

# Striking union organizers raided by Russian security forces

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**Russian security forces raided the apartments of independent trade unionists in Moscow on Monday night in a direct attack on the organising of gig economy workers, writes an anonymous rs21 member. This article includes descriptions of torture.**

Late on Monday night, Russian security forces broke down Kirill Ukraintsev's front door and launched a [full-scale raid](#) on his Moscow flat. Kirill is co-chair of [Courier](#), an independent trade union. The other co-chair, Said Shamhalov, was simultaneously abducted and could not be reached for hours. Said is currently safe, but at the time of writing Kirill is still in custody. The raid on Kirill lasted four hours, deep into the night. His lawyer and a journalist were denied entry throughout.

The raid marked the fourth consecutive day of a wildcat strike called by Courier. The industrial action was coordinated by couriers at Delivery Club, joined by colleagues at Yandex Food. Both companies provide aggregator food delivery services, and are in direct competition.

## The background

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has aggravated a world economic crisis. Sanctions, mass exodus of foreign companies, a drop in consumer purchasing power and demand have hit corporate profits. Thousands of fast-food restaurants in Russia are owned by just a handful of multinationals; as these pause operations or pull out, delivery aggregators watch their supply chains rupture.

Barred from foreign markets, and with no government bailout in sight, the sector turned up the exploitation dial on its casualised workforce. Delivery Club altered the algorithm for calculating couriers' earnings per completed order. In the vast majority of cases this has amounted to an extortionate pay cut. Couriers report an average 20% income loss. Some now take home as little as 2000 roubles (£21) at the end of the working day. And yet couriers say they are forced to walk, cycle and drive further to complete deliveries.

Yandex Eats pushed driver tariffs down to pedestrian and cyclist courier levels. All this is against the backdrop of a 14% inflation rate and a major [cost of living crisis](#).

For couriers, this is a worrying roll back on hard-won changes to their material conditions.

In 2020 – the same year it made a record £26 million in the second quarter – Delivery Club baked a minefield of punishments and sanctions for couriers into its app.

Failure to walk far enough or fast enough led to fines – a [10 minute lateness registers as a no-show](#) on the app. At least worker was fined 3000 roubles (or a day's wage) for this. Smaller fines were a near-daily occurrence, awarded automatically for whimsical reasons, 'impossible' to contest. Just a few years ago, co-chair Said would work [two 19 hour days back-to-back 'just to keep on top of the fines'](#). In 2019, Artyk Orozaliev, 21 year old courier worked a ten hour, uninterrupted shift for

Yandex.Eats. He had a heart attack and died.

Sick of being punished, forced into debt, blocked without warning or simply not being paid, in July 2020 the workers created Courier. They formulate demands and fight back against cuts and repressions, secure legal support, educate and engage the public. Collectively they identify the weak points in their exploiter's opaque, contradictory model, ensuring a greater chance of success in strike and struggle.

They have won significant victories. They recovered 30 million roubles of delayed pay from Delivery Club. They organised fundraising that supported workers injured in traffic accidents. And thanks to their organising many (but by no means all) of the penalties previously imposed have been abolished.

## **The attacks**

Couriers continue to organise and defend their interests during this massive squeeze on wages and prices. For five days they have been on strike, refusing to fulfill their orders. On April 25<sup>th</sup> some 30 couriers rallied outside Delivery Club HQ – unmissable in their signature, acerbically bright raincoats. The rally was unceremoniously dispersed by police; at least one officer carried an assault rifle ('definitely an AK', two bemused Yandex couriers recall). Twelve of them were detained and later released without charge.

In just 21 months of Courier's existence, the State security forces have been [constantly harassing](#) Kirill – huge fines, abductions, arrests in special detention units for five, ten days at a time. Said too has been fined and targeted. In late 2020, Said was detained at a strike action and abducted. At the police station Said was restrained, his hood pulled over his head, choked and brutally beaten. Masked officers in plain clothes demanded his union comrade's phone numbers and a halt of his organizing activity ('defending those narrow-eyes') for good. Hinting there may have been a call from 'upstairs', an irritated officer told Said that the union is creating problems for their department. ['They promised to make my life unbearable'](#), he recalls. Said refused to acquiesce to a single of their demands. He suffered multiple injuries, including a diagnosed concussion and traumatic brain injury.

This is widely accepted as worker intimidation and punishment for the Courier union's success.

Kirill's work computer, laptop, and smartphones were seized last night, and operatives will no doubt hang onto them and extract anything they can. He is charged with article ['212.1'](#), a criminal offense listed as 'repeated violation of the established procedure for organizing an assembly'. His other 'violation' is allegedly taking part in organizing a rally at Sergiev Posad, in solidarity with app-based taxi drivers. In Russia no spontaneous demonstrations are allowed and there is no meaningful right to protest, so the bar for breaching the rules is extremely low. Courier believe the true motivation is a crackdown on independent unions and joint effort by capital and the State to 'decapitate' and break their swelling, class-conscious protest.

Kirill now faces a maximum sentence of five years in prison. He has been taken away to the Sledcom Investigative Committee for questioning last night and has not yet been released. His bail conditions will be decided today, according to his lawyer. Kirill was held in an IVS facility until his hearing. IVS or 'temporary detention isolators' are high security units, still under direct Ministry of Internal Affairs (police) control. They are notorious for secrecy, impunity and the [use of torture to force confessions](#).

**[Update 16:17]** Kirill is in court. 40 people are gathered on the street, most are [not allowed inside](#).

**[Update 18:05]** The Savelovsky District Court of Moscow has ordered Kirill Ukraintsev, co-chair of the Courier trade union, into custody. He will be detained in a pre-trial detention center (SIZO) for a period of 1 month and 30 days, i.e. until June 25.

### **How to stand in solidarity**

Kirill's comrades have asked everyone to share this story widely, and copy-paste the hashtag suggested by his union - #ПрофсоюзНеПреступление [a union is not a crime]. They call for an end to union persecution and for Kirill's immediate release.

Developments about Kirill's case and details of future solidarity actions will be updated here and posted on rs21 social media.

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