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Russia's car industry, where even the dead work overtime

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Once the pride of the Soviet Union, Tolyatti's car factories are cutting workers and raising production quotas by the year. The cost is all too human.

Tolyatti is Russia's Detroit. Situated on the Volga River not far from Samara, the city is home to some 700,000 people, and its workshops - which produce Ladas, Renaults, Nissans and Datsuns - are still the core of Russia's automobile industry. Russian website [Socialist.news](#) recently [published](#) this reportage from AvtoVAZ, which shows the human cost of overtime and overwork at the city's principal employer. With weak labour protections and union organising, Russia's car workers face significant exploitation at the hands of management. We are grateful for their permission to publish a translation of it here.

At the end of November, a 58-year-old man died at Tolyatti's AvtoVAZ car plant after a 12-hour shift. His colleagues said that he couldn't take the extra shifts. Workers at other parts of the plant confirmed that they often do overtime and weekend shifts.

We went to find out how automobile workers live at AvtoVAZ - and what keeps them there.

No compensation

Five years ago, Anna Perova, a worker at AvtoVAZ, had her fingers ripped off her right hand. A rod had fallen out of the control unit of the press she was using, but as soon as Anna decided to fix it, the press started working all by itself. Anna whipped her hand out of the press, but her fingers had been stamped into the glove she was wearing.

The press continued stamping away. Anna's colleague was waiting for parts from Anna, and was about to kick up a fuss, but when she turned around she saw Anna pressing her hand with a oil-wet glove. The foreman, standing in front of them, didn't understand what had yet happened because of the noise of the machines. "What's up, Anya?" he asked Perova with a smile on his face. She showed him her injured hand, and the foreman began to sway from what he'd seen. "I'm the one that's in a bad way, not you," Anna snapped.

An inspection at the factory revealed that the equipment Anna had been using was defective, even though it had been repaired. But the factory management didn't admit wrongdoing. Perova decided to go to court, but the judge decided to consider the loss of Anna's fingers a "light" injury, and ordered the factory to pay her 50,000 roubles (£627) compensation. "This would be 50,000 euros abroad," Perova said in court, but no one listened to her. Perova could no longer work in a workshop making roofs, doors and other parts for cars. Her monthly wage was cut by more than half, from 25,000 roubles (£313) to 14,000 (£175) - you'll have less work to do now, they said.

Take a look at your hand, and imagine that Anna has nothing up to the knuckle. Perova believes she was lucky. In the same workshop, six months later, one worker lost three fingers to the press. Another lost her whole hand.

Overworked, underprotected

It's just before 11 in the morning, but Anna's kitchen is already filled with the smell of a lunchtime cafeteria - marinated cucumbers, meat with pineapples, pig fat, herring and bread. It'd be hard to imagine this on a weekday - Anna has to be up at five for work. But it's Saturday, and Anna has a day off. Today, other women are working at the factory for double time.

Anna is holding a kettle with her knuckles, pouring hot water into mugs. "People here work 12 hours a day, six days a week, and this leads to overwork and injuries. People are afraid of the consequences, they hide their injuries. Last year, a woman tripped on a waste pipe and fell on her back, she didn't tell anyone - she took pity on the engineer responsible. Her spine was injured to the point where she spent two months in bed. A year later, she died. The engineer retired, and she went to the grave."

"Why didn't she tell anyone?"

"How could she? People die, taking pity on their bosses. They worry that they won't get work, they'll be fired for something. That'd be fine at a small business, but this is AvtoVAZ! So many people are killed. One lad dropped from a chimney at the factory while he was cleaning the windows. They paid his parents 300,000 roubles [£3,700] compensation."

"They say that last month a man died from overworking?"

"I saw the obituary. But I don't know him, nor the shop where he worked," Anna tells me as she threads her ponytail into a red band, her curly hair peeking out. "People are always overworking. No one tries to stop them, all you have to do is offer work and they'll stay. I was putting my coat on in the cloakroom the other day, and I see a young woman sitting on a bench, all hunched over. I ask her: 'Kristina, what's wrong?' 'They didn't let me work. My shift is over, and they're sending me home. I don't even know what I'm going to do.' You have to understand, they're so used to working that they can't imagine that they could do something else in life." With this red band in her hair, Anna looks like a revolutionary, worker and shock worker. Perova wears a ponytail at work too - you can lose your bonus if you don't cover your hair.

Perova first got a job at AvtoVAZ when she was 18, on the advice of her father, who also worked at the factory. When Anna came here, the town that was renamed Tolyatti after the death of the eponymous Italian Communist leader in 1964, she dreamed of a better life - her own apartment, marriage, children and a job at a leading enterprise. Initially, the factory gave her a space at a workers' dormitory. Later, the factory built apartment blocks in the new Automotive district - this is how Anna's father received his first apartment. They bought a carpet, television (filled with adverts for AvtoVAZ cars) and a Zhiguli car on credit.

Two years later, Anna gave birth to a son, and it became too hard to combine work at the factory and care for her child - she left for her mother's in her hometown of Samara, round the Volga bend. When her son had grown up a little, Anna started working at an aviation factory, but seeing as it was impossible to solve their housing situation in Samara, they moved to the town of Tutayev, outside Yaroslavl, for a few years - they'd been assigned an apartment there. Perova didn't like living in the Yaroslavl climate, and she found a family in Tolyatti who wanted to exchange apartments with her - and to make the deal work, she took a job at AvtoVAZ again. Now she's been working there for 28

years.

Trade union competition

Perova returned to AvtoVAZ in 1989, and the next year privatisation began – the factory became a centre of criminal battles. Nevertheless, AvtoVAZ continued to work without stops: in 1993, workers produced their 15 millionth car, and in 1995 they released the VAZ-2110 – the so-called “Number 10” that was for years considered a prestige model. But workers felt that work had got harder. Though there were already two trade unions operating at AvtoVAZ, production norms would be changed several times a month, there were delays with wages and bans on holidays.

The ASM and Unity trade unions, which both operate at AvtoVAZ, don’t have anything in common, apart from the size of monthly contributions from their members (one percent of your wages). ASM is considered the largest trade union organisation in Russia – it has 80,000 members, with 25,000 working at AvtoVAZ. Over 51 years of its existence, ASM has never organised a strike, and, according to its leaders, they defend their members peacefully, via negotiations with management. Unity, on the other hand, has roughly 100 members, and has organised several strikes since it was set up in 1991 – this union believes its important to defend workers’ interests in court.

Like the majority of workers at AvtoVAZ, Anna Perova used to be a member of ASM, the official trade union. She used to attend the meetings, and wasn’t worried that several of the union’s leadership also occupied high-ranking posts at the factory. She believed that ASM could help with workers’ complaints. But once, in 1997, she saw how the ASM chairman placed his signature on orders to cut wages, told her fellow workers and left the union. Perova’s team left with her, facing a scandal with management and threats of sacking.

“Since I joined the Unity union, I tell everyone: ‘Guys, until you start striking, you’ll be treated like lambs to the slaughter’”

Disillusioned with one of her factory’s trade unions, Perova joined the other. She started reading workplace legislation and learning Russia’s Labour Code by heart. In 2000, she organised a strike against 24-hour production at the factory, and in 2015 was elected union chairperson.

“I realised that we’re not limited to just banging our fists on the boss’ desk, but can fight against injustice together with workers in a civilised way,” Perova tells me. “Since I joined the Unity union, I tell everyone: “Guys, until you start striking, you’ll be treated like lambs to the slaughter.””

Leaders of ASM don’t copy the methods of the other trade union. Sergei Zaitsev, one of the ASM chairpersons, says that there’s “only criticism” at the core of the Unity union, and believes that “people who spread this kind of [negative] information are harming the factory and its workers.”

Sweet life

Attitudes to workplace injuries are another area where the views of the two trade unions diverge. According to Perova, instead of trying to reduce the rate of injuries at the factory, ASM negotiates with local cafes and companies to arrange discounts for AvtoVAZ workers: “They shut the workers up with chocolate.”

In September 2016, Dmitry Safonkin, a press operator, was tasked to work in a different shop – he was sent to stamp out metal details. After several stages of cuts to AvtoVAZ workforce since 2008,

there's a human resource problem at the factory. In 2017, 6,000 people were [fired](#) at the factory - and 2,200 are likely to lose their jobs in 2018. According to workers I spoke to, the management usually transfers personnel to different workshops, asking them to carry out the work of three people.

Shepherds and the sheep - this is how several members of the Unity trade union divide up workers and management at AvtoVAZ

Safonkin agreed to the transfer, especially as he was promised higher wages than usual. But when his colleague switched the press on, he used the wrong setting - and Dmitry's hand was in the press at the time. The machine was old, from the 1970s, and there were no protective monitors installed. Dmitry's hand, trapped in the press, bled for 20 minutes: the paramedics could only offer him painkillers, Dmitry had to wait for the emergency services to get him out of the press.

After Safonkin lost his hand, factory management organised a commission to investigate what happened. Afraid that Safonkin, who was now disabled, could also be recognised as a guilty party to the accident, Dmitry's mother asked Perova to join the commission. When it came to decide whether Safonkin and his colleague were guilty, their counsellors from the official trade union refused to vote.

"I rang ASM and shouted: 'Why did you send us this moron? Why is he failing the worker?' He suffered and now they want to make him a guilty party," Perova tells me. "It was only thanks to the statements made by the labour inspector, my efforts and those who supported Safonkin that he wasn't declared guilty." During the internal investigation, it turned out that the signatures on the technical safety certificate had been forged. Safonkin hadn't taken the instruction course (or signed off on it), and management didn't have the right to send him to work on another machine.

Dmitry Safonkin was never a member of either of AvtoVAZ's trade unions - neither before, nor after his injury. He's become less sociable since the accident, and refuses to tell me about it in detail. At first, he agreed to meet us, but when we arrived at his home, he refused to come out of his apartment. He wrote us a message to say he'd changed his mind, that he had "nothing to say" and stopped answering our calls.

"He's now got foreman status, he's like a boss. They gave him a new job, a inspection position - he has to check the quality of parts. He's really happy with it, he doesn't want to sue anybody or talk about what happened," Perova tells me. It seems as if she's justifying his actions, though she can't understand him herself.

Self-reliance or selfishness?

Shepherds and the sheep - this is how several members of the Unity trade union divide up workers and management at AvtoVAZ. They call team leaders who are ready to raise a strike, issue a statement to court, start a conflict with management "shepherds", and workers who agree with management in fear of losing their monthly bonus, who are ready to carry out any work regardless of their qualifications - "sheep".

Leonid Emshanov, a Unity leader and assembly fitter, traveled the path from the "sheep" to becoming a shepherd. At 16, when he first joined AvtoVAZ, he didn't know about his workplace rights, and threw his back out several times at the factory, and damaged his knees. Now both factory management (he can stop the production line, meaning managers will lose their monthly bonuses)

and his team are afraid of Emshanov. He has collected signatures for collective declarations on the deteriorating quality of food at the factory canteen, chemical spills after improvement works, about the ban on using the showers at the end of a shift – and won all these cases in court.

“Each person is responsible for themselves. Many people complain that wages aren’t enough. But what have they done to increase them? Nothing”

“I go up to a person – who’s basically in a position of enslavement – and say that they need to sign [a statement]. They look at me and realise that it’s better to argue with management than me. Well, they’d rather not, but seeing as I’m there, it’s better for them to sign up. If they don’t want to fight with management, we’ll get on their backs. If the workers don’t support us, then we tell them we’ll set management on them.”

Emshanov wears a black Adidas tracksuit and a ring with a swastika on it. I ask him about this, and Leonid confirms that he has right-wing political views. But he doesn’t see any conflict between his role in the trade union and the revolutionary banners in the union office.

“Are you proud that you work at the factory?”

“No. A school friend of mine left a factory to work at an electronics store, he was a foreman. He said that it’s humiliating to work at AvtoVAZ.”

“What do you think about that?”

“It’s all the same to me. What happens to everyone. Even my relatives. Each person is responsible for themselves. Many people complain that wages aren’t enough. But what have they done to increase them? Nothing. Everyone whines and don’t do anything. Everyone wants someone else to do it – at home, at work, in the state. I’m not complaining, I made my own life: I don’t have a mortgage, loans, problems with management. I didn’t think I’d end up at the factory, but in principle everything suits me, so I’ll stay here until I retire. I’m not worried about my salary, I earn around 30,000 [£377]. That’s enough for me.”

Anna Perova says that there’s leftists, right-wingers and anarchists at the Unity union. Its offices, where we meet Emshanov, belong to a United Russia deputy, who used to be an engineer at AvtoVAZ and chairperson of the union – he now lives between Moscow and Spain. The office walls are covered in red and black revolutionary banners, the tables – textbooks, excerpts from technical standards guidelines and Russia’s Labour Code.

Non-stop

AvtoVAZ works 24 hours a day, 365 days a year – some factory shops don’t even stop on public holidays. A day at the factory is broken up into three eight-hour shifts, but sometimes workers are asked to stay for a four-hour overtime shift.

In November 2017, Valentin Nasonov, who worked in the engine shop, finished his first shift, left the factory and walked towards the bus stop. As he was walking, the engine shop foreman called him and asked him to return for another half-shift. Initially, Valentin refused, he didn’t feel right, but the foreman managed to convince him. When Nasonov left for the second time four hours later, he crossed the road and then fell to the ground. By the time an ambulance arrived, he was dead.

Not one of the unions investigated the incident. Formally, Nasonov had decided to work overtime by

himself and died outside the factory, and so factory management doesn't accept guilt for what happened. We weren't allowed to enter the factory and management refused to speak to us. The press office stated that "it's unethical, in relation to the family, to speculate on the death of a man", and that the factory is a dangerous place that can be visited only when prepared.

One family, who are former colleagues of Nasonov, agreed to speak to us on condition of anonymity.

"He was a workaholic," Maria tells us. "He'd start working at 6.30 in the morning, though our shift starts at seven. He didn't take lunch breaks at all, he didn't even bring anything with him to eat. When he worked the second shift, he'd switch on the lathe an hour before. People don't usually care about anything until the shift starts, whether management asks you to work or not. He had a different nature, he did the work of two people."

"Unions have had all their forms of protest removed. Today, the union is no one"

"Perhaps he worked so hard because of money?"

"Not at all, there's just a few of these kind of people left over from Soviet time," Alexey, Maria's husband, joins in. "These people work subbotniki [volunteer service work on Saturdays], they're made of certain stuff, they always need to work. I don't know which generation is going to realise that, when it comes to employers, relationships are purely contractual. You need to teach people from school about their legal rights, explain that the Soviet times have ended and that they don't need to work on Saturdays."

"Is the management not interested in knowing about problems and solving them, to increase profits?"

"They know that there's postal addresses to get in touch with management, but it doesn't really work," says Alexey. "You're not coping? They'll remove your bonus for professional qualifications. The job of everybody in management at the factory is not to let any information travel up. The French [reference to current management Renault] get their money. But they're like guests here. Why should they care about what's going to happen to the factory? They decided to do everything like in France. But to try and manage [in the western way] people who are left over from Soviet times - is a lose-lose situation. We have our own atmosphere here, our own way of doing things and our own, prison-like relations with one another."

Alexey and Maria recall incidents where people had their fingers or hands torn off, how someone ran out naked into the street because it was so hot in the shop, how someone was mashed into pieces in a mixing machine. I don't even understand any more if these are cases that I already know about or if they're different - they all start the same, with a desire to fulfill a quota quickly or with the press of the wrong button. The story of this family is also ordinary - both of them at the factory, an apartment on credit, and the impossibility of finding work elsewhere.

They don't complain. They are trying to bring up their children to be educated and hope that others, just like them, will stop overworking, will start fighting against overwork via a work-to-rule strike. Maria left ASM, Alexey - Unity after a strike in 2007.

"The chairperson convinced us that everything was lawful," Alexey says. "We downed tools, closed down production, put forward our demands on wage rises and decrease in quotas. It turned out the strike hadn't been agreed as necessary. Those who took part lost their bonuses. Yes, they did raise our wages... The quotas were cut, although they then tried to raise them without agreement. Unity

restored the lost bonuses a week later from their own reserves. But a union should fight within the framework of the law. The chairman can come out with a flag, the people are with him, and then the people will get it in the neck. There's us and then there's the shop foreman. Unions have had all their forms of protest removed. Today, the union is no one."

Top-down

Visits by high-ranking officials to AvtoVAZ are the only way of leaving the factory early. Workers tell us that, when Vladimir Putin or Dmitry Medvedev visit, the factory is painted white and cleaned up, and they're let go an hour earlier. Andrey Kuranov's shop is situated a few kilometres from the main gate. He's not expecting anyone from the Russian government to turn up any time soon.

Andrey tells me that workers have always criticised management, and the management - workers. "The first crisis [after the 1990s] was in 2008, when the factory was sold to a Moscow group. Before that, life was sweet, other workers say, although there were causes for grief. Andersson [Bo Andersson, general director of AvtoVAZ between 2014-2016] came in 2013, and started introducing all sorts of nonsense that our people couldn't understand - to get your bonus, you had to go to work constantly, you couldn't take a sick day, no days off for blood donation. If you worked the whole year without a sick day, then they'd pay you 28,000 roubles. Everyone complained. Workers used to come to work with tears in their eyes. They used to complain about Andersson, now he's left, and everyone complains about Mor [Nikolay Mor, president of Avtovaz since 2016] - at least under Andersson they paid 28,000, now we don't even get that."

"We were taught from childhood that the factory is the very bottom - you go there and you don't get out"

Andrey never thought he'd end up at the factory, although he did study at an engineering faculty set up to train people for AvtoVAZ. In 2015, the higher education reform reached the branch of Samara's Aerospace University, and dozens of Tolyatti students, including at the engineering faculty, were left without diplomas.

Kuranov and Emshanov, students at the time, didn't stop studying, and transferred to part-time study in Samara. "We were taught from childhood that the factory is the very bottom - you go there and you don't get out. But after you work in one office, then another, you realise that working at the factory is okay," Andrey says. "People say you need to leave Tolyatti. But where? Moscow? Petersburg? Who needs you there? There's no hills of gold there."

Management have told Andrey several times that his name is on the list for the sack, though he hasn't been shown any official documents. He believes that these lists are fake, and management is talking about cuts because he left the ASM union and joined Unity, where he's studying relevant laws on Perova's watch.

Like other young workers at AvtoVAZ, Andrey has a mortgage and a small child - he's afraid to lose a stable job. But he's not expecting a wage rise any time soon: if management raised his hourly rate and indexed it, then his wage would still remain around 20,000 roubles a month - he lost his bonus for professional qualifications and seniority. Andrey's family has a car, a Lada Kalina, which means getting to work for 6.30 in the morning is easier, but its chassis is rotting.

Faded glory

Wherever you go, Tolyatti reminds you of a sleepy neighbourhood. Lines of Khrushchev-era apartment blocks, with cars parked outside them. Officially, the town is 280 years old – founded as Stavropol-on-the-Volga in 1737. In the 1950s, when the first hydroelectric dam was built here, the town was almost completely flooded. The city turned out to be at the bottom of the Kuybyshev reservoir, and the town was rebuilt anew, together with the AvtoVAZ factory. A separate residential district for workers was built next to the factory. A large part of the district is made up of apartment blocks, kilometres of them separated by highways.

Anna Perova's former workmate Klara Nuykina lives in an old apartment block on Lenin Avenue, which looks like a car from above. Due to a leg injury, Klara Osmanovna moves slowly, and it takes her a while to open the door. A few years ago, Nuykina fell into a metal trap for waste. Now she can only walk with a stick. Management offered compensation to the tune of 2,000 roubles – Nuykina refused it, she considered the sum humiliating.

At management's request, Klara Osmanovna took early retirement at 53 – they paid her 300,000 roubles in order for her never to return to the factory.

"Nuykina, she's so lazy. She cuts her finger and she's off to report it. She doesn't want to work because her station hasn't been prepared," Klara Osmanova laughs, reading out a leaflet that her teammates and members of ASM wrote about her. This happened after Nuykina refused to work due to exposed wires near her station. "I said: 'If you want to die at work, then go for it. I come here to work.' People were angry that production had stopped, they have their quota to fulfill after all. They said that Perova and I were discriminating against our team and ruining the atmosphere in the shop, calling them 'sheep'. I thought back then that my life had ended. But Perova shook me: 'Why are we sitting quiet?' Then we wrote 55 lines about there's violations at my work station, we sent it to the prosecutor's office, and the foreman was fired."

"We're not only teaching ourselves how to defend ourselves, but we're telling our kids that you can't let anyone wipe their feet on you"

Nuykina talks excitedly, the whole time her eyebrows rising and falling. Her telephone rings several times, and she hides it under a cushion.

"Did you really call them sheep?"

"Why would I insult them? I quoted Pushkin to them. To wait in the pen for another shearing – that's what our workers are good for."

"So you didn't?"

"Well, maybe I did say the word 'sheep'... Montina, she was hit in the back really hard because of a technical violation. She didn't tell anyone about this, she was afraid. When she was already on her back, when she couldn't walk, she asked people at work to act as witnesses, but they refused. Then you ask: she fell over, another was pushed, and everybody remains quiet. And where's Montina now? She's passed away, may God rest her soul."

"Have you ever tried to talk about the violations with higher management?"

"How?! I've tried. They hid that Bo [Andersson] from me. They said he was coming to the factory,

they said that workers can talk to him, and I wanted to. Then they sent me to the Old Town [central district of Tolyatti] for three days to carry out an inventory. But I did catch him once. He was walking through the shop, the heat was above 30 degrees. Perova and I had written to the administration, the courts, the prosecutor's office because of the heat, no one wanted to recognise our measurements [Russia's Labour Code states that if workplace temperature rises above 25 degrees, then the work day should be cut by an hour - above 30, then the workday should be no longer than five hours]. He's there with bodyguards, a translator - I ask them to translate. It's hot, I tell him, really hot, we can't work! I'm all sweaty, I stink, and I'm a woman!"

"And what did he say?"

"Nothing! He just laughed like an idiot, shook his head and that was it. He doesn't need any of that. Labour protections, new documents - all the formalities taken care of."

"We don't have men or women here, we have workers" is a phrase of Bo Andersson's that's gone on to become folklore in Tolyatti: men quote it on public transport when they don't want to give up their seats. Indeed, men and women are equal at AvtoVAZ - they both have the same quotas and workloads despite the fact that, according to Russia's Labour Code, women shouldn't lift weights of more than seven kilogrammes if it happens regularly during a shift.

"Women are lifting between 10-15 kilogrammes here, thinking about how to fulfil their quotas the quickest. Women get medical conditions as a result - weak bladders, thrombophlebitis. Your legs get really tired, and then you have to work at home as well, making soup," Anna Perova says.

Nuykina says that Perova helped her achieve equality. In 1996, when they traveled to Moscow for a meeting with independent trade unions, Nuykina didn't ask permission from her husband - she just told him she was going to study. When she was young, Klara Osmanova decided not to go to university to benefit her family. Her husband made her choose: children or work. "Before, like all women, I want to bring up kids. But now I understand that you can buy pies at the shop, now I can get involved with trade union struggle."

"Why do you need all of this? What's your future" I ask Perova on the bus after a shift. Workers are hunched up in black coats in their seats, someone asleep.

"Future? The future is ours. We're not only teaching ourselves how to defend ourselves, but we're telling our kids that you can't let anyone wipe their feet on you. Perhaps some people like lying in their graves, but not me."

On 17 January, AvtoVAZ workers [reported](#) in a social media group that Alexander Shatalov, a cutter at the factory, had died overnight. They were forbidden from stopping production. The worker's body lay covered in the shop until morning. One anonymous author commented: "Even the dead work overtime at AvtoVAZ".

Diana Karliner

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