

# Russian autoworkers protest low wages

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Workers at an auto factory in Ulyanovsk, Russia, spontaneously shut down production on May 17 in protest over low wages. The plant is owned by one of the country's major producers of buses, trucks and off-road vehicles for consumers, the government and the military. Activity was brought to a halt for several hours when dozens of men and women laid down their tools at the lunch hour and refused to restart the line until that night.

Law enforcement arrived, and seven workers were detained and brought to the local police station. Their protest was, according to the director of the Ulyanovsky Avtomobilniy Zavod (UAZ), "an illegal action" that interfered with the production process. The workers were later released without charge.

According to the workers, the average monthly salary at the UAZ factory is about 20,000 rubles (\$260), with the highest paid seeing their earnings peak at around 31,000 to 32,000 rubles (\$406-\$419). They want all workers in the plant to be bumped up to the next skill and qualification tier and for compensation at that tier to be raised. In addition, they are demanding the removal of the clause from their contract that makes wage indexing dependent upon "the financial capacity of the company."

UAZ as well as the general prosecutor brought in to investigate the dispute and the region's minister of economic development have rejected the workers' demand for a change to their tier status. They also said they were lying about their incomes.

Prosecutor Andrei Yefremkin told the newspaper *Kommersant* that his inspection "has so far found no violations," and "the statement about the workers being paid 20,000 rubles does not quite ring true." Repeating the position of the company, he declared that "their wages are higher than the regional average," implying that this fact, even if it were not false, invalidates workers' demand for better compensation.

The same line came from Ulyanovsk Minister of Economic Development Nikolai Zontov, who told the press, "On the whole, UAZ in terms of average wages corresponds to the average wage level in the automotive components and car manufacturing industry. The region itself is now in 60th place in Russia in terms of the average wage," he opined as if such a ranking is some sort of achievement.

UAZ says that wage hikes in 2021 and 2022 have been adequate to meet workers' needs and points to further planned increases, which will boost salaries by 12 percent overall for 2023. But even if one were to accept the company's claims about what their line employees actually make, 2023's boost would bring them up to just 45,000 rubles, less than \$600 a month.

The company and state officials as well as the trade union have also sought to deny that there was really any real protest on the shopfloor. They claim it was just some sort of gathering in which workers, unplanned and in the middle of their shift, asked to speak with management.

Viktor Bychkov, chairman of the trade union committee at the plant, told *Kommersant*, "It was not a rally, but a meeting with the management, expressed in a loud form."

He said he would "work through the legitimate demands with management" but would explain to his members that some of what they wanted, in particular the wholesale transition to a higher wage tier, was "illegitimate." Bychkov defended the company's outsourcing of work as necessary during "periods of high production load" and denied that his members are paid less than these temporary employees.

Conditions in Russia's auto industry, which saw vehicle production fall by 56 percent in 2022, are extremely tense. Having been closely integrated into global auto production, the industry was particularly hard hit by the draconian economic sanctions imposed

by the US and EU since the beginning of the war in Ukraine. Despite an uptick in output, producers continue to impose unpaid furloughs and temporary shutdowns due to supply chain problems. AvtoVaz, the country's largest automobile producer, was forced to move up a planned July shutdown to the end of May due to parts shortages.

In an interview with Tsargrad.tv, economist Yevgeny Nadorshin, commenting on the recent protest at the UAZ plant, stated that given the crisis in household incomes in Russia and the country's efforts to ramp up industrial production, "without a doubt" there would be growing wage demands from Russian workers."

While inflation has eased over the last year in Russia, the country's state bank just announced that the price reprieve was temporary and is now over. Inflation is once again on the uptick and will hit between 4.5 and 6.5 percent in 2023. Workers' real incomes will continue to fall.

The stage is being set in Russia for major social conflicts. The relentless pressure on workers' living standards coincides with and is exacerbated by the escalating US-NATO war against Russia over Ukraine.

In the war, the Russian ruling class is seeking some sort of accommodation with imperialism that allows it to exploit Russia's natural resources and the Russian working class without direct interference by the major capitalist powers. But the imperialist powers are seeking not accommodation but military defeat. The Kremlin, having taken the US and NATO's bait in invading Ukraine, has entangled the Russian working class in a bloody debacle.



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