

Russia - The workers' and trade-union movement in 2009: consolidation and dispersion

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At the beginning of 2009 Russian workers took the crisis in a rather passive way, even though in May-July we witnessed a surge of activity, initially in the form of an explosion of street actions and other forms of protest that were fairly uncontrolled and not envisaged by the legislation on the resolution of work-related conflicts. Subsequently, we saw a slow but persistent growth in the number of industrial disputes, with many more meetings being held. The increase in tensions was expressed outside the public space, including by individual acts (hunger strikes, sit-down strikes and even, sometimes, suicides).

According to the sources of the Institute of Collective Action (IKD), there were 183 industrial disputes over the whole year (probably an underestimated figure), with a tendency to increase. In the first half of 2009, there were 62 industrial disputes - half of them in May-June. In the second half of the year, there were 116 disputes (half of which took the form of protest meetings).

In comparison with 2007, the forms of protest changed: in place of strikes we saw street actions. This was a consequence of the crisis (which makes work stoppages a high-risk form of action), but also of labour laws which now make it almost impossible to have a strike within the framework of the law. Because of the absence of effective mechanisms for settling disputes, workers are forced to resort to forms of mobilization not covered by the labour laws, like street actions.

The geographical spread of the disputes was very broad - practically all regions were affected to a greater or lesser degree. The most tense situation was in the mono-industrial cities [\[1\]](#) where the inhabitants of the city took the side of the workers. As for the most affected sectors, they were the car industry, arms factories, agriculture, and metallurgy. But in fact the increase in the number of disputes affected almost all sectors.

The principal demands of the workers concerned payment of wages and saving the company from closing. In other words, defensive actions predominated, which is not at all surprising in a period of crisis. But faced with extremely strong pressure by the employers and an increase in the rate of

exploitation, even defensive actions give a foretaste of a counter-offensive.

In fact the problem does not reside only in the crisis and the so-called objective economic difficulties. Often workers and trade unionists can't believe their eyes: the company is viable and even makes profits, sales are going well, but that does not prevent management from using the crisis to make savings at the expense of the workers: wages, working conditions, safety norms, etc. And everything is done to dissimulate the real financial position, both from the public and from workers and trade unionists (at least, from genuine trade unionists).

The fact is that because of the crisis or by making use of it, the employers have launched a full-scale offensive against workers who are starting to organize themselves. Since 2007 we have seen a rise in workers' consciousness, with greater autonomy as well as a real ability to organize themselves. Obviously, during the past year this tendency became obvious to the employers, who are doing everything to crush centres of resistance and examples of self-organization.

Their primary targets are the really independent trade unions. These aggressive actions on the part of the employers have been further reinforced with the crisis which accentuates competition, but also because of the policy of the government which, itself dependent on oligarchic capital, is giving generous help to the oligarchs so that they can get through the crisis without important losses, and doing so at the expense of taxpayers and workers.

A full-scale offensive against the workers

Managers of enterprises, both private and state-owned, engage in systematic violations of the labour laws.

In the first place that takes the form of non-payment of wages. As already happened in the 1990s, workers are transformed into slaves forced to work for nothing. Furthermore, whereas the labour laws require an agreement by the two parties, the employers reduce wages unilaterally, stop paying bonuses, and reduce working hours with a big cut in wages.

Even more serious, large-scale dismissals have begun, generally in violation of the law, accompanied by threats against the workers, who are forced to "resign" from their jobs. Sometimes the sackings are dissimulated through workers being transferred to a company created for one day (this is apparently what happened in the Avtovaz car factory in Togliatti).

We are seeing a multiplication of forms of non-standard employment, without any guarantee of job security. Often cuts in wages are not justified by real financial problems (the situations are difficult to verify because of the systematic dissimulation of the accounts).

It is useless to talk about the official unemployment figures (the authorities consider as unemployed someone who has signed on at the labour exchange): in reality, very few people are ready to wait for hours in a queue for a miserable allowance, between 890 and 4900 roubles (between 25 and 120 euros). According to figures established in accordance with the methods of the ILO (a declaration by the person concerned that he or she is available for work and is looking for employment), at the end of November 2009 the number of unemployed was 6.3 million people, 8.1 per cent of the active population. As for the "hidden" unemployed, who are still considered as working, but who do not receive wages or who because of a lockout receive only two-thirds of their salary, there are very many of them. Many have loans to pay back, not to mention their current expenditure for essential products and services whose prices, unlike wages, increase.

Frequently, sackings mean a worsening of the workloads of the remaining workers, who, moreover, see their wages reduced. The factory inspectors have noted an increase in stress and in over-long working hours, resulting in a big increase in industrial accidents, sometimes fatal, a situation made worse by the fact that the employers do not hesitate to economise on safety, by threatening with unemployment those who protest.

In short, the workers either are thrown onto the street, almost without means of subsistence, or are squeezed like lemons, forced to work more to earn less.

In such a situation, the majority of them limit themselves to passive demonstrations of protest. Many prefer to knuckle under and put up with the situation, putting all their hopes on the kindness of the employer and on keeping their jobs. Many have recourse to individual forms of adaptation, seeking to make an agreement with management and to negotiate some advantages for themselves. Some nevertheless manage to find a second job or tighten their belts while waiting for better times. With the crisis, these possibilities have been considerably reduced and we have seen a growing number of desperate people launching into spontaneous mass initiatives, which no one controls.

The most important thing is the increase in the number of new trade unions. More and more workers are trying to resist the offensive against their rights, collectively and in an organized way. Moreover, these new trade unions are developing in sectors where up to now they were absent: the media, the food sector, commerce, etc. And under the pressure of the dissatisfaction of the rank and file, many traditional trade unions are being forced to adopt more combative positions.

It is precisely the most combative trade unions which are the target of the sharpest attacks, not only by the employers but also by certain functionaries and representatives of the government.

The employers and the government: crush and divide the trade unions

The Russian capitalists have never considered the trade unions as a normal phenomenon and have always done their utmost either to eliminate them or to neutralize them, by resorting to corruption or by incorporating them into the administrative machinery of the company. Today, seized by panic in the face of the crisis and confronted with the formation of new combative trade unions, but also with a reactivation of some trade unions which had up to now been passive and loyal to them, the employers and their managers have launched a redoubled offensive. With, overall, the active support of the government and of the local authorities at various levels.

It should be noted that persecutions, repressive and discriminatory measures, far from being limited to only the independent trade unions, are also being used against trade unions affiliated to the FNPR [2] if they take any steps to mobilise their members.

It was the managing director of the OAO Kontsern Kalin trust (in the Sverdlovsk region) who raised the standard of this anti-union campaign. On October 5, 2009, in an interview with an online newspaper, he declared: "For several years, the trade unions, like cockroaches and bedbugs, have endeavoured to infiltrate companies by all kinds of means, and that puts my back up. For me the trade unions are like sects. If in a company there appeared paedophiles, drinkers of blood, followers of Satan, if they became stronger and started to attract the members of the collective into their sticky webs, people would understand better why I attacked them. For me, trade union militants are just the same: manipulators who pursue their material and political goals to the detriment of the company..."

The forms of repression against the trade unions are very varied. Trade union leaders are summoned

by various police authorities for “interviews”; they try to charge them with having organized a protest action on the basis that it was not authorized or on the pretext of having committed an offence invented for the purpose. That is the case with Piotr Zolotarev, a leader of the Yedinstvo (Unity) trade union in the Avtovaz factory, who is regularly summoned by various bodies. Or the tragic case represented by the illegal arrest of Velentin Ouroussov, a leader of the Profsvoboda trade union, sentenced to 6 years in prison on the pretext of possession of drugs. Or the more sophisticated approach of CentreE, which seeks to prove that calling for the setting up of trade unions - as in the leaflets distributed by the MPRA [3] union in the Tsentrosvarmach company in Tver - comes under the terms of the law against “extremism”.

There is another means which is now largely available for all employers who go to war against the trade unions: on November 3, 2009, the Constitutional Court declared anti-constitutional article 374 of the Labour Code which prohibited the sacking of non- fulltime union representatives without the agreement of the leading bodies of the union, thus removing the only legal protection from trade-union activists in their struggle against the arbitrary decisions of employers. This article was used especially by militants of the independent trade unions, who have few full-timers and whose activities greatly displeased the employers. They were the ones who were particularly targeted, more especially as it is not complicated to cobble together a so-called offence.

Some recent examples including the dismissal of E. Ivanov, president of the MPRA union in the GMAuto company (in Saint Petersburg) and of a woman militant, O. Chafikova, following a “work to rule” on October 21 and again from 11-20 November. The demands included the following points: incorporation of bonuses into guaranteed wages, the right of employees to have their holidays, the abolition of the annual calculation of working time and the introduction of the 40-hour week.

But the imagination of the employers does not stop there. Sometimes the trade union has its office taken away without the slightest reason being given (as was the case on October 26 where, on the orders of the Civil Aviation authorities, the trade union of air-traffic controllers saw itself deprived overnight of its office in Moscow). Or else trade-union activists are deprived of the pass which allows them to circulate freely in the workshops.

In some companies, leaflets are distributed aimed at discrediting trade-union activists. Sometimes, management calls in the militia or the special forces (OMON) to stop a protest action, an information drive or quite simply a trade-union assembly, as was the case on October 20 in the KarelskiOkatych company when there was an assembly of the Sotsprof trade union.

Another invention in the anti-union arsenal is the seizure of personal goods following a strike, as happened to A. Shkhakharov, president of the trade union of the maritime commercial port of Tuaspinski, hauled before a court by the management of the harbour company TMTP, which asked for him to be condemned to refund the losses caused by a strike.

The attacks against trade union leaders, in the first place leaders of the alternative trade unions, and more particularly those which belong to the MPRA, have increased in number. However, in comparison with the massive wave of attacks at the end of 2008, we have witnessed a certain lull, probably a result of the massive protest campaign (including from abroad) but also due to a change of tactics on the part of the employers and the presidential administration. Certain media and some experts have linked these recent ups and downs to bureaucratic operations at the top and to attempts at neutralising the combative trade unions and getting them under control. They point out that between September and the end of December 2009, there have been three changes in the personnel responsible for following the trade unions within the presidential administration. Obviously, the trade-union field is regarded as a sensitive question, requiring the utmost vigilance.

The government is playing a cynical game: on the one hand it tacitly encourages the employers to launch prosecutions and other discriminatory measures, on the other it signs agreements, pretty empty of content, with the trade unions that are traditionally loyal to the government. So it is a question of developing pseudo trade unions and at the same time combating the “extremist” unions.

The best known example concerning the creation of phantom unions is the new Sotsprof union, led since the beginning 2008 by Sergeï Vostretsov, a character who has absolutely no connection with the trade union movement but who, in all probability, has very solid relationships at the top of the government. The government is endeavouring to transform the first alternative trade union federation created in post-Soviet Russia into a union that is under control and pro-governmental, while giving it the appearance of an independent and combative organization. This is by definition an impossible task and the only result of these manoeuvres has been the de facto breaking up of Sotsprof.

However, it seems that on the whole, the preferred tactic is “divide and rule”: create a yellow trade union (under orders) in order to oppose it to a too awkward alternative trade union, but also buy off certain leaders by promising them that they will have the ear of the government; or provoke a split, setting unions against each other or sowing discord between consumers and the trade unions. Thus, last winter the so-called subversive activity of motorists in Vladivostok was presented as being directed against the workers of the Russian car factories.

Faced with all sorts of manoeuvres of this sort the reaction of the trade unions is above all to defend their independence and their cohesion. Admittedly, certain leaders have let themselves be corrupted, others (very few) have taken fright, but the majority have chosen to unite their efforts and to develop solidarity.

Thus, the trade union of the Ford factory (Saint Petersburg region) launched a solidarity campaign with the slogan: “the workers of Saint Petersburg are not the enemies of the workers of the Far East”, to which the Society of Active Citizens of Russia (a network-type movement formed at the end of 2008 to protest against the increase in customs duties on imported cars) replied: “the workers of the Far East are not the enemies of the workers of Petersburg”. As for the independent trade unions, they have launched a unitary process, with the preparation of a process of fusion between the All-Russian Confederation of Labour (VKT) and the Confederation of Labour of Russia (KTR).

Recently, trade unions of various sectors, regions or federations have signed mutual assistance agreements. This was the case with the agreement between the APK union (which belongs to the FNPR), of the Yaroslav subsidiary of the Baltika firm and the MPRA (which is part of the VKT) of the Ford Motor Company. Another example was the agreement between the union of the Packaging firm and the union of Leroy Merlin (“commerce” sector of the FNPR).

As can be seen, we are witnessing contradictory dynamics within the trade union movement: on the one hand we see dispersion, on the other consolidation.

As for the government, on the one hand it helps the employers to neutralize the unions, on the other it favours reducing the labour force, but is careful not to touch the bonuses, profits and other dividends of the shareholders and directors. So money from the federal budget is made available to support the big companies. On the other hand, it makes big cuts in welfare spending and on the indexation of wages to the cost of living. In 2010, neither the salaries of civil servants, nor soldiers’ pay, nor the minimum wage, nor even unemployment benefit will be indexed to the rise in prices.

By this policy the government is sending a clear message to the employers: make savings at the expense of the workers. And to help them to do that they plan not to respect the labour laws: last

April, a document was signed by the government, the employers and the FNPR, affirming the possibility “of a temporary suspension of certain articles of collective bargaining agreements”.

It seems likely that if the government continues to make the workers bear the full weight of the crisis, for the sole benefit of big business, it will end up sooner or later by encountering a strong reaction.

Spontaneous resistance

During the year 2009, the blocking of roads and assemblies held outside of the workplaces were the principal forms of resistance.

In the beginning, the workers, faced with the deterioration of their situation, began by addressing themselves to the management of their company, by engaging in negotiations via the trade unions and by resorting to the other forms of action envisaged by the labour laws. But since these methods had no effect, they went beyond the limits of the company to address themselves to public opinion and the authorities. By doing that, they were no longer acting within the framework of the labour laws, which, moreover, clearly reveals the limits of these laws. And the actions which were carried out were those of people who despaired of being to obtain payment of their wages in any other way and who were very worried by the prospects for their company.

For the past year, we can count no less than 88 street actions by workers, primarily mass meetings, often in front of the offices of public authorities. In May-June we witnessed an explosion of blocking of roads (18 cases) following the events in Pikaliovo [4].

In general, at least whenever the union takes part in them, street actions are used as an additional means of pressure and are associated with other initiatives. Their objective is to address public opinion and government authorities, in order to break out of the head-to-head discussion with the employer. The majority have taken place in mono-industrial towns and other working-class areas. Very often they have involved a large number of people, because the destiny of the whole town or neighbourhood depends on the rescue of the only factory which is established there.

In general, local authorities make at least a pretence of taking measures. But experience shows that it needs the intervention of the federal government for the the employers and the local authorities to really move. That is why the blocking of major roads (or the threat of such blockades), accompanied by other actions, has become the most effective instrument. It was the government itself which said after Pikaliovo: “If you want to have your wages paid, then block the roads, otherwise the government will pay no attention to you! ”. The dressing-down that President Dimitri Medvedev gave his representatives and the governors, threatening to relieve them of their posts if events comparable to those of Pikaliovo happened on their territory, took effect: sometimes the mere threat of blocking a road was enough to make the local authorities agree to take responsibility for the debts of private employers.

Does the state have sufficient means to extinguish these fires and compensate for the actions of thieving and irresponsible employers? Obviously not. The government sounded the alarm at the end of the year, by putting before the Duma a bill envisaging very severe sanctions against those who were guilty of “illegal interference in the operation of transport” (including blocking major roads). The message was clear: no, there is no money, no, there is no possibility of obtaining justice within the limits of the workplace, but don’t risk taking to the streets!

Here are some significant cases of street actions:

* **The town of Pikaliovo** (in the Saint Petersburg region) has been the symbol of this new wave of protests. On June 2, 2009, the inhabitants of the city blocked traffic on the trunk road from Saint Petersburg to Vologda. Approximately 300 people, workers from the factories in the city and members of their families, took part in this spontaneous action. They demanded in a very determined way the payment of the wages that were due to them and the restarting of production. As is known, Putin reacted at once and in a decisive fashion: in front of the cameras he forced Deripaska, the owner of Baseltsement-Pikaliovo, to sign a document on restarting production in his factory, which had shut down. In a certain fashion, the problem was settled. Let us remember that on May 20, 2009, the inhabitants, plunged in despair, had tried to “take by storm” the town hall where a meeting devoted to the problems of the city was taking place. Taking part in this meeting were local civil servants, representatives of the procurator’s office, the supplier of gas to the city and the owners of local companies.

* **The Altaï region:** the workers of the ATE-Spare Parts company (and of other firms resulting from the break-up of the former tractor factory, a giant of the Soviet period) started to brandish the threat of a new Pikaliovo. In open letters they announced their intention of organizing blockades of the main road and the railway. From June 18 they organized an unauthorized picket opposite the offices of the administration of the Altaï region. This action had been triggered by the announcement of the arrival in Barnaul of Vladimir Putin. Following the intervention of the police the action was stopped, but the authorities did not dare to repress the participants: not only did they take responsibility for part of the wages that were owed, they also tried to fill for a time the company’s order book. In July, the workers of the Altrak factory, the members of their families and the inhabitants of the town of Roubtsov, in solidarity with them, carried out a series of street actions, including a fresh attempt to block the main road, but they were driven back by the special forces (OMON). From September, the local branch of the Communist Party of the Federation of Russia mobilized and brought logistical support for the organization of expeditions and protest actions. However, some observers consider that this support was especially aimed at preventing a social explosion and new road blockades. The last action by the workers of Altrak took place on December 1, 2009 in Novosibirsk, in the offices of RATM which owns the factory (more than 1100 workers took part in this gathering). As the town of Roubtsov (150,000 inhabitants) is entirely dependent on Altrak and its subcontractors, the two principal demands of the workers were the restarting of production and the payment of arrears of wages.

* **Kirov region:** the mono-industrial cities of the Kirov region also witnessed mobilizations of workers to save their factory and their city. They were supported by the local section of the RKR [5] in the person of assembly member V. Touroulo.

- The workers of the Molot armaments factory in the town of Vjatskie Poljany took to the streets on several occasions. On June 26, 2009 a meeting took place in front of the offices of the management of the factory where the shareholders were meeting. This was not the first mobilization of the workers, who had not received their wages for several months. The same day the factory received a state grant and the workers got three months of arrears of wages. On October 14, 2009 there took place a new action, with a warning strike which was transformed into a spontaneous meeting to demand full payment of wage arrears.

- The inhabitants of Kirovo Tchepetsk mobilized to save their town from an ecological catastrophe. The meeting which took place on September 8 in front of the Velkont factory led to the establishment of a Committee for the Safeguarding of the Town, with the task of controlling companies and the local government on the ecological level.

- At Strijki the workmen fought to keep the Silikat factory, including by transforming it into a factory under workers’ control (which from the juridical point of view is very complicated). During the

summer there took place a series of actions demanding payment of wages, which had not been paid since the end of 2008, but also guarantees for their jobs and the saving of the factory from bankruptcy. In July a committee for the safeguarding of the town was set up, as well as a Zashchita trade union. On December 14, the workers went to Kirov where they held a meeting in front of the offices of the regional administration, demanding that factory be kept open and asserting the right of the workers' collective to buy the factory with state aid in order to transform it into a self-managed factory.

* **Ivanovo region:** The workers of several factories were mobilised, again because of non-payment of wages.

- On March 5 the inhabitants of the estate where the workers of the Petrovski factory live organized a meeting in front of the management building to demand payment of wages and to ask for the projected liquidation of the company to be stopped. On June 30 the workers planned a "workers' march on Moscow", but finally decided to defer this action, taking into account some progress concerning the payment of wages and the rescue of the factory, following pressure on the management by the local authorities. At the announcement of the march, the governor of the region of Ivanovo invited the leader of the committee of initiative for negotiations, promising the resumption of production and the full payment of the arrears of wages owed, in exchange for the cancellation of the march.

- On June 27 the workmen of the Menanzhevo combine organized a march (unauthorized) in front of the headquarters of the local government.

* **The Urals:** The situation in the Urals is very tense.

- On June 23 the workers of the porcelain factory of Bogdanovchisk (Sverdlovsk region) tried to block the main road to save their company. 150 people took part in this spontaneous action to demand the re-establishment of gas deliveries, which had been suspended that very morning because of the company's debts. The regional authorities reacted at once and following their intervention gas deliveries were restored a few hours before the stopping of the furnaces would have caused irreparable damage.

- On July 22, the workers of the Kuzbasselement company in the town of Leninsk Kuznetsk organized a picket for four hours and blocked Lenin Avenue in the downtown area. Approximately 300 workers (some with their children), driven to despair, demanded payment of their wages, which they had not received for 10 months. Traffic was practically paralysed, which forced the city administration city to react. The vice-governor came to meet the demonstrators with promises. But the participants in the meeting refused to move as long as they did not receive their money. And things only calmed down when money for the wages (30 million roubles taken from the regional budget) was paid into the workers' accounts.

- In the bauxite mines of the oligarch Deripaska, a fresh dispute was brewing [6]. The members of the Institute of Collective Action (IKD) became convinced of that after visiting Severuralsk in September. From June 5, 100 miners from the Severuralsk mine (which belongs to the RusAl holding) organized a picket in front of the offices of the management, banging their helmets on the ground for an hour: they were protesting against the removal of food rations, and over wages and the insecurity in the mine which had already caused several accidents.

In September, in various mines, on the initiative of the NPG union [7], a meeting had been planned to discuss demands and define a plan of action. But the guards and agents of the management blocked the meeting, threatening with redundancy all those who took part in it. As Valeri Zolotarev,

president of the NPG in the Severuralsk mine, pointed out, "today, looking back at everything that happened on the eve of the strike in March 2008, you have to say that they have understood nothing". Let us remember that at that time 123 miners of the Krasnaïa Chapochka mine belonging to the n° 3 team had spontaneously decided to stay underground at the end of their shift.

* **In Kaliningrad**, it was the workers of KDAvia who mobilized in the most determined way for the payment of pay arrears. In July, various categories of personnel launched strikes of short duration, after which the procurer's office opened several inquiries. Then there were meetings. With the support of the Communist Party of the Federation of Russia and other social and political organizations, a meeting took place in the downtown area attended by 500 of the 2000 workers of the company. In November, after several months of mobilization, the workers obtained partial compensation for unpaid wages and material help from the budget of the region.

* **Yaroslavl region:** from January to April there took place a series of meeting of the workers of the motor factory and the inhabitants of Tutaev. Following that, the mayor of Tutaev resigned. In Kurgan, on the initiative of the Zashchita trade union, the workers of several companies, first of all from Area Avtotrans Kourgan and from Promstroï, carried out during the summer and autumn a whole series of actions in connection with wages that were owed: pickets, hunger strikes, demonstrations in the offices of the administration.

* **Vladivostok region:** the Far East was not immune from disputes, they took place in all sectors.

- On May 13 in Vladivostok, a meeting of the workers of the naval ship repair yards was held, on the initiative of the Federation of Trade Unions of the Vladivostok region. 400 people took part in it: the speakers denounced the generalized non-observance of the labour laws, the non-payment of wages, and the unjustified increase in administrative staff.

- The inhabitants of Svetlogorie continued the struggle. On April 4 the majority of them (approximately 1000 people) took part in a meeting to demand the payment of back wages (not paid for several months) at the Russki Volfram combine, and to organize free meals for the children. At the time the whole neighbourhood was starving. From August the company started production again and at the end of the year, Svetlogorie was incorporated into the government's programme for the development of mono-industrial towns.

- The workers of the mining and ore reprocessing companies of the Vladivostok region also mobilized. On March 11 more than a thousand of them demonstrated in the streets of Dalnegorsk to demand a reduction of the charges for communal services and to ask that wages be regularly paid. It was the trade union of the Bor combine which took the initiative, supported by the unions of the metal and chemical industries of the region. Representatives of the unions of the health, education and culture sectors and of the wood industry were present to express their solidarity.

* **The Far North** (beyond the polar circle) was also the scene of mobilizations.

- On May 24 more than a thousand people took part in a meeting in Vorkuta, on the main square of the city. The miners and the inhabitants of the city demanded that the management of Vorkutaugol give up the planned reduction in the workforce, and that the city authorities block the increase in the charges for communal services. The demonstrators also demanded that the widows of miners who had died in the mines should be relocated to another region (a hundred families put in requests).

- On April 10 in Murmansk, on the initiative of the regional section of the Trade Union of the Fleet of the North, a meeting was held in which several hundred workers, coming from eight companies working for the army, took part. The participants demanded that the Ministry of Defence pay them

the arrears of wages that were due. This action paid off and part of the money was paid.

- Another action had an impact comparable to the events in Pikaliovo, by its size and owing to the fact that it took place on the initiative of people who are generally passive: doctors and hospital staff demonstrated in defence of the health system. On May 19 in Arkhangelsk 450 people took part in a meeting: doctors from Arkhangelsk, Severodvinsk, Novodvinsk, as well as specialists from the region. They demanded that hospitals be equipped with the kind of high-quality equipment that is essential to ensure quality care, demanded better working conditions and a wage increase, and also that measures be taken to deal with the shortage of staff in the private clinics of the region. On June 29 a picket was organized in the hospital grounds to support the doctors who were being threatened with disciplinary measures. It got to the point where the doctors threatened to go on strike!

* **Togliatti:** we cannot fail to mention the mass meetings at the Avtovaz factory in Togliatti. The actions undertaken to save this giant of the car industry and in defence of jobs did not go unnoticed by the authorities at both regional and federal level: the result was a flood of (often empty) promises, threats, “soft” restructuring plans and all sorts of other manoeuvres. In spite of strong pressure and thanks to the tenacity of the independent trade union Yedinstvo, two relatively big meetings (more than 2,000 people) took place on August 6 and October 17 in the Square of the Palace of Culture and the engineering section of the factory. What is at stake in Togliatti now is the ability of the trade union movement and, more broadly, of the social movement, to build a broad front capable of influencing government policies towards the factory-based cities. Piotr Zolotarev, president of Yedinstvo, formulated it clearly: “We will not remain passive in the face of the intention to try out in Togliatti a new plan for the factory-based cities. We want to save our city, our industry. We are looking for the means that will enable us to influence our future, so that the interests of the workers and the inhabitants are taken into account”.

To sum up, we can say that where collective actions were carried out in a determined fashion and were accompanied by threats of blocking roads, as in the case of the cities built around one only factory, the public authorities at regional and federal level had to intervene and take responsibility, at least partly, for the debts of the owners who had made their companies bankrupt.

The maintenance of the potential for strike action

As in 2008, what predominates are “crisis strikes” where work stoppages are provoked by the non-payment of wages (one of the rare forms of strike that is envisaged by the Labour Code). But there were also offensive strikes, in the real sense of the term: a collective stoppage of work to defend a series of demands, faced with an employer who doesn’t want to listen. During the year 2009, there were seventy strikes, two thirds of them falling under the category of “crisis strikes”.

1. Crisis strikes. Up until May 2009, the workers, on the initiative of their trade union, used their individual right to refuse to work, a legal form of strike. Actions then take the form of a sum of individual refusals, organized collectively, faced with the non-payment of wages (article 142 of the Labour Code). But this form of action loses its effectiveness in periods when workers fear above all the stopping of production and the loss of their employment. Nevertheless, in the majority of cases, this form of strike produced results, with payment of wages, at least in part. Some examples:

In September the workers of the eleventh sector of local government services of the town of Orel went on strike. The sit-down strikes of janitors, technicians of the sanitation department and the water department lasted a week. The reason was the non-payment of wages since July.

- At the Chikh mine in the Rostov region, the miners went on strike several times, including staying

down the mine. At the beginning of October, several of them went on strike in this way to demand the payment of arrears of wages. More than a hundred colleagues supported them on the surface. As a result the manager was sacked and the owner of the mine promised to pay the wages that were due for August. Previously, on June 24, 34 miners had gone on strike and had refused to come up from the mine. And this episode had already been preceded by other strikes "at the bottom", each time with some results, even though the delays in paying wages always started again very quickly.

- On September 14 in the "Third International" shipyard in Astrakhan, the workers stopped work to demand payment of wages. Fifty people took part in the action. After negotiations in the presence of Oleg Shein, member of the Duma, management promised the very same day to pay part of the arrears of wages due.

- Kalibrov Factory in Moscow. One day of strike action (June 22) was enough to make the management give in on wage arrears. There was another strike on August 3, non-payment of wages having started again.

- Naval repair factory of Chajminsk (Vladivostok region): more than 50 workers stopped work from July 20 to August 3 because of five months' arrears of wages. As of July 24 part of the arrears was paid, and on August 3 the workers resumed work, the wages for June having been paid. Only five workers decided to continue the strike until the arrears had been paid in full.

- Yenisseï Mine: after a 24-hour strike underground (27-28 May) the miners obtained satisfaction.

- The welders of workshop 45 of TagAz stopped work on May 23, but in the face of threats from the management, they stopped their movement.

Similar strikes also took place in the Krasnodar building combine (three months' unpaid wages), in the Linetsk building combine (Novosibirsk region, four months' unpaid wages), in the mine of the Abakan mining company (republic of Khakassia, three months' unpaid wages), in the engineering factory of Katav Ivanovo (Chelyabinsk region, five months' delay in paying wages), in car repair factory n° 96 of the Fleet of the North in Murmachi (Murmansk region, five months delay), in workshop 26 of the Taganrog car factory (4 months' unpaid wages), in Uralesprom (Sverdlovsk region, 3 months' wages unpaid). These strikes often took place with the assistance of the trade unions; some were organized by a specific committee of initiative.

Offensive

In spite of the crisis and a certain overall retreat by the trade unions, we have witnessed over the past year offensive strikes, where workers not only mobilized against a deterioration of their situation, but also to demand an improvement in it. These actions can be spontaneous or take the form of a collective stoppage of work organized by the trade union in the framework of a work-related dispute or concerning working conditions. There have also been cases where, with the support of the union, the method of struggle chosen was a slowing of the rhythm of work and strict respect of the regulations ("work to rule"). The most frequent tactic is the threat to go on strike, when the degree of mobilization makes it credible.

Some examples of spontaneous strikes:

- On May 15 in the Lipetskkompleks company, the workers of the sausage workshop stopped work because of bad working conditions, low wages and the police system of control. The management having threatened to take the strikers to court, they went back to work.

- In the Korkin mine (Chelyabinsk region) on July 21, the miners, dissatisfied with starvation wages, began a strike. The three shifts refused to work and sought a meeting with the management to demand a pay rise (of approximately 6,000 roubles - 167 euros).

In general, spontaneous strikes end quickly, because it is easy for the management to intimidate the workers by threatening them with court action for an illegal strike.

With the help of their union and basing themselves on the law, the workers have found other legal forms of struggle. For example, in the Volkswagen factory in Kaluga the workers of the assembly line, referring to article 379 of the Labour Code, refused to work for several days (starting on June 15), because the unbearable heat in the workshop constituted "a threat to life and health".

On September 7 at the GMAuto factory in Saint Petersburg, the assembly line stopped work in the welding shop because of non-observance of occupational safety after a cooling conduit broke down three times, in close proximity to a group of workers.

The "work to rule" which had the biggest repercussion took place precisely in this GMAuto factory from November 11-20. On November 11, on the initiative of the MPRA union, a group of workers from the assembly workshop slowed down to the maximum the speed of work, giving the starting signal for this "work to rule". The union's demands were for the immediate convocation of a conference of the factory collective, the abolition of annual bonuses and a guaranteed 8 per cent wage increase, not counting any further adjustment because of inflation, strict rules concerning holidays and, especially, the abandonment of the annual calculation of working hours and the return to the 40-hour week. It should be stressed that not only union members, but also rank-and-file workers took part in the movement. For a few hours the paint shop stopped the assembly line, but following "convincing explanations" by the management, it started working normally again. However, the planned level of car production was not reached. Officially the management did not recognize that there had been a strike, but on November 20 E. Ivanov, president of the MPRA union, was sacked on the pretext of "unjustified absence".

The actions organized by the unions are more effective when they consist of brandishing the threat of a strike when there is an industrial dispute. That is what occurred successfully on May 19 when, following a threat of strike action, air-traffic controllers obtained from the federal air transport authority the prolongation of the existing collective agreement. It is true that the union paid dearly for this success, its office being taken away from it.

Although it is true that last year there were no offensive strikes in the real sense of the term, the threat of strike action, made credible by the level of mobilization, was used successfully by some active unions during industrial disputes:

- At the Danone Industry factory (Moscow region), on the initiative of the Trade Union Committee (which belongs to Sotsprof), on December 2 an industrial dispute broke out. The management of the factory received notice that there would be a strike from December 15 if a commission of conciliation was not formed by then and if the demands put forward by the union were not satisfied. As of December 11 the management agreed to negotiate. The demands put forward by the union were formulated with precision and solidly defended on the legal level. They related to the regulation of working hours, the definition of work stations, work norms and instructions, temporary work and discriminatory measures against union activists.

- The same approach was used by the Sotsprof engineering union in the Karelski Okatych factory, but in this company the union activists encountered fierce resistance from the management, which did not hesitate to use the security forces to prevent a union meeting on October 20. However, the

activity and the determination that the union demonstrated won many workers to the union.

- A final example: the launching of the campaign against temporary work (recruitment by agencies specialised in outsourcing). Following actions carried out by workers at the Babayevski confectionery factory (Moscow), recruited by the Petrolina agency and not paid, several unions, including the International Union of Food Workers (IUF) organized in November and December pickets in various cities in the country with the same demands: stop the recourse to outsourcing and other forms of nonstandard employment. In this case the trade unions acted in a preventive way to oppose the legalization of forms of employment which deprive workers of the guarantees that still exist.

Hunger strikes

Unfortunately, since spring 2009, there has been an increase in the number of cases of hunger strikes (at least twenty cases have been listed), although this method is not very effective in putting pressure on the employer and is especially harmful and dangerous for the health of those involved. In general, workers have recourse to hunger strikes when only a small part of the collective is ready to mobilize in an active way (i.e. they are confronted with an absence of solidarity) or when the company goes bankrupt. Generally, after a certain time, the hunger strikers stop their action following promises to pay wage arrears, but these promises remain a dead letter if the hunger strike is not followed by more active mass actions.

We can cite many examples of hunger strikes which failed and which contributed to demoralizing the workers:

- On June 1, the flight personnel of the KraAir aviation company, which demanded the total payment of wage arrears (several months of unpaid wages) ended a 19-day hunger strike. Although they did not obtain satisfaction they stopped their movement because of an abrupt worsening of their health.

- On June 29, the railway workers of Severomuisk stopped their hunger strike after seven days, because there had been progress concerning the question of the reduction of the workforce and cuts in pay;

- In Akhtubinsk, the municipal employees of the CentrJilKomKhoz enterprise undertook a hunger strike "in shifts", the second since the beginning of the year. By taking this action, the workers, on the initiative of their Zashchita trade union, sought to oppose the "organized" bankruptcy of the only service enterprise in the city. But this action did not lead to any reaction on behalf of the local authorities;

- In January 2009, because of non-payment of wages, the workers of the n° 111 military factory in Bryansk conducted a hunger strike. Those who took part in this action had to be hospitalized after ten days. The hunger strike was stopped, although the wages were not paid. The 421 workers of the factory had not received their wages for seven months.

- In February and again in March of the workers of the Zlatustovo iron-foundry (Chelyabinsk region) organized an action to protest against cuts in wages. The first hunger strike (on February 16) had forced the management of the firm to react and retreat, at least verbally. Since the problem remained, the action was started again on March 10. This time, the management of the firm accused the hunger strikers of "political extremism".

On some rare occasions, this form of action has made it possible to obtain payment of wages.

Especially when the workers combined the hunger strike with other forms of action, or when the hunger strike had an important echo in public opinion and in the media. That was the case with the Chikh mine (Rostov region) where on June 23 thirty miners undertook a hunger strike down the mine: on June 25 the strikers came back to the surface, because their action had caused real panic among the bureaucrats of the region. The vice-governor and the Minister of Energy came in person to the mine. It will be recalled that previously, in March, the miners had gone on strike, remaining underground in the mine.

At the Baïkal cellulose factory, following a massive hunger strike (in which sixty people took part, installed in a tent village set up in front of the offices of the administration of Baïkalsk) combined with repeated pickets and meetings, payment of wages began on June 8.

In Yamala, on August 10, after two weeks of hunger strike, the workers of the geological exploration firm Severnaïa Ekspedicija obtained payment of wage arrears. Previously, from June 25 to July 3, a first hunger strike had taken place and had stopped following promises by management.

A few remarks to draw the lessons

The dynamic that the workers and the trade union movement had experienced has slowed down. The facts mentioned above reveal a rash of spontaneous actions at the local level, such as street actions with the threat of blocking roads, first of all in the mono-industrial cities. Thanks to the "Pikaliyovo" effect, these actions have become the most effective means to involve the authorities in the search for a solution. When these actions take place, questions are raised which are not limited to arrears of wages: in practically all cases, what is involved is saving the enterprise. For this reason, workers more and more often address themselves to the state to demand the nationalization of the company, or in any case to ask it to "put some order" in the situation and to prosecute the "deficient" employer. From this point of view, we can speak of a certain politicization of social conflicts, but with limits: the term "nationalization" generally indicates state aid of one form or another, and not a real change in economic policy.

Overall, the disputes for the year 2009 were defensive, and offensive actions by workers, which we saw in 2007-2008, are rare, although this potential always exists with collective disputes started on the initiative of the trade union and with threats of strike action.

In the conditions of the present crisis, disputes do not remain confined within the limits of the workplace. The number of spontaneous actions carried out in the street has seen a big increase, indicating that the disputes cannot find a solution within the workplace, especially taking into account the present labour laws. Moreover, the workers have broadened the arsenal of forms of action, trying out any form that is likely to have a certain effectiveness. The majority of these actions take forms not envisaged by the legislation on industrial disputes. And that is not because people have tried not to respect the law - quite the contrary, the legal skills of workers and of the unions are constantly increasing, as is their ability to use the law to their advantage - but because the existing legislation does not make possible an effective solution to industrial disputes.

Lastly, we should stress another important characteristic of the current wave of protests: the disputes break out in a spontaneous and disordered fashion and are not part of an ongoing mass movement, which alone would be capable of influencing the way out of the crisis: at the expense of the workers or of the employers? For the moment, the initiatives of the government and the big capitalists go in the direction of finding a way out of the crisis at the expense of the workers (lowering of wages, reduction of the workforce, non-payment of wages) and by no means in the direction of a reduction of the profits, dividends and bonuses accumulated during the previous

period. Worse still: the state takes responsibility for the debts of the employers, who refuse to take responsibility for them before the workers: it is the taxpayers, and therefore once again the workers, who pay for the debts of Deripaska and other oligarchs.

The absence of a general movement is due to the fact that disputes are very limited in space, with the absence of a structure capable of coordinating them and of horizontal links between the collectives involved in struggles. The only thing which exists is a common media space, with “Two, three, many Pikaliovos”.

For a substantial mass movement to develop what is required is an organisational structure, bodies that organize coordination and solidarity between the trade unions, elements that endeavour to counter the government and the employers, with their policy of repression and division of the trade union movement.

Lastly, the scattered nature of disputes is also explained by the fact that the sharpest disputes take place away from the alternative trade unions and their networks. These unions have serious problems in the workplaces: they suffer the consequences of the crisis (in particular in the car industry) and are subject to very strong pressure by the authorities and the employers. That leads them to concentrate on the organization of struggles where they are really implanted and to reinforce their organisational structures. As for the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia (FNPR), its leadership is not in the least interested in taking part in a coordinating body and in the consolidation of a general movement for the defence of workers’ rights.

All that explains why because of the crisis and the reactions of the various actors in the face of this crisis, the process of consolidation of the trade union and workers’ movement has undergone a definite slowing down.

Nevertheless, the emergence of new leaders in the wave of spontaneous actions and the activation of certain local organizations of the FNPR constitute a positive tendency. Even though, in the majority of cases, the leaders of the movements complain about the very weak support from the leadership of the FNPR, at federal level but also in the various industrial sectors. The positive counterpart to this is that certain trade unions affiliated to the FNPR are starting to conduct battles within their industrial federations and to assert their independence.

Once again, we have to stress the contradictory character of current dynamics: on one side the scattered nature of disputes, on the other, consolidation.

Perspectives for going beyond scattered local actions

In spite of all the difficulties, due to the crisis but also to the pressures exerted on the organized wing of the workers’ movement, the tendency towards consolidation continues, in spite of a certain slowing down. The combative trade unions are increasingly cooperating with each other, but also with other social movements and with political militants.

It is clear that to get an improvement of the situation concerning the rights of workers during this crisis period, it is essential to develop a mass campaign with the participation of all the components of the social movement: only such a campaign can force the government to abandon its current policy of seeking a way out of crisis that is synonymous with the deterioration of the situation of workers and violations of their rights.

We have witnessed some steps, still isolated, in this direction. The interregional Car Workers’ Union

(MPRA) took the initiative of a mass campaign around the slogan "The workers should not pay for the crisis". And on February 14, 2009 a first interregional action was conducted on this theme.

On April 19, during the Social Forum of the Urals, militants – mostly belonging to the Union of Coordinating Committees, SKS [8] and to certain alternative trade unions - agreed to conduct together a campaign for the defence of workers' rights and defined together a list of proposals so for a way out of crisis that is not "on the backs of the people". Among the priority demands are: to provide the trade unions with information on the real economic and financial situation of companies and to guarantee them the right of control over the measures adopted to get out of the crisis. But the campaign did not develop very effectively, at least during the unitary days (10-17 October): not all regions were mobilized, and nowhere did the trade unions participate.

The activists of the social movement are willing to take action along with the trade unions, above all within the SKS: in many cities, they are already conducting work within the workers' collectives, in particular through workers who live in hostels. That is the conclusion reached by the participants in a seminar organized on 18-19 November 19 in Togliatti by the Yedinstvo union of Avtovaz, with the support of the All-Russian Confederation of Labour (VKT) and the Institute of Globalisation and Social Movements (IGSO). The topic of the seminar was: "What trade-union strategy in the conditions of the crisis?".

Obviously, such co-operation will be effective and advantageous for all the participants if it is established on a city level around the questions considered by all to be socially most acute and important. If the first experience is a success, then it is perfectly possible that a form of coordination will be set up, something which is so cruelly lacking in the country, whereas it is crucial in order to overcome both the scattered nature and the localism of the movement for the defence of workers' rights. At the present time these structures of coordination are at best in an embryonic state.

The trade unions and the social movements have a decisive role to play to bring a positive response to the question of whether the spontaneous movement of protest can be incorporated into an organized movement able to obtain from the government concrete measures for the defence of the rights of the workers.

The government itself should be interested in a strengthening of the trade union movement, because otherwise it will remain alone in the face of an uncontrolled upsurge which could have regrettable consequences for the entire country. But what we are seeing is quite the opposite, with the reinforcement of pressure on the trade unions. The employers get rid of the most active militants by sacking them, by physical assaults or by imprisonment for all sorts of fabricated offences. And we cannot but note that at every level the "masters of the country" help them: whether it is the United Russia party (with its refusal to amend the labour laws in a sense that would make life less hard for the alternative trade unions) or a part of the presidential and governmental apparatus which by its provocations and its repressive measures does nothing but reinforce the tension in the country.

The workers of today are different from those of the 1990s. They will not accept indefinitely being made fools of. They are demonstrating increasing capacities for self-organization and self-defence. In Russia there exists a new generation of workers who are very conscious of their dignity and who have different demands. They are no longer ready to tighten their belts for nothing, and their ideal is not to join the ranks of those who swear only by their car or their house.

Once again, the choice is simple: either the development of an organized workers' movement, or "the bottomless misery of despair".

Carine Clément

Moscow, December 30, 2009.

P.S.

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Footnotes

[1] In Russia (mainly due to the heritage of the Soviet period) many cities or conurbations were built around one enterprise. The best known case is that of the town of Togliatti, with the gigantic Avtovaz car factory.

[2] Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia, the de facto successor to the official trade unions of the Soviet era

[3] Interregional trade union of the car industry: trade-union network organized by the leader of the very combative trade union of the Ford factory (Leningrad region).

[4] On the events in Pikaliovo, see below and the report of Carine Clément. [Russie : Ces villes à la merci des oligarques](#), January 5, 2010.

[5] Communist Party of the Workers of Russia. One of the organizations resulting from the former CPSU, which takes Stalin as a reference. Unlike the Communist Party of the Federation of Russia, the members of the RKRП are active in various regions and are involved in the social movement.

[6] For more details, see the article by Carine Clément, “Ces villes à la merci des oligarques” referred to above.

[7] Independent miners’ union. This alternative trade union was formed following the big miners’ strikes in the summer of 1989.

[8] The SKS was formed following the mobilizations in the winter of 2005 against the monetarization of welfare benefits. Regrouping various associations and movements existing at a regional or city level, the SKS is present today in more than thirty regions and organizes campaigns on various issues such as the right to housing.