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Russia

Strike At Ford-Vsevolojsk

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On November 20, 2007 at midnight the assembly line stopped. Of the 2200 workers at Ford-Vsevoljok (region of Saint-Petersburg), 1500 took part in the strike.

[http://internationalviewpoint.org/local/cache-vignettes/L250xH175/ford_20_11-222c9.jpg] **Workers demand a 35% pay rise** Renault workers supported the strike at Ford

The management reacted by prohibiting the workers of the morning shift to enter the factory. It even called in the OMONs (Russian riot police) to block the entrance. Since then, every day, hundreds of workers hold a permanent meeting in front of the factory, taking care not to let any possible strike-breakers pass.

In a dash of enthusiasm, they dance and sing. The employees of the canteen, who are also on strike, distribute tea and sandwiches. There is an atmosphere of euphoria and enthusiasm as they find themselves together again to fight for their rights. The principal demand of the strikers relates to the level of wages, which they ask to be raised by 30 per cent. For the moment the average wages in the factory turn around 19,000 roubles (550 euros). The strike is attracting a lot of attention, linked to the massive strike movements in France and in other countries of Europe - you can hear the workers chanting: "France shows us the road to follow, hurrah! ", and also in relation to the next parliamentary elections, which will be held on December 2, 2007.

Especially, public opinion and even the traditional trade unions of the FNPR confederation, which are, however, hostile in principle to any open conflict with company managements, is starting to shift. A public letter signed by twenty sociologists of work, asking for a liberalization of the Labour Code in relation to the regulation of the right to the strike, was published by several newspapers. The trade unions and collectives of other companies of the country, and also from abroad, have sent messages of support. Pickets in solidarity with the strike have been organized in Saint Petersburg and Moscow. The president of the FNPR, Mikhail Chmakov - allied with "United Russia" [Putin's party] in the elections - has dared to speak publicly of the need to revise the Labour Code, which was, however, adopted in 2001 thanks to him and the party in power.

On the other hand, the management of Ford Russia, for the moment, says that it will refuse any negotiation before the ending of the strike. The strikers have been warned that they will not be paid. Those workers who agree to sign a formal declaration of non-participation in the strike have been promised that they will receive two thirds of their wages for "forced unemployment".

Feeling that the strike was going to be prolonged, the strikers, meeting in general assembly on November 22, unanimously decided divide into two groups: one would resume work in order to be receive minimum remuneration; the other would continue the strike and the permanent meeting at the entrance to the factory "In any event", - explains Alexei Etmanov, the president of the trade union of the factory, "that will not be enough to start up production again and will only worsen the financial losses due to the strike."

The case of the "Fordists" is rather unique and exemplary for Russia. A young trade union, which left the traditional FNPR confederation two years ago, continuous work on the ground by the leaders of the union in order get the workers to understand that the union is all of them and not a service agency in cahoots with management, an offensive strategy of trade union unity. On the initiative of the Ford trade-union committee there was formed this summer the Interregional Car Workers' Trade Union, bringing together independent trade unions from several large companies, in particular the Lada factory in Togliatti (where a strike took place - savagely repressed - at the beginning of August) and the Renault-Autoframos factory in Moscow. So it is an exemplary case of a combative trade union supported by the majority of the workers.

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It was following the first strike of the "Fordists" (concluded by the signature from a collective agreement), last February, that the strike movement started to develop in the country. Since then, we have learned of dozens of cases of strikes. Most of the time, because of the regressive labour legislation and repression by employers, they ended in sackings, disciplinary actions and condemnations for "illegal strikes".

The most recent examples: the strike of the dockers of the port of Tuapse (November 4-7, 2007), then of Saint Petersburg (November 13-17, 2007), and that of the Post Office in Saint Petersburg (October 26, 2007). The first two were stopped by court decisions. The third - in fact a work-to-rule - ended in the dismissal of three leaders of the Post Office lorry drivers' union. But despite repression the epidemic is spreading. For November 28 a strike is announced of the rail workers belonging to the independent trade union RPLBJ. The strike, even though it has not started, is already the object of a lawsuit initiated by the management. The railway workers nevertheless declare that they are ready to go into action. The demands relate to the regulation of wages and the right of the minority trade union to take part in collective bargaining.

So a wind of strikes is blowing over Russia. Even if the dimension is less compared to what France is experiencing, the radicality of the change has to be put in the Russian context, where strikes had practically disappeared since the beginning of the 2000 decade, when Vladimir Putin came to power. There is a change in mentalities, in the conception of what a trade union is, in the practices of solidarity which are being established. There is also a change of generation, with the arrival of young workers who refuse to sell their labour power on the cheap, rightly demand the recognition of their qualifications and are less impregnated with traditional paternalist attitudes towards management and the the trade unions.

These changes are also related to socio-economic evolutions. Stable economic growth, a rise in profits and in the salaries of management, galloping inflation - all these factors are accumulating to produce rising discontent. To this should be added the incidences of globalization in Russia. Industrial disputes particularly affect the multinationals, as the workers see how trade unions function in other countries and measure the difference between their wages and those of the workers of other countries. Lastly, the key factor is provided by the second wave (after that of the beginning of the 1990s) of the creation of independent trade unions, generally constituted at rank-and-file level, starting from a core of workers more conscious than the average.

In short, although it is not comparable to the movements that are setting France ablaze, the germs of a change of tendency are undeniable. And neither the elections nor repression will do anything about it. The transformations, essentially qualitative, go much deeper.

This article first appeared on the Swiss web site www.alencontre.org.