

The strike by Russian Wildberries workers and the growing instability of the Putin regime

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Amidst the relentless war propaganda against Russia in the Western media, developments in the Russian working class receive little to no coverage. But over the past month, a strike by workers at Wildberries, a giant online shopping site, has resonated widely. Wildberries is a platform on which small and medium-sized entrepreneurs sell goods. They pay a commission to the corporation for the site's services. The owner of Wildberries is the billionaire Tatyana Bakalchuk, who had estimated net worth \$13.3 billion, as of 2021.

To ensure that goods can be delivered to customers, the company has 1) managers (who take orders remotely and ensure goods reach their destinations); 2) warehouse workers (who are responsible for checking for defects and packaging); 3) couriers (who bring goods either to a home or a delivery station); 4) owners and employees of the delivery stations (who are responsible for receiving, storing and delivering products to the customer).

On March 3, Wildberries announced new rules under which if the buyer returns the product because of defects or because he was sent the wrong item, the worker at the delivery station is considered at fault and the entire price of the product is withheld from his wage. This was allegedly adopted “in order to protect against fraud at delivery stations.”

The company was not known for having good working conditions even before these new rules were put in place, and it suffers from very high staff turnover. All the hardships of the economic crisis in Russia fall on the shoulders of the workers and small business owners who have signed deals with the company. Bakalchuk has a scandalous reputation as a businesswoman.

The owners and employees at the distribution points lost their patience. At first, on March 14, they protested at the company's headquarters, to no avail. The next day a full-fledged strike started in which distribution centers in St. Petersburg, Moscow, Nizhny Novgorod, Yekaterinburg,

Barnaul, the Kuzbass, Irkutsk, Chita, Vladivostok and others took part. Not all workers participated, but it put a certain amount of pressure on the company.

Even though the action at Wildberries was not a mass strike, it made a lot of noise and a number of government officials decided to intervene. The Federal Labor Office, the State Duma Deputy Corps, the Ministry of Industry and Trade, and other government agencies, immediately began looking into Wildberries. The official explanation for this investigation was that “in order to preserve social stability during the special operation in Ukraine, prompt decisions were taken to resolve the situation between the parties to the conflict.”

In response, Wildberries retreated, the strike ended, and the authorities promised to find a resolution to the conflict.

There are even plans to pass a “Bakalchuk Law,” which will allegedly allow for more oversight of retail giants such as Wildberries. While the strike itself may have had limited immediate impact, it gives food for thought and indicates just how insecure the Putin regime feels. The Kremlin chose to intervene immediately in a relatively small labor conflict in order to avoid a broader eruption of social tensions.

In another indication of how concerned the Putin regime was, on March 14—that is, during the Wildberries strike—the Russian president made a trip to Ulan-Ude, the capital of Buryatia. The purpose of this trip was to put on a show of how the Russia's leader communicates with the working class. Putin visited an aircraft factory, where he was given a tour and spoke with workers.

This meeting had a clear propagandistic character. It was aimed at underscoring the supposed “consolidation of society.” During the gathering with the workers, Putin reiterated typical nationalist clichés. He noted that although “we are different people, we have one Motherland.” In a comment on the meeting, Alexei Martynov, director of the Institute of Modern States, wrote: “The logic of unity, the logic of the Russian people, the logic of the Russian

character is that the more you put pressure on us, the more we unite, and in the end we always win—throughout the entire thousand-year history of our great state, no matter how threatened we are, no matter what horde stands against us: the Tatar-Mongols, Europeans, the West, or anyone else.”

Putin tried to draw a dividing line between his regime and Western countries, noting that “for the West, territories are important, but for us (Russia), people are.” This was his justification for Russia’s intervention in the Donbass and the start of the invasion of Ukraine.

But in reality, for Putin, people’s lives are important only insofar as they can help to preserve his own existence and the existence of his regime, which stands atop the ruins of Soviet society. Putin is trying in every way to obscure the class contradictions in Russian society in order to ensure support for his war in Ukraine. For this he needs a strong state and a “consolidated” nation.

But this “unity” is a myth, a fact underscored by a report by the Labor Protest Monitor on labor conflict in Russia in 2022. The report’s concluding paragraphs state:

1. Labor protests have not disappeared. Their number has not decreased, although there was one period [toward the beginning of the war] when they almost stopped. However, subsequently the situation returned to last year’s level.

2. In recent years, the dynamics [of labor conflicts] has changed significantly—there are more fluctuations and their scope has increased. The resulting picture can be characterized as feverish. But at the same time the tendency of growth remains, i.e., the general trend of the fluctuations is not downward, but upward, which is alarming.

3. Protests occur in the vast majority of regions of the country, with about the same frequency. Labor tensions persist almost throughout the entire country.

4. The distribution of protests across industries is largely unchanged. The structure remains the same—health care, transport and industry. In recent years, transport and health care have either taken a lead or remained in second place.

5. In 2022, full or partial non-payment of wages again regained its status as a “super cause” [for labor conflict].

The main result of 2022 can be considered a dramatic change connected with forms of labor protests. Complaints and “petitions” can hardly be considered full-fledged forms of protest, rather these are cases when the situation has become intolerable for workers, but they are aware of the fact that open conflict is impossible for them. This is an indicator of the narrowing of the “corridor of possibilities”, when employees not only do not have the opportunity to express their disagreement with the actions of the employer, but they also have fewer opportunities to participate in the regulation of labor relations. In the future, this situation will contribute to the accumulation of latent irritation, fraught with the potential for deep alienation, if not a social explosion.

Based on this report, one can conclude that the political and economic situation in the country is far less stable than it may seem at first glance. The Putin regime is trying to present itself as good at playing on the world stage and capable of blocking the development of an internal crisis. That is why we can also anticipate an intensification of historical falsifications and repressions by the capitalist, restorationist regime in Russia.

The Putin regime understands that it needs to conceal its bourgeois character in every possible way, in order to maintain its status as a supposed “state of the people.” However, despite its isolation and the sanctions imposed on the country, the development of the global financial crisis will inevitably also affect Russia. This in turn will lead to an ever clearer manifestation of the capitalist essence of the regime. No matter how much Putin plays at being an all-powerful ruler, he is subject to the laws of the capitalist economy, which means he will launch a brutal attack on the rights and social position of workers in order to hold his ground in the conflict with imperialism. In light of these dynamics, we can anticipate that this year the class struggle in Russia will erupt, catching up with its level in the West.



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