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Kazakhstan

Repression intensifies against Kazakh oil workers' uprising

- IV Online magazine - 2011 - IV443 - December 2011 -

Publication date: Monday 19 December 2011

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The Kazakh authorities have responded to the oil workers' revolt with arrests, jailings and police attacks on demonstrations, while company managements have sacked hundreds for striking. Despite the repression, the unprecedented wave of protests, which erupted in the oil-producing province of Mangistau in mid-May, was continuing at the time of writing in late August. At the movement's height in early June, labour movement sources reported that 12-18,000 workers were on strike, demanding pay rises and recognition of independent trade unions.

The protests started on 9 May at Karazhanbasmunai, a joint venture owned by Kazmunaigaz, the main state-controlled national oil company, and CITIC, a Chinese holding company. The immediate spark was Karazhanbasmunai's refusal to recognise the results of a trade union election that had gone against a collaborationist official. On 9 May, 1400 workers refused to eat lunches and dinners, and on 17 May 4500 walked out. They demanded pay parity with workers at OzenMunaiGaz, KazMunaiGaz's largest production subsidiary – who themselves had won a substantial increase in basic wages, and torpedoed company plans for a greater element of production-linked pay, with a 19-day wildcat stoppage in March 2010.[i] [\[1\]](#)

On 11 May, activists called for a general strike across Mangistau region. Kazakh workers employed by Ersai Caspian Contractor, a joint venture owned by ENI, the Italian-based multinational oil company, and ERC Holdings of Kazakhstan, joined the protests. They demanded pay parity with foreign employees doing the same jobs, who they said were paid twice as much. Ersai refused to negotiate with the strikers, ten of whom went on hunger strike, and retaliated with sackings, according to a news agency. [\[2\]](#)

In late May the action spread to the larger workforce at OzenMunaiGaz, where workers – including transport drivers and those conducting well servicing and well workover operations – demanded pay rises to make up for rapid inflation since their increase last year and the slashing of bonus payments. On 24 May a local court declared strike action at the company illegal, but on 26 May there was a mass walkout nonetheless.

The strikers in the three companies advanced various demands. The principle concern at Ozenmunaigaz was for a recalculation of the coefficients (i.e. regional weighting, industry premia, etc) on which pay depends, Kazakhstan's main business newspaper reported. Other demands reported by the Association of Human Rights for Central Asia included: the right for independent trade unions (the Karakiyak union and others) to function; revision of collective agreements "on the principle of equality of parties"; a 100% wage increase to bring workers' living standards up to minimum; and for wages and conditions to meet International Labour Organisation standards [\[3\]](#)

The strike now turned into a grand battle between the workforce on one side, and the companies and authorities on the other. KazMunaiGaz Exploration and Production (KMG EP), which owns all of OzenMunaiGaz and half of Karazhanbasmunai – and is itself state-controlled but with 39% owned by investors via a London stock exchange listing – announced that it now expected to lose 540,000 tonnes of oil production, 4% of its previously projected total of 13.5 million tonnes in 2011, due to the dispute. Ozenmunaigaz's output had already fallen by 2% in 2010, mainly due to the strike in that year. [\[4\]](#)

On 1 June, Natalia Sokolova, a lawyer who had advised the workers, was arrested and both OzenMunaiGaz and Karazhanbasmunai began sacking strikers. Tensions were heightened further when Sabit Kenzhebaev, a transport department manager at Karazhanbasmunai who had been instructed to sack strikers against his will, died of a heart attack. On 5 June, 500 Karazhanbasmunai workers gathered in Aktau, the capital of the Mangistau region, intending

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to march to the akimat (regional authority) building to protest – but were dispersed violently by police. Three strikers, including the prominent trade union activist Kuanysh Sisenbaev, were admitted to hospital with knife wounds after harming themselves as a protest. Local authority employees were instructed to go to work as strikebreakers, and threatened with sackings if they refused, according to labour movement information networks. [5]

During June, some strikers returned to work, but those who remained out grew more determined. Workers established a “tent city” in Zhanaozen, and on 8 July it was broken up by baton-wielding police – to which about 60 responded by pouring petrol on themselves and threatening to set themselves alight. Another thousand demonstrators were encircled by police outside the OzenMunaiGaz headquarters. There were repeated confrontations between police and a crowd of several thousand in the days that followed. [6]

The movement has a political aspect. Not only was it first sparked by a row over union representation, and featured demands for the right to organise independent unions, but it has also led to mass resignations from Nur-Otan, Kazakhstan's ruling political party. Workers at state-controlled enterprises are encouraged to join it, in a manner reminiscent of Communist Party recruitment in the Soviet period – and on 11 August a large group marched to the Nur-Otan regional headquarters in Zhanaozen to hand in their resignations. A spokesman told reporters that 3000 of them had quit, since they had been forced to join anyway, and their demands had not been met. The Nur-Otan regional leader, Koshbai Qyzanbaev, acknowledged only 1089 resignations. [7]

As the summer wore on, the Kazakh courts and police stepped up repression against activists. Natalia Sokolova, the lawyer assisting the strikers, was on 8 August sentenced to six years in jail for “inciting social discord”; Akzhanat Aminov, a trade union leader at OzenMunaiGaz, and Natalia Azhigalieva, an activist, have been arrested and charged with the same crime, while Kuanysh Sisenbaev has been sentenced to 200 hours' community service. On 16 August, Zhanbolat Mamay, a 23-year-old activist in an opposition political group, Rukh Pen Til, was arrested as he returned from Moscow – where he addressed a press conference and civil society meetings about the oil industry dispute – and sentenced to 10 days' administrative detention. According to company statements, 373 OzenMunaiGaz employees and 160 from Karazhanbasmunai have been dismissed for “illegal” strike action. One activist, Zhaksylyk Turbaev, has been murdered by unidentified thugs. [8]

The oilfield conflict makes a mockery of Kazakhstan's long-standing efforts to present itself in the west as a democratic state, and human rights organisations in western Europe have not lost the opportunity to point this out. On 6 July, with encouragement from Amnesty International, the rock singer Sting cancelled a planned appearance in Astana at a \$700-per-ticket concert, stating that he had “no intention” of crossing “a virtual picket line”. The legal persecution of labour movement activists has been denounced in the European parliament by Paul Murphy, a Socialist Party/United Left Alliance member of the parliament from Ireland visited Mangistau, and others. [9]

The Kazakh oil workers' struggle bears out the proposition of the labour historian Beverly Silver that “where capital goes, conflict goes”. [10] Since the break-up of the Soviet Union, western capital has made greater inroads into the oil sector in Kazakhstan than in Russia, where it has been somewhat constrained by statist and nationalist policies. In the last decade it has been joined by a gigantic inflow of Chinese capital. The Kazakh elite, who have been immensely enriched by the oil boom of the last decade, is the third part of the unholy trinity that workers face.

In Mangistau region, oil production has expanded at a healthy pace. But the riches have been divided unequally: while billionaires flourish, and living standards have risen in the new and old capitals, Astana and Almaty, Mangistau has in terms of the UN's development indicators only been lifted to the national average, from below it. And, staggeringly, although Mangistau produces more oil than any other Kazakh region, in 2008 it had the highest proportion of people living below the poverty line (32.4%) and the worst poverty by the UN's measures. [11] The immediacy of this injustice, the stark chasm between rich and poor, and a tradition of worker activism that has resurged in recent years, is a potent mixture that has now exploded.

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First published [here](#).

- [1] "V Zhanaozene zakonchilas' zabastovka neftianikov", Ak Zhaiyk (Atyrau), 19 March 2010; "[V Kazakhstane zavershilas' dvukhnedel'naia zabastovka neftianikov](#)" Deutsche Welle web site, 21 March 2010; Linksunten, "[Kazakhstan: Mass strikes and protest action](#)".
- [2] Almaz Rysaliev, "[Kazakstan's Unhappy Oil Workers](#)" Institute for War & Peace Reporting web site, 24 June 2011, ; Central Asia Newswire, "Kazakh oil workers begin hunger strike", 24 May 2011.
- [3] "Bastuiushchie udarili po RD KMG", Kursiv, 30 June 2011; Nadejda Atayeva, "[Kazakhstan: vlast' massovo raspravliaetsia s bastuiushchimi neftianikami](#)".
- [4] KMG EP press release, 28 June 2011; KMG EP annual report 2010, p. 26. The 2% fall was in comparison to 2009 output.
- [5] "[Krovavyy razgon demonstratsii rabochikh v Aktau](#)", IKD, 5 June 2011; "[V Moskve proidet aktsiia solidarnosti](#)", IKD, 6 June 2011; Nadejda Atayeva, "[Kazakhstan: bezdeistvie vlastei](#)".
- [6] Nadejda Atayeva, "Kazakhstan: vlast' massovo raspravliaetsia", op. cit.
- [7] "Striking Kazakh Oil Workers Quit Ruling Party", 11 August 2011, [Radio Free Europe](#).
- [8] Nadejda Atayeva, "[Kazakhstan: bespretsedentnoe davlenie na uchastnikov zabastovki](#)"; "Lider zabastovki neftianikov osuzhden", Kursiv, 18 August 2011; KMG EP press release, 27 July 2011; "Bolee 400 bastovavshikh uvoleny", Kursiv, 7 July 2011.
- [9] "Sting nakazal Kazakhstan", Kommersant, 4 July 2011; the web sites of Sting Symphonocity and Paul Murphy MEP. Sting, who was touring the whole former Soviet Union and did not cancel dates in e.g. Belarus or Uzbekistan, was criticised for being selective in his protest.
- [10] Beverley Silver, Forces of Labor: workers' movements and globalization since 1870 (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 41)
- [11] UNDP Kazakhstan, National Human Development Report 2009, pp. 103-109