

Russia: A series of strikes and anti-union repression

Protest letters and funds needed in support

Monday 3 December 2007, by [CLÉMENT Karine](#) (Date first published: 27 November 2007).

Since the strike of February 2007 at the Ford factory (in the region of Saint Petersburg, the Russian trade-union movement seems to be waking up.

Contents

- [Workers' Victory at Ford-Russia](#)
- [Appeal of the Edinstvo trade-union](#)
- [Appeal by strikers at St \(...\)](#)

New trade unions are being formed just about everywhere, first of all in the profitable sectors of oil, metallurgy, cars and aluminium, and in the transnational corporations. And faced with the refusal of factory managers to negotiate over wage increases or the improvement of working conditions, some even go as far as to organize or support strikes, in a situation where it has become practically impossible to conduct strikes legally, in the framework of the new Labour Code. This code requires that at least half the employees, meeting in a general assembly, decide by a majority vote to go on strike. If this does not happen, the strike is declared illegal and workers run the risk of being sacked.

Workers' Victory at Ford-Russia

On February 2, at half past one in the morning, the conference of the workers of the Ford factory of the region of Saint Petersburg ended. After a vote, the decision was taken - there would be a strike starting on February 14. In all, 1300 people, representing 70 per cent of the factory's workers, took part in meetings after finishing work (the factory operates on a three-shift system) - in the street, in temperatures of minus 15 degrees, because the management of the company refused to put a meeting room at their disposal. The result of the vote: unanimity, with five abstaining, to start the strike, which would thus proceed entirely in conformity with the Draconian requirements of Russian labour law.

The principal demands were on the one hand the regulation of work norms, and on the other support for the proposals made by the trade union during negotiations on the collective agreement of the company, all of which were rejected by management. These demands concerned in particular transparency over work norms, respect of safety measures, the establishment of social guarantees and the limits on the externalisation of work (outsourcing).

This strong action taken was due to the new trade union, founded less than two years ago, with at its head very dynamic young workers who have worked hard since then to solidarize the collective and radically transform the relationship of the workers to union activity.

As Alexei Etmanov, president of the new union, says: "With my mates on the union committee, we taught them to make the union theirs, as a fighting weapon, to say 'us' when they speak about the union".

Feeling cramped in the traditional trade-union federation, the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia (FNPR), which is hostile to any kind of struggle, the Ford factory union very quickly left to create a free, fighting trade union. With other new emerging trade unions in the industry (in particular the union at General Motors in Togliattigrad), they even formed, in July 2006 at the time of the Russian Social Forum, a new car workers' union.

The position of the management, which is however foreign and accustomed to negotiations, was astonishingly hard. In spite of negotiations which lasted three months, none of the points proposed by the union was included in the draft company agreement, which confined itself to reproducing the Russian labour code. According to Alexei Etmanov, the management quite simply found the traditional methods of management in Russia to their taste. "They believed that, as in the majority of workplaces in the country, they could impose their law on the workers and they didn't think that we were able to defend our rights", he said. "But this time, they were completely mistaken", he added.

To give an idea of the working conditions in this factory, which is, however, highly profitable and equipped with the most advanced technology, here are some elements: average monthly wages of 19 000 roubles (540 euros); work stations without a fixed assignment (workers moving from one to the other); systematic refusal to respect holidays which are due; maximum flexibility; accumulation of hours of overtime; many tasks which are dangerous and harmful to the health of the workers. To which must of course be added,, an enormous disproportion between the wages of the workers and those of management...

We should remember that it was not the first collective action carried out by the workers of the factory. In the summer of 2005, after a work-to-rule lasting several weeks, they had already obliged the direction to increase wages by 14.2 per cent.

Shaken by the workers' determination, the management of the Ford factory announced to the press on February 9, 2007, five days before the strike was due to start, that it was conceding wage increases of from 14 to 20 per cent, according to the category. "They want to calm us by giving us alms", that is how Alexei Etmanov commented on this gesture. The union leader promised that the strike would take place in any event, since it did not have as its main object wages, but working conditions as a whole. The final decision was made by the workers' collective of the workers, called on by the union to decide on February 13, the day before the announced strike. Finally the strike at Ford lasted one day. The management immediately gave in and accepted almost all the demands of the union.

Strike at Severstal

A strike has just finished with a victory at the Karelski Okatich factory (in the Republic of Karelia), which belongs to the powerful Severstal iron and steel group. To avoid falling foul of the law, the workers of the rail transport department of the factory struck in the form of an act of refusal to work without guaranteed conditions of safety, calling attention to the deplorable technical condition of the locomotives. The action lasted from June 28 to August 3 and ended with management accepting the workers' demands. The main ones were a wage increase and an improvement of working conditions.

One of the keys to the success of this action was the good organization of the workers, of whom the majority are members of the alternative trade union Sotsprof, whose leaders succeeded in conducting negotiations at the same time as making a show of strength.

Unfortunately, the days following the victory were more bitter. A few days after the end of this strike of a particular kind, the workers received a warning for refusal to work without legitimate grounds, which opened the door to possible sackings. The Sotsprof trade union was expelled from its union office, and the city prosecutor opened an investigation into the “illegal” intrigues of the trade union leaders.

Strike at Avtovaz

The strike on August 1 2007 of the workers on the principal assembly line of the automobile giant Avtovaz (Lada cars, in the region of Samara) resounded like a bolt from the blue. Nobody expected it, since this factory was dominated by the traditional trade union FNPR, which was strongly hostile to any action of frontal opposition to management. And yet...

Anger had been welling up for a long time already, since the workers were extremely dissatisfied with the level of wages, which since 1994 had been falling in purchasing power because of inflation. Today, an average worker earns hardly around 7 000 roubles a month (200 euros). Consequently, workers have been leaving the factory massively. Among those who decided to remain, some found the courage to start a collective fight for a wage increase. To carry it out, a strike committee was set up in June 2007. It transmitted a list of demands to the management of the company, in the first place the demand for a wage increase. Since the management did not react, neither to the demands (signed collectively by a large number of workers), nor to the work-to-rule strike which accompanied them, the decision was taken to go on strike. The date had been announced a week before: August 1.

Nobody among the commentators really believed it would happen; The factory has more than 100,000 workers, largely unorganised and remaining through inertia members of the traditional trade union. Moreover, in the days preceding the strike, the management did everything to dissuade the dissident workers: threats revealed by department managers and foremen, calling the “ringleaders” to threatening interviews, calling in the police on the pretext of an “extremist threat” in the factory. Thus, one of the militant workers, Anton Vetchkunin, was arrested at his place of work by the police, a few days before the announced strike. The motive that was cited was distribution of leaflets of an extremist character.

Despite everything, the assembly line was indeed stopped on August 1, as planned, from 10.45 in the morning till four in the afternoon. And an assembly took place in front of the entrance to the factory, where the strikers sang and danced, exultant to have found the courage to do such a thing. Around 2000 workers took part in the strike. To avoid repression, it was collectively decided to make it a warning strike and to resume work at the start of the second shift. But this strike of a few hours was very much talked about. All the media reported it and public debates were held on whether the strike was justified. They revealed broad support among the population for the striking workers.

Among the factors that played a role in facilitating the strike it is necessary to evoke the active assistance provided by the alternative trade union Edinstvo (Unity), very much a minority in the factory, but very active. It is also necessary to speak about the actions of support organized by networks of political and trade-union militants, including protest pickets in front of the offices of the group in various towns in Russia (including Moscow, where militants were arrested and condemned to several days in prison for “unauthorized action”). Lastly, it should be pointed out that the strike was the initiative of the workers themselves, working mainly in three workshops, all linked to the assembly line and occupying a key position in the production process.

However, if the reaction of public opinion was positive, that of the traditional trade union and the management was much less so! The leadership of the traditional trade union completely dissociated itself from the action, which was publicly presented by its leader as a provocation by extremists. As

for the management of the factory, it decided to deny the facts and put out communiqués according to which nothing had happened. In spite of the promise made to open negotiations with, as representative of the workers, Petr Zolotarev, president of the Edinstvo trade union, two weeks after the strike the negotiations had not even begun. Worse still, measures of repression started...

Repression by employers

One week after the strike, the workers who had taken part in the five-hour strike started to receive warnings for refusal to work without legitimate grounds, fines and other disciplinary measures. In all, on August 16, more than 170 workers had been affected by these repressive measures. Two workers, one of whom is a member of the alternative trade union Edinstvo, received warnings of dismissal. And measures of repression are continuing.

The Edinstvo union committee is preparing to conduct a legal battle to defend the participants in the strike. It succeeded in opposing the sacking of Anton Vetchkunin, union representative of Edinstvo" and for this reason more protected. However, the traditional trade union FNPR gave its approval for the sacking of the second worker, Alexei Vinogradov, victim of betrayal by his own union.

The free trade union Edinstvo has undertaken to defend all the victimised workers, without regard for their trade-union membership, but the task is gigantic and far exceeds the organisational and material means of this minority trade union (it organises at most 700 workers out of the total of 100,000). So it needs help, among other reasons to be able to provide compensation for the material losses incurred by the strikers.

It is an important issue. It is a question of showing the factory workers and, more broadly, public opinion:

1. that the trade unions can and must be fighting unions, independent of the employers;
2. that it is possible to strike, that it is an inviolable right;
3. that solidarity, inside the country and on the international level, is a key value which makes it possible to win struggles.

The solidarity campaign has already started in Russia itself. I join with the comrades of the Edinstvo trade union in asking international militant networks to take part in this campaign in one way or another.

Since the strike of February 2007 at the Ford factory (in the region of Saint Petersburg, the Russian trade-union movement seems to be waking up.

Appeal of the Edinstvo trade-union committee of Avtovaz to social and trade-union movements

Dear colleagues!

The wages of the workers of the Avtovaz factory are gradually losing purchasing power. At the time of the last regional elections, one of the slogans of the party that is in power, "United Russia" was

“wages of 25 000 roubles - it is possible!”. The list of this party was headed by the principal managers of the Avtovaz factory.

Once elected, the deputies of “United Russia” forgot their promise.

The workers of the automobile giant Avtovaz, despairing of never obtaining a wage increase, decided to strike. To defend their human dignity, as of July 2007, the employees of two workshops in particular (the mechanical assembly shop and the body shop) addressed to the managers of the factory their demands concerning the respect of the electoral promises of wages at 25 000 roubles. They never received any answer.

On August 1 the employees of workshops 46-1, 45-2, Motor-3 and some others went on strike to defend their demands. The main assembly line was out of action for four hours. The representative of the management, I Ivanov, arrived on the spot, promised that the president of the Avtovaz group, V.V. Artiakov, would soon come to Togliatti and that negotiations with the representatives of the strikers would begin. It was also promised that no repressive measures would be taken against the strikers.

The employees once again believed the promises and stopped the strike, waiting for the beginning of the negotiations on wage increases.

The promises once more proved to be deceitful.

The employer did not accept negotiations. Worse, in violation of the Labour Code (art.414) which prohibits disciplinary measures against strikers, the employer add

We, the Edinstvo trade-union committee appeal to all social movements and trade unions to ask you to support workers who are victims of arbitrary employers. The new management of Avtovaz presented itself as professional and supporting respect for law and order in Russian companies. However, instead of law and of the order, the managers showed their incompetence and of their attraction for easy money. They bought luxurious cross-country vehicles on a large scale and founded a management company in Moscow where the wages of the personnel are several tens of times the wages of the factory workers. The incompetence in the management of the factory led to the massive departure of its workers, to a fall in production, to the ending of social programmes for the workers and thus, as a consequence, to their impoverishment.

A campaign of solidarity and protest by Russian and international public opinion will oblige them to put a stop to illegal repression against people who are working hard to earn their bread and feed their families.

We ask you to send letters of protest to the address of the management of Avtovaz.

We ask you, as far as it is possible for you, to send your donations to the bank account of the Edinstvo trade union. We guarantee that the money thus received will be entirely transmitted to the striking workers illegally and wrongfully hit by repression.

Thank you in advance!

The Edinstvo trade-union committee

Contacts:

President of the trade-union committee, Petr Zolotarev,

fax: (+7-8482) 53-41-48,

e-mail profedinstvo yandex.ru

To help financially:

The Edinstvo trade union does not have a bank account in currency, and given the new legislation in Russia, it is better not to receive money from abroad. With the agreement of Petr Zolotarev, I place my French banking account at the disposal of those who would like to make donations. Contact me at this address: info ikd.ru (Carine Clément, Avtovaz donation).

To send letters of protest:

Address: 445633 Region of Samara, town of Togliatti, Chaussez Iuzhnoi, 36, OAO Avtovaz

President of the Avtovaz group V.V. Artiakov

Tel. in Togliatti: (+7 8482) 73-82-21,

fax (+7 8482) 757274

Tel.. (+7 495) 970-11-00

Appeal by strikers at St Petersburg Ford factory

“When all other rights are trampled under foot, the right to revolt cannot be denied” Tom Paine

Trade Union Committee of the Ford Motor Co Information Bulletin November 27, 2007

Comrades,

We turn to our brothers and sisters, fathers and mothers, who live in the Vsevolzhsk region and in St. Petersburg, to those who are working at our plant, and to those whose relative have some connection with the Ford plant in Vsevolzhsk. We have held out a week to win our goals, in particular a wage increase.

You have also seen the contemptuous attitude of the bosses to the demands of our collective and the surprise of our compatriots at our “huge” demands. “You’re asking a lot,” they tell us, when they see we ask that the wages of welders and painters be raised to 30,000 roubles. But no one is surprised when they raise the salaries of department supervisors and other managers, which stand at 200,000, two times a year by 10-20% each time. In other words, the bosses are worthy of salaries at the European level, but the workers who feed that bunch are supposedly not working at European standards and should get kopecks... A dual approach and double standard. We’ve went into this difficult strike so that our children do not have to go half-hungry and so that our parents will have decent pensions.

We are the first in Russia of the 21st century who have begun to defend our rights, relying on the law

and our solidarity. We are skilled workpeople and we have a right to a wage that allows a decent human existence. Many of us have higher education and have lived in the St. Petersburg-Leningrad region all our conscious lives, bringing much benefit to this land.

We turn to you, our compatriots! Today our victory will be the victory of all citizens of Russia working at any enterprise. Support us! Support yourselves! We will win no matter what! But we would like to reach that victory together with you! We are ready to share our experience and our results with you!

The plant is not working. It has been shut down for a week. The administration is hoping we will give in. Our struggle is not taking place against bullets and shells. We are not forced to stand in the trenches and face tanks, as did our grandfathers at Stalingrad. We aren't facing snipers' bullets and mortar fire, as did our fathers and brothers in the mountains of Afghanistan and in the Caucasus. We are facing well-fed bourgeois and their lackeys, who see to it that the simple working person should work for a bowl of soup and a crust of bread and have no thoughts and claims, wishes or opinions. For them the best worker is the one who works for pennies, and when his health fails, he brings his children to the assembly line to replace him and then goes to die in some ditch or to live in misery on an inhuman pension.

For the bosses this is normal and correct. And if someone suddenly raises his head and declares that he is a person and has rights, then he is an extremist or terrorist - check whichever pleases most. It is not so! Our brothers, fathers and grandfathers shed their blood so that we could have a just and happy life. We cannot stand on our knees, forgetting their heroism. Yes, it is frightening, though we are not at Stalingrad; yes it is dangerous, though we are not in the mountains of Kandagara. It is just that no one in Russia has shut a factory for so long and forced the hand of a transnational corporation. It is always harder and more frightening for pioneers than for the next wave. But if not we, then who?

Or shall we forget our heroic roots and get used to living on our knees? No! Our memory raises us up and forces us to struggle and defend that for which our ancestors gave their lives. Can anyone really think that our grandfathers and fathers in the trenches dreamt that their children would lose their health and self-respect on the assembly line under the shouts of supervisor-overseers, who allow workers go to the toilet only as an act of charitable kindness? If that is so, then we are ashamed to live in Russia and to call ourselves the Russian people. A victorious people cannot stand on its knees! The shift bosses, who count other people's money and know the wages of each worker at the plant, and the supervisors, who lick the boots of the top management, are afraid... They are afraid of their boss and of organized workers! Organize!

Brother Ford workers! If they call you to work from involuntary layoff [not all workers are on strike, but the plant is not working] in order to start up the assembly line, got to one of our activists, take a form, and write to the general director that you are joining the strike. Don't lend your support to those who don't give a damn about workers, who are interested only in their own welfare and profit! Or have these people become closer to you than those with whom you work side-by-side on the assembly line and who are now fighting for our common well-being? But if for some reason you cannot join the strike, then before starting work demand mandatory health-and-safety training, demand that they familiarize you with the operating instructions, the QPS, WES, especially if you are moved to a new operation. Remember that this is mandatory. Otherwise it is a violation of the law, and you are responsible for all possible consequences!

Fellow countrymen, union brethren! Your support now is especially important. Any kind of support! Both moral and financial! We need to hear you and see you. It is important to us to know your opinion. Come to the walls of our plant. Go to our site www.ford-profsoyuz.ru and tell us your

opinion. Our union is supporting the strikers financially out of our strike fund, but unfortunately it is not unlimited. We are into our second week and we will stay out longer! There are already citizens who have given the strikers financial support. Those who want to help will find our account number on the site.

And more... Yes, the corporation is huge and churns out vast sums of money. It is very hard to oppose it. But for a HUMAN BEING nothing is impossible. Remember the Spartans' battle at Thermopylae, remember the Russian's battle at Kulikovo Field [against the Mongols]! Who says the time of heroism and courage has passed, that they belong to history? How our children live and how they will remember us depends on us alone!

Translated by David Mandel.

P.S.

* From International Viewpoint Online magazine : IV n° 395 - December 2007.

* Carine Clément is a sociologist and runs the Institute of Collective Action in Moscow.