

COMMENT

Union busting, Russian-style - The case of the Worker's Association Interregional Trade Union (MPRA)

Saturday 20 January 2018, by [OVSYANNIKOV Ivan](#) (Date first published: 15 January 2018).

In an article originally published at a Russian business news site [1], Ivan Ovsyannikov, a member of the Russian Socialist Movement [2], describes what's behind the attacks by the Russian government on the Worker's Association Interregional Trade Union, which the state has accused of acting as a "foreign agent." A comment from a former organizer with the union is appended to the end of this article.

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Russian labor activist Alexei Etmanov leads a demonstration of autoworkers through St. Petersburg (MPRA | Facebook)

They've Come for the Unions [3]

ON JANUARY 10, the St. Petersburg City Court issued a ruling to dissolve the Worker's Association Interregional Trade Union (MPRA) [4], known for its high-profile strikes at a Ford plant. This is the first time a 2012 law about non-governmental organizations acting as "foreign agents" [5] has been applied to a workers' organization; unions were previously untouched by it.

An Independent Union

While not the largest Russian trade union—its official membership numbers approximately

4,000—the MPRA is perhaps the most renowned. It emerged in the midst of a high-profile series of strikes at the Ford plant in Vsevolozhsk [outside of St. Petersburg], the most well-known of which took place in winter 2007. Bringing production to a halt and blocking the entrance to the factory, the Ford workers won the majority of their demands from the plant’s administration. Wages grew by 11 percent, and yearly pay raises were indexed to 1 percent above the rate of inflation. For several years afterward, the Vsevolozhsk factory’s contract, which determined working conditions and benefits, was considered a model in union circles.

The leader of the strikers, welder Alexei Etmanov, became famous overnight and, in 2011, was elected to the Leningrad Region Legislative Assembly, where he showed his worth in the opposition. In 2014, his antiwar position [against the annexation of Crimea] cost him the support of the center-left party A Just Russia [6] and his mandate; in 2016, he ran on the liberal Yabloko ballot line [7] and lost.

By the end of the 2000s, the Ford factory’s example had spread: Workers at Volkswagen, AvtoVAZ, Omsktransmash, and dozens of lesser-known companies both foreign- and Russian-owned joined the ranks of the MPRA. Over the past 10 years, only a few have managed to replicate the Ford workers’ success, which was surpassed only by the workers of the Volkswagen factory in Kaluga. There, the staff of the plant was able to avoid the massive layoffs that swept through the auto industry in 2015. According to the contract that the union won, autoworkers in Kaluga would be sent not back onto the job market, but to paid vacation and training at the auto group’s European branches.

In the pre-crisis years [before the collapse of the Russian ruble in 2014], the MPRA made a name for itself through several strikes and protests. Unlike the old trade unions, which serve mostly to distribute favors, the MPRA has placed its bets on collective action, arousing the anger of the state, not to mention employers. In 2016, a Kaluga TV channel produced, *Anatomy of a Union*, a “whistleblowing” film that accused the MPRA of ties to the West and orchestrating a “Maidan.” [8] Further attacks followed.

Last year, on May 19, Ilya Remeslo filed a complaint about the union with the prosecutor for the Krasnogvardeysky district of St. Petersburg. Although Remeslo calls himself a lawyer and investigator, he is better known as a propagandist who specializes in criticizing the opposition. The prosecutor’s office took the cue right away, beginning an audit that resulted in a lawsuit for the union’s dissolution.

“The first question the procurator’s representative asked when they visited our office was, ‘So what do unions do?’ These are completely ignorant people. But these days, the brood of snitches who use state prosecutors as a tool for their own political gain keeps growing,” declared Alexei Etmanov as he left the courtroom. The judge needed no more than five minutes in her chambers to dissolve the union.

“Do You Have Any Relatives Abroad?” [9]

The MPRA was charged with “egregious violations of the law and systematic actions counter to the rules.” All of the items in the indictment can be sorted into three groups: formal complaints about the union’s founding documents (for example, the use of the phrase “social alliance” instead of “social organization” in the rules), involvement in political activity disguised as union activity, and receiving funding from abroad.

The decision of the St. Petersburg court is unprecedented for two reasons. For the first time, an organization not included in the state register of foreign agents was dissolved by a court for “performing the functions of a foreign agent” (the court opined that the MPRA should have

registered as a foreign agent voluntarily); and, for the first time, a trade union fell within the purview of the rule about foreign agents.

Until now, Russian unions had felt themselves to be relatively safe; they were protected by International Labour Organization conventions, which Russia has ratified, and by the federal law on trade unions, which distinguishes them from other civil society organizations.

“We all understand perfectly well that Russian trade unions are a part of the international labor movement,” says Oleg Babich, the director of the legal department of the Confederation of Labor of Russia [10] (the KTR, of which the MPRA is a part), who represented the union in court.

In the MPRA’s case, this means the global union IndustriALL, which brings together unions of metalworkers and chemical workers in more than a hundred countries of the world. In Russia, its members even include several perfectly state-approved unions, which, according to this logic, should also now be dissolved.

The accusation of foreign financial support for the MPRA is based on its receiving one-time grants of 150,000 and 180,000 rubles (\$2,500 and \$3,000) over the course of two years to organize trainings and workshops. However, in Alexei Etmanov’s words, the MPRA gives IndustriALL more than 200,000 rubles (\$3,300) each year, and has a right to some compensation.

“Basically all unions do some kind of back-and-forth funding,” Oleg Babich explains. “It turns out that, using these kinds of lawsuits, without any warning or other, more gentle measures, they can now destroy large organizations that unite thousands of people.”

Solidarity Outside of the Law vs. Unions Outside of Politics

The most unusual accusations brought by the city prosecutor against the MPRA are that it gave moral support to the 2015 protest [11] of long-distance truck drivers, as expressed in an article titled “PLATON is no friend of ours,” [12] and that union activists participated in a protest of fast-food workers from Carl’s Jr. and a protest of doctors against cuts to hospital staff [13]. According to the agency’s logic, MPRA only had the right to defend the interests of its own members, but not the members of other organizations, even those with which it was affiliated.

Further “proof” of how Alexei Etmanov’s union “was actually involved in politics” was provided by the union’s online petition to change Article 134 of Russia’s labor code. These corrections were aimed at eliminating a loophole allowing private companies to not index their workers’ pay to the level of inflation.

“This court decision throws the entire existence of trade unions in Russia into doubt. It hasn’t come into legal force yet, and I sincerely hope that the Supreme Court will reconsider it,” Oleg Babich commented. Alexei Etmanov is not planning to lay down his arms, either. If the higher court leaves the decision to dissolve the union in effect, the MPRA may be resurrected under a new name.

Ivan Ovsyannikov

Comment: Globalism, Nationalism, and Workers' Power

In an article published in September [14], Dmitry Kozhnev, a former union organizer in the MPRA and an organizer with the union Novoprof adds:

This case demonstrates the real purpose of the law about “foreign agents,” exposing the false assurances of representatives and bureaucrats that “this has nothing to do with the unions.”

Transnational corporations are receiving more and more tax breaks and privileges and their influence on the economy, and hence on politics, is growing. They have powerful lobbyist groups who needn't expect problems from the state.

It is very revealing that while the MPRA, a union, is being declared a foreign agent, the governor of Kaluga region, home to several auto factories where the MPRA is active, Mr. Artamonov, who promotes the interests of foreign business in his region (for which he has received six awards from foreign states [15], orders from NATO countries or close U.S. allies), not only remains in his position, but is the vanguard of “patriotism” in his campaigns against independent unions [16]. This all vividly illustrates the anti-worker, oligarchic essence of the current regime, which acts in the interests of Russian and international capital.

By the way, this is a good incentive to shed our illusions and build a new labor movement. In the long run, no one can get in the way of people's desire to make common cause, fight, and defend their interests and rights. All of world history attests to this.

P.S.

* January 15, 2018: <https://socialistworker.org/2018/01/15/union-busting-russian-style>

* First published at провед.ру: <http://провед.ру/article/45805-ppishli-za-ppofsoyuzami.html>

Translation by Kate S.

Footnotes

[1] <http://провед.ру/article/45805-ppishli-za-ppofsoyuzami.html>

[2] <http://anticapitalist.ru>

[3] In Russian, this title is a translation of “First they came for the communists”—the line from Martin Niemöller's famous poem about the Holocaust. Since there are only two past tenses in Russian, however, it's been translated accordingly. (Translator's Notes)

[4] <https://mpra.su>

[5] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jul/02/russia-register-foreign-agent-ngos>

[6] http://www.sras.org/fair_and_just_russia

[7] <http://eng.yabloko.ru/?p=8630>

[8] “Maidan” means mass anti-government protests, as on the Maidan Nezalezhnosti in Ukraine in 2014, with the implication that these would destabilize the country and bring pro-Western politicians to power. This term and the term “color revolution”—referring to uprisings in the mid-2000s in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan—are often wielded by the Russian government to brand any mass political mobilization as a conspiracy orchestrated by the U.S. State Department. (That’s not to say that the color revolutions were successful from a socialist perspective—leftists in these countries continue to fight against new rulers’ neoliberal policies, corruption and flirtation with ethnic nationalism.) (Translator’s Notes)

[9] This is a question once asked on official Soviet forms, since having relatives abroad when the Iron Curtain was still in place was suspect. It also has anti-Semitic overtones, since Soviet Jews, some of whom were allowed to emigrate in the 1970s, were more likely to have relatives living in a different country. (Translator’s Notes)

[10] <http://ktr.su/en/content/news/detail.php?ID=5720>

[11] <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2015/12/23/460703160/in-a-rare-protest-russian-truckers-rally-against-putins-highway-tax>

[12] <https://mpira.su/news/mpira/1926-Platon-nam-ne-drug>

[13] <https://www.equaltimes.org/doctors-and-patients-battle-to?lang=en#.WmPDQSNehBw>

[14] <http://september.media/archives/2094>

[15] https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Артамонов,_Анатолий_Дмитриевич#Награды

[16] <https://therussianreader.com/2015/03/29/kozhnev-ituwa-interview/>