

Russian taxi drivers strike

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Taxi drivers in cities across Russia struck this week in protest over low earnings. Hundreds, if not more, parked their vehicles and refused to take calls on Tuesday evening during rush hour. Local press outlets reported actions in Voronezh, Prokopyevsk, Surgut, Kaliningrad, Ufa, Yekaterinburg, Tyumen, and Moscow. The following day, cabbies in Novokuznetsk also briefly went on a strike, and on Friday workers in Novosibirsk declared they would keep their cars off the roads during peak evening hours that day.

These demonstrations have taken place after a group of drivers in Prokopyevsk, located in southern Siberia, issued a call to action, which then circulated via social media. In Yekaterinburg, drivers posted it in their vehicles.

Their statement condemns one of the country's largest online companies, Yandex, the value of which Statista estimates to be \$12.5 billion as of this month. The strikers explain that fares do not even cover the costs of maintaining their cars, much less anything else. "Prices are rising for cars (30-40%), parts (60-70%), rent (about 20%), gas (around 20%), food and clothes (endlessly)," they write.

In a January 14 interview given to Moyo! Online, a cabbie in Voronezh, which is 2,300 miles to the west of the city where the strike was first announced, said, "Prices are growing every day! For the rental of the car—pay, for gas—pay, taxes—pay. In the end, everyone is making money except the driver. It turns out that we give rides to passengers for free. It's not work, it's charity."

In Yekaterinburg, another striking taxi driver echoed the same sentiments. "Earnings are not enough to cover expenditures on maintenance, gas, and car washing. About 60,000 rubles go to gas, about 30,000 to technical maintenance. The rental payment is 90,000 rubles. In sum, the driver is left with all of 30,000 to 50,000 rubles," he told Realniy Tagil. This amounts to

between \$290 and \$490 a month.

Speaking to a different news outlet, E1.ru, a worker in the same city explained that fares have been falling since December. The day before speaking to the press, he said that after completing 25 trips he had earned all of 3,000 rubles, about \$30. In order to keep up his weekly income, he now has to work through the weekend. In January he had to get 35 more fares as compared to November of last year just to earn the same amount.

Cabbies are also objecting to government agencies' slow processing of licenses through the imposition of what drivers in Voronezh describe as "absurd measures." Authorities in that city acknowledged to the press that they are currently sitting on over 500 such applications.

In Saint Petersburg, 1,000 drivers were just stripped of their permits on the grounds that they do not carry a required form of insurance that covers passengers. The idea that officials or cab companies care much about protecting the safety and well-being of ordinary people taking taxi rides is absurd. In Russia, hundreds die every day due to miserable working and living conditions.

In reality, the use of legal measures to put the squeeze on cabbies is aimed at whipping up Russian nationalism and hatred of "foreigners," as many drivers are from Central Asia. This population, whose countries were previously part of Russia and later the Soviet Union, are now derided as dangerous "immigrants" and "illegals" who threaten "the motherland," despite the fact that their history and cultures have for centuries been as central to the Russian experience as that of the dominant group, ethnic Slavs. Central Asians are in a fundamental sense as "Russian" as anyone else who hails from the region, and have as much right to be on the territory of the state controlled by Moscow as others recognized officially as

citizens.

When asked about this week's drivers' strike, a representative of Yandex claimed in an interview with Moyo! Online that there was no action in Voronezh on Tuesday evening, cabbies are making as much as they were last year, the number of fares year-over-year has not changed, and the number of drivers on the road has increased.

Vladimir Gerasimenko, an expert on the taxi industry, described the companies as monopolists, in an interview this week with Federal Press. He noted that even as they put the squeeze on drivers, they also use their market position to drive up fares for passengers. The corporations create a shortage of drivers at peak times, refuse to transfer ride requests to workers standing by and then wait till demand pushes prices even higher, he explained.

He further said that cabbies are generally afraid to stage protests because the monopolies will either cut their fares more or cancel their contracts altogether in retaliation.

Despite this, there have been mounting strikes among Russia's taxi drivers for several years, and that, while small, they are widespread. In December, when cabbies in Tyumen, which is in western Siberia not far from the Ural mountains, declared an "online strike" and announced they were preparing a list of demands for Yandex, fellow drivers in Khanty-Mansiysk—415 miles to the north—declared their support. Then, in Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug, which is a further 638 miles in the direction of the Arctic circle, others did the same.

The conditions that taxi drivers are facing reflect the reality of Russia's working class as a whole. Increasing prices are hammering away at their incomes. While overall inflation officially stood at around 9.4 percent in the country last year, the increasing costs of everyday items outstripped that number many times over.

Nezavisimaya Gazeta reported in late December that the price of potatoes, a staple of the Russian diet, doubled over the course of 2024. They noted that the cost of all of the following goods increased last year by anywhere from 20 to 50 percent: onions, cabbage, butter, beets, cucumbers, lamb, apples, frozen fish and sour cream.

A January 8 article in the same press outlet titled,

"Russia continues to have high level of worker exploitation," observed that despite a recent growth in wages, "in the structure of household consumption for a very long time the share of expenditures on 'primitive goods and services,' more specifically, on food, has remained unchanged."

Meanwhile even though there have been salary increases in some sectors of the economy, as a percentage of their total costs, corporations are spending less on workers' wages. "The share of labor remuneration in the cost structure of enterprises has not been growing over the last 10 years, but, on the contrary, has been declining: from 28% of output in 2013 to 22% in 2022," an economist at the Russian Academy of Sciences told NG, adding, "This leads to the conclusion that enterprises, let us say, are increasingly underpaying their employees for labor."



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