

Factory and health care workers strike, protest in Russia and Georgia

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The entire shopfloor at the Urals Compressor Factory (UKZ) in Yekaterinburg, Russia, walked off the job on Tuesday in protest against the failure of the company's owners to pay them several months' worth of salary. The plant's 316 employees, who make parts for medical and military equipment, are owed in total 13.4 million rubles—about \$233,000—in outstanding wages.

The strike is just the latest action taken by workers in the assembly, foundry, heat treatment, tool and mechanical sections at the enterprise, which since October 2021 has repeatedly failed to pay salaries. In March 2022, workers laid down their tools and then again in May 2022, resuming work only after UKZ promised to give them their pay, as ordered by the local prosecutor. They have gotten nothing, however, for two months, apart from 1,000 rubles last week out of 100,000 they were supposed to receive.

We don't have enough money to even get to work," one worker told the press. "You can't even get on a bus for a ruble."

The plant, which has holes in the roof, is evidently falling apart. In a video posted on the Telegram social media channel Ural Mash, one can see piles of rubble on the factory floor. "You get refreshing drops of rain on your head," one worker reported.

The company claims it is owed millions by customers and is saddled with massive debts, having failed to pay its taxes and for supplies. Workers report a steep fall in production, with daily output recently dropping to just two units a day from 60.

But UKZ's insistence that it suddenly does not have the means to pay its employees just because of poor market conditions and government taxes is unconvincing. "I worked there," wrote one person on Telegram. "The suits looted it and this is the sad result." "Let the epaulets [an ornamental decoration

pinned to the uniform of a high-ranking person] dig into them. Then they'll find the salaries, the [money for] the utility bills and everything else," said another. Referring to the wholesale theft of publicly-owned industry by the newly-emerging rich in the 1990s, one worker declared, "It's time to take back the plants and factories."

The strike in Yekaterinburg follows walkouts and slowdowns in April and May by sanitation workers in Novosibirsk, doctors, nurses, and emergency medical technicians in Bashkortostan, taxi and delivery drivers in Tver and Moscow, and poultry workers in Sakhalin.

In the former Soviet country Georgia, which borders Russia to the southwest, workers at a mineral water bottling company are also on strike. They too have not been paid for two months. The entire 800-person workforce at two Bojomi plants walked off the job on May 31, demanding payment of back wages, a 25 percent wage increase, a collective bargaining agreement, an end to what workers describe as "blackmail and threats of layoff" for those who criticize the company, and the reinstatement of 50 personnel previously laid off for protesting.

On Tuesday, laborers threw eggs at police cars that sought to bring strikebreakers into the plant. Workers say the company is offering their jobs to Georgians from other parts of the country, as well as Ukrainians and Russians, attempting to attract them with promises of a salary that is three to four times what they currently pay in order to break the strike.

The day before the conflict with police broke out at Bojomi's factory gates, Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili announced that the government would be buying a majority stake in the concern, taking over ownership of the company from the Russian-based Alfa Group, whose head, Mikhail Fridman, is under anti-

Russian sanctions, the immediate cause of the financial crisis at the company.

Georgia's head of state insisted that it would ensure the end of "the suffering and oppression" at Bojomi, a dubious promise given that Georgia's average monthly salary is \$356 a month, more than 20 percent of its population lives in poverty, and its major industries, such as mining, are well known for being death traps.

In the country's capital on Tuesday, medical workers protested against terrible working conditions and low wages. Senior emergency personnel make about \$61 a shift, junior staff about \$48, and drivers just \$36. Doctors, nurses and ambulance teams are demanding a 100 percent wage increase and the reinstatement of a monthly bonus, about \$180, that had been stripped from them because the government in Tbilisi recently declared the COVID-19 crisis to be over, terminated all public health measures, and ended all extra payments for health care employees. Workers insist, however, that the number of emergency calls has not decreased.

Refusing to increase wages, the Georgian Ministry of Health is instead proposing that emergency health care employees' hours be changed such that they work 12-hour days, as opposed to 24-hour days spaced 3 days apart—in other words, that they trade one misery for another.

Discontent among workers is widespread throughout the former Soviet sphere. Over the last seven months, thousands of health care employees, taxi drivers, railway, fertilizer plant, oil and agricultural workers have protested and gone on strike in countries such as Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

Conditions are only worsening due to the US/NATO-Russia war in Ukraine. Whatever claims the governments of these states, particularly the Baltic countries, make about the willingness of their people to sacrifice to wage war against Moscow, millions of workers cannot and will not accept the ruin of their livelihoods so that Russia can be carved up like a Thanksgiving turkey and handed out to the rich.

Russia too is facing a growing jobs crisis, despite the Kremlin's insistence that the unemployment rate is the lowest ever. The country's Central Bank just acknowledged Wednesday that job vacancies have been declining for the past several months, with March showing 17 percent fewer available positions compared

to the previous month. HeadHunter, a labor market analysis firm, reported the next day that one-third of Russia's workers are fearful they will lose their jobs.

Layoffs continue to be announced at industrial enterprises across Russia. Volkswagen is trying to dismiss hundreds of employees at its plant in Nizhni Novgorod by offering them six wage payments if they voluntarily leave. In Tikhvin in Leningrad Oblast, a car plant and an IKEA facility employing 7000 people will close. The Barnaul Machine Tool Plant in Altai is going to let go 500 workers, more than previously planned. In Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Region, 1,200 workers at the residential construction company Sibpromstroi will lose their jobs.



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