a legal strike for the estimated 40 percent of Russia’s workforce who are employed without labor contracts (about 34 million people).

While the number of protests in 2018 has so far been slightly lower than in 2017, a growing percentage of them are work stoppages, and most of them are taking place outside the control of the trade unions. In the first half of this year, there were 122 labor protests (as opposed to 170 in the first half of 2017), while the percentage of work stoppages grew from 36.5 percent to 47.5 percent.

Only 17 percent of all labor protests were organized by the unions. A recent poll by VTsIOM found that among all institutions and organizations in Russia, only the judicial system, which is seen as utterly corrupt, and the widely hated liberal opposition, which is most directly associated with the “shock therapy” of the 1990s, enjoy less confidence than the unions.

There are three main union structures in Russia. There are the official trade unions of the FNPR (Federation of Independent Unions of Russia), which directly emerged out of the Soviet trade unions controlled by the Stalinist bureaucracy. The FNPR officials enriched themselves massively during capitalist restoration by selling off a good portion of the assets of the Soviet-era union structures, and have since become firmly entrenched in the management of companies and the decisions of the Kremlin on a national level. The FNPR president, Mikhail Shmakov, is considered one of the richest people in the country, and works closely

with Putin.

The second structure is Sotsprof, which was also heavily involved in capitalist restoration.

The other union structure, the so-called Federation of Russian Labor (KTR), purports to be “independent.” It emerged after restoration but is equally pro-capitalist.

While large sections of the Russian pseudo-left glorify the KTR unions as an alternative to the FNPR, like the FNPR the unions that entered the KTR had participated in and benefitted from capitalist restoration. The union maintains ties to the pro-US liberal opposition.

The aggressive crackdown by the authorities, especially on the strike in Kamchatka, reflects the fear within the Russian oligarchy that the rapid development of the class struggle internationally will sooner rather than later drive Russian workers into an open struggle. This would inevitably develop in a rebellion against the unions and all established political parties.

Extreme poverty in Russia has grown rapidly in recent years under conditions of far-reaching Western sanctions and the attempts by the Russian oligarchy to make the working class pay for the years-long economic crisis. Those officially ranked as “extremely poor”—people who have to live on 9,828 rubles (less than \$174) a month—totaled 19.6 million (13.4 percent of the population) in 2016.

Since the beginning of 2018, regional governments have carried out a new round of social cuts in response to a presidential decree raising the minimum for many state employees. These governments have massively reduced work hours and laid off staff. Numerous kindergartens, institutions of higher education, hospitals and medical practices were shut down virtually overnight. In some places students have been unable to go to school at all. In many rural areas people have to drive eight or more hours to get to the nearest hospital.



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