

Energy, transport and municipal service worker strikes in Kazakhstan

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Strikes across several industries broke out on February 15 in southwestern Kazakhstan. Workers at seven companies in Mangystau oblast walked off the job on Wednesday in protest over low wages, poor working conditions and political repression. In their statements, the strikers expressed solidarity with one another and insisted that the country's oligarchs give up some of their millions.

The city of Zhanoezen, where in January police massacred protesters objecting to a sharp hike in gas prices, is among the places hit by the latest round of labor unrest. Among their demands, drillers with the oil company Ozenmunaygaz are calling for all those imprisoned for participating in the January demonstrations to be set free. "The detainees are not terrorists," as the government claims, said a worker reading a declaration. "We demand a stop to the torture and their release."

The oil workers are also calling for jobs for the city's unemployed, who have been staging daily protests for two weeks demanding that the government fulfill its long-standing promises to those out of work. While the authorities insist that just 8,000 of the city's nearly 83,000 residents cannot find employment, ordinary people say that the real number is 25,000.

Employees at transportation, construction and energy companies, as well as those employed in municipal services, in the cities of Aktau, Kalamkas and Zhetybay, also went on strike the same day. While the limited news reports currently available do not provide information about the numbers of people involved, video footage indicates that at least hundreds, if not more, are participating. (The video narration is in Russian, and groups of workers from different factories can be seen reading their demands in Kazakh in the second half.)

On Thursday in Aktau, a city of about 180,000 that sits on Kazakhstan's Caspian coast, oil workers with Aktaukrantechservice LLP threatened to start a strike if the government does not "stop the persecution and slander against innocent citizens in connection with the January events" and the company does not "raise salaries" and "bring social and living conditions to the appropriate level." A similar statement was issued by employees with energy company BozashyTransKurylys LLP.

Much of the anger of energy sector workers is directed at KazMunayGaz, the national oil and gas conglomerate. Despite popular opposition, the Kazakh government is currently preparing to transfer even more of the country's natural resources into private hands. In a statement released on February 7, the ministry of energy underscored that it has no intention, as is being demanded on social media, of nationalizing Kazakhstan's oil and gas supplies. "The state is actively working to transfer state and quasi-state enterprises to a competitive environment, including in the oil and gas complex," declared the ministry's press service.

This week's strikes come just eight days after workers at MAEK-Kazatomprom—a nuclear power plant in Mangystau that supplies the region's heat, water and electricity—walked out in demand of a 100 percent wage hike.



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