

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article1862>



Kazakhstan

# The current state of the trade union movement in Kazakhstan

- IV Online magazine - 2010 - IV424 - May 2010 -

Publication date: Wednesday 5 May 2010

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**The situation in the trade union movement in Kazakhstan is complex and quite difficult. The processes under way within the organizations and amongst the working masses are in many ways reminiscent of the changes taking place in Russia. In essence, there is no unified labor movement in the country. [1]**

The old Soviet-era trade unions have collapsed, turning into an aging, parasitic bureaucratic caste. Likewise, the free trade unions that emerged in the early 1990s have seriously deteriorated and thus do not offer a real alternative for union activists who want to engage in genuine struggle. At the same time, the economic crisis, which has staggered many sectors of the economy, has stimulated the growth of a new trade union movement. The signs of this new movement have begun to emerge everywhere and are a cause for optimism.

## The History of the Labor Movement in Kazakhstan

As in many other Soviet republics, the massive miners strikes of the late 1980s gave rise to the first free associations of workers – the locals of the Independent Miners Unions (NPG), which were mostly concentrated in the country's central regions, in particular in Karagandy Province. They formed the basis for Birlesu ("Unity"), an association that was transformed into the Kazakhstan Free Trade Unions Confederation (KSPK) when the country gained its independence in 1991. KSPK locals were formed in five provinces, and four industrial associations were created as well: an airline crews association; a trade union of the republic's miners; a trade union of healthcare workers; and an education workers union. In addition, eighty-six trade unions were formed in various other sectors. In the early 1990s, the KSPK was a genuinely alternative organization that also exercised an invigorating influence on certain industrial unions within the Trade Unions Federation of the Republic of Kazakhstan (FPRK, the successor to the republic's branch of the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions, or VTsSPS). The activists in these unions began vigorously defending the interests of their workforces.

Around the same time, in 1992, the Solidarity Workers Movement of Kazakhstan (RDKS) emerged. Fairly politicized in its outlook, this movement was at first influenced by anarcho-syndicalists until left-wing communists and socialists took control of it in 1994. The movement was behind a series of massive radical strikes and actions by workers from various sectors in Almaty, Uralsk, Karaganda, Ust-Kamenogorsk, and South Kazakhstan throughout the 1990s. The RDKS collaborated with rank-and-file activists from both the KSPK and the industrial unions of the FPRK. One serious success that came out of this collaboration was the creation, in 1995, of a republic-wide strike committee, which was organized by the leading industrial unions of the FPRK and the provincial branches of the RDKS.

The collapse of the former state sector and the massive privatizations of 1995–1997 led to the destruction of heavy industry. This in turn sparked socially catastrophic processes that followed upon the disappearance of whole sectors and the closing of several thousand enterprises. Entire regions of the country were devastated. Sixty "ghost towns" appeared, and unemployment afflicted thirty percent of the working population (four million people were listed as "self-employed" in 1998). Approximately three million people left the country, including huge numbers of skilled workers and specialists of various ethnicities. These processes were accompanied by the liquidation of the entire social welfare system and Soviet-era labor laws.

All the progressive trade unions and labor organizations in the country were delivered a heavy blow by this collapse, on the one hand, and by state persecution, on the other, and many of them ceased to exist. This process was aided

and abetted by the errors and anti-labor actions committed by trade union leaders themselves. This discredited the idea of an organized labor movement and led to the total degeneration of the leadership in these unions. Thus, for example, responding to the anti-communist and neoliberal moods among some miners, in 1992 the leadership of the KSPK entered into close cooperation with the old leadership of the AFL-CIO. It began promoting the idea of depoliticizing labor organizations and supporting the government's experiments with the market economy. This stance was reflected in KSPK leader Vitaly Solomin's open support for the government's passage of new pensions legislation, which copied the Chilean model of pensions provision.

The KSPK leadership's inconsistency and rejection of pro-active measures led to the closure of many regional unions, as well as to the persecution of the leaders of the miners union in the city of Kentau. By the late 1990s nearly all the locals within the KSPK had turned into tiny groups, and today the KSPK has only several thousand members. In 1997, the chairmanship of the FPRK was taken over by Siyazbek Mukashev, a personal friend of President Nazarbayev, who wanted to gain control of his country's trade unions and prevent actions and protests by workers. This altered the balance of forces within the former Soviet trade unions as well: the elements that were most conservative and amenable to cooperation with transnational corporations and the authorities finally gained the upper hand.

All these developments caused splits and the expulsions of the most energetic and radical activists in the union locals. Thus in 2002 the union of machine construction workers, part of the FPRK, initiated the liquidation of the progressive trade union at Metallist, a major defense factory in Uralsk, because it had begun a relentless campaign against the government's privatization and destruction of the enterprise. In 2001, nine industrial trade unions announced they were quitting the FPRK because of the complete decay of the federation's leadership, its usurpation of power, and its tendency only to engage in commercial activities involving union property. The coal miners union suffered a split even earlier, in the late 1990s. In 1996, when the Karaganda open-pit mine and metallurgical complex fell into the hands of ArcelorMittal after it was privatized, the trade union committees at eight mines formed their own corporate-level coal miners union, Korgau ("Defense").

In 2003, the union of transportation and civil aviation workers, which had left the FPRK and was headed by Murat Mashkenov, joined parliament deputy Serik Abdrakhmanov and former KSPK leader Vitaly Solomin in creating the Kazakhstan Labor Confederation (KTK), which allegedly had an initial membership of forty thousand. But to this day the KTK has shown no signs of activism and militancy. The leaders of a political movement of workers that formed out of the RDKS were imprisoned in the late 1990s after campaigning for the creation of their own labor party, while the movement's rank-and-file activists were persecuted and subjected to mass dismissals. By 2007, this movement had practically ceased to exist. At present, there is no unified trade union sector in Kazakhstan, and the existing unions have no influence on economic life and the activities of the companies at which their members are employed.

## The Current Role of the FPRK

On paper, the FPRK is still the largest officially recognized trade union organization in the country. You would be hard pressed, however, to learn its actual membership figures, although its reports claim it represents approximately one million workers (out of a working population of four million). This year around 100,000 people have lost their jobs as a result of the economic crisis, and so the authorities have turned the official trade unions into yet another pillow for suffocating the rage of workers. Alongside the social conflict resolution "councils" controlled by the ruling party, Nur Otan (an analogue of the CPSU, except with a market economy ideology), the provincial branches and industrial unions of the FPRK have long followed a policy of cooperation and "social partnership" with the authorities and employers. One striking example of this policy are the memoranda on the preservation of "social stability" – that is, a public disavowal of demonstrations, pickets, and strikes – signed by a number of labor leaders at the beginning of this year.

And yet such important criteria as a minimum wage, a minimum basic pension, and a minimum subsistence level are neglected by the official policy of the FPRK. It is worth noting that at present the minimum wage and minimum subsistence level are the same, amounting to 13,740 tenge (approximately 80 USD) per month. According to the country's labor laws, these levels should be set in consultation with the trade unions. Ideally, trilateral commissions, roundtables, and other meetings should take place in order to determine the minimum wage before this figure is introduced into the republic's proposed budget.

However, it all happens the other way round. The FPRK's leadership does not insist too strongly on participating in the discussion of the national budget, and as a result practically no one takes its opinion into consideration. Moreover, aside from flimsy memoranda and other such declarations, the FPRK is totally ignored by the government and management. And even these "general agreements" are signed only after the country's budget has been passed.

Another important basis of the current "social partnership" is the collective bargaining agreement, but its function in workplaces is more declarative than real. In the state sector, it has more to do with work conditions than with wage levels. Most important of all is the fact that collective bargaining agreements do not in any way reflect inflation and the devaluation of the tenge, and thus owners can confidently refer to old documents and base wage rates if pressed. The regional agreements signed by employers, the unions, and the authorities also contain no mechanisms for indexing wages. So it turns out that the work of the current union bosses is just a giant soap bubble that in no way defends millions of laborers.

This year, meetings and elections are scheduled to take place throughout the FPRK, and the status of many union bosses is thus genuinely threatened. But as likely as not many of them will survive this tense moment and keep their jobs insofar as the old mechanisms of "democratic centralism" still operate. Here, apparently, is where the trustworthy chairs of the FPRK's regional unions will step into the fray. Strange as it may seem, these regional chairs automatically become directors of the limited liability companies that oversee the use of trade union property and report to the FPRK's economic servicing directorate. Public and economic functions are thus fused in the same people, and this suggests a possible dependence on the "general line" of the federation's leadership, which in turn might influence the election of delegates who are precisely loyal. In Kazakhstan, this is how the conferences of trade unions and the one true party are conducted: naturally, the unions and the party are united in their desire to ensure true "stability."

The last straw was the expulsion of the only remaining progressive trade unions from the FPRK – the association of scientific workers, which has come out against the privatization of scientific research institutes; and the interindustrial regional union ODAK, which has been advocating radical methods of struggle and had supported the call for nationalization of production made by several enterprises that went on strike.

## Trade Unions in the Metals and Mining Industries

There is no amalgamated union of metal workers in Kazakhstan. The Soviet system of industrial unions still exists. Thus, for example, there is the ore mining industry union, which although it has not actively opposed militant workforces, has also not engaged in any other kind of activity or activism. Its organizations exist only formally at many enterprises.

Workers at a number of maintenance facilities and plants for the manufacture of rolling stock are members of the railroad transport workers union, which is a corporate union within the parastate company Kazakhstan Railways. It

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gets its funds and office space directly from management, as well as the bonuses and salaries for its permanent staff, and representatives of management are also part of the union's leadership board. Therefore, over the past several years this "trade union" has not supported a single lawsuit filed by laid-off workers. It also backed the management of the Almaty Car Maintenance Plant against the plant's workforce, which went on strike on June 22, demanding that the plant be nationalized.

This is a common disease amongst such so-called trade unions. Thus the corporate trade union at Kazakhmys, a major copper producer allied with Samsung, came out against a sit-down strike by copper miners in January 2008. The union's chair joined leaders of the Jezkazgan district union in threatening members of the strike committee with dismissal and violence. Deputies of the company's president also control this corporate union. Union leaders receive their salaries and other resources from the Kazakhmys company budget, which should indicate that they are totally independent of union membership dues and the interests of the workforce. A similar situation also exists at the Kaztsink Company, in East Kazakhstan.

Korgau, the coal miners union that brought together miners from eight mines in the coal production unit at ArcelorMittal along with workers at adjoining facilities (around 25,000 workers in all), pursues a similar policy, although it is not part of the FPRK. In the person of its then-chair Vyacheslav Sidorov, Korgau opposed a strike at all eight mines in 2006 and demanded that the workers return to the pit faces. This led to Sidorov's being hissed and nearly beaten by shaft men at a demonstration outside the mayor's office in the town of Shakhtinsk. The union's current chair, Daniyar Mirgayazov, does not even bother to hide from journalists the fact that he receives monthly bonuses from company management for maintaining "social stability" and that in June of this year he approved a 14% pay cut for workers. In recent months, whole crews of miners have begun leaving the union, and so Korgau has asked ArcelorMittal to strip them of all the benefits and guarantees stipulated under the collective bargaining agreement. A court in Shakhtinsk is now adjudicating this very issue between workers and the union. In addition, the process of forming an alternative union for coal miners has been launched.

An analogous situation has developed within the trade union committee at the Karaganda Metal Works (22,000 workers), which is owned by Mittal Steel Temirtau, a subsidiary of ArcelorMittal. Wages there were likewise slashed by 14%, and workers in various shops began forming initiative groups to study labor laws and the collective bargaining agreement. Vladimir Dubinin, chair of the official trade union, attempted to repudiate the dissatisfaction of metal workers to the press and conceal the fact that they were quitting his union. Company management and the official trade union are now attempting to stop this movement with threats and other forms of persecution.

The trade union of machine manufacturing workers, which is still listed as part of the FPRK and allegedly has 20,000 members, has practically ceased to function. The union at the Almaty Heavy Engineering Plant (AZTM) has now independently organized workers in the struggle to save the plant and nationalize it. The leadership of the industrial union, however, has also been noted for its anti-labor actions, in particular at the Metallist plant in Uralsk.

Like their colleagues in other unions, the trade union of petroleum industry workers and the trade union council of Mangystau Province (on the Caspian shore in West Kazakhstan), attempted to stop actions by drillers at Burgylau, Ltd. (in Kazakh, burgylau means "drilling"), in April of this year. The workers immediately formed their own independent trade union (with two thousand members) and organized a sit-down strike and a hunger strike, demanding that the enterprise be nationalized. At present, this new union's struggle is supported by oil workers at ten other facilities (over 100,000 workers), and we are in the process of forming an integrated trade union association. This is an encouraging situation insofar as independent trade unions have also begun to form at sites owned by various foreign petroleum-extraction companies – for example, the union of oil workers at the Zhanazhol field (2,000 workers) in Aktobe Province (Western Kazakhstan). A fairly independent stance has also been taken by activists with the trade union of gas workers (around 8,000 members) at the Karachaganak field near Uralsk, one of the largest deposits in Europe.

Strange as it may seem, the corporate trade union at the uranium company Kazatomprom (around 40,000 workers) has actually come to the defense of its workforce, opposing planned massive layoffs that were spurred by reorganization of the industry and the government's refusal to develop high technology and new production facilities. As a result of these actions by the government, six thousand workers at the Ulbinsk Metallurgical Plant might find themselves without jobs next year, while another thousand might be laid off before the end of this year. Despite coercion by the security forces, the union has no intention of surrendering, and it has shown interest in joining us to creating a common organizational structure. The only problem is that it has not managed to enlist all workers to its cause: only twenty percent of them are members of the union.

## New Trade Union Opportunities and the Latest Strikes

The authorities have done everything they can to halt and, where possible, ban the process of self-organization on the part of workers. Now it is already impossible to control the process of layoffs, while the law "On Strikes" and the Labor Code make it as difficult as possible for workforces to use strikes and industrial actions to combat the abuses of management. True, the government has created a "working commission" to prevent layoffs that includes representatives of the FPRK, but it would appear that the bigwigs of the extraction industries could care less about this commission. Who concretely has this "commission" saved in Kazakhstan? Meanwhile, the union bosses continue to spout trite phrases about "social partnership" and "stability" even as they allow people to be torn to shreds by the predators of the modern business world.

Late 2008 and early 2009 were marked by new strikes and actions by workers in various sectors of the Kazakh economy. As a rule, these were actions sparked by nonpayment of wages or significant wage cuts. In December 2008, strikes were carried out by construction workers at major development companies in Almaty and Astana, by workers at the car maintenance units of Kazakhstan Railways, and by minibus drivers in the southern capital. Municipal workers in Taraz and metal workers at the Irtysh Chemical Metallurgical Plant organized mass hunger strikes. The most impressive action and a kind of wake-up call was the strike by construction workers at Agip KCO (Atyrau Province, Western Kazakhstan), which erupted into a demonstration that ended in mass clashes with the police. Several thousand people took part in this action, and workers from two other companies supported them.

In our opinion, this past spring marked a new chapter in the history of the contemporary labor movement and a new starting point: the strike by oil workers at Burgylau, Ltd., in Zhanaozen (West Kazakhstan). Two thousand workers there demanded new management, reinstatement of their comrades who had been fired, and nationalization of the enterprise. The workers occupied their own plant, fearing that equipment there would be hauled away, while approximately forty workers staged a twenty-day hunger strike. Two workers were seized by officers of the KNB (the former KGB) and beaten up, and to top it all off smoke grenades were thrown into their jail cell. Daniyar Besbayev, the chair of the trade union committee, was subjected to multiple attempts to have him brought up on criminal charges and threatened with physical violence. However, the twenty-day strike led to a partial victory for the workers: all employees who had been laid off were reinstated and new management was installed at the facility.

Workers at the Almaty Car Maintenance Plant carried out another powerful strike action. The two-thousand-strong workforce there demanded that the government reexamine the outcome of the plant's privatization, which led to this strategic enterprise falling into the hands of unknown owners who filed for bankruptcy and began making massive layoffs and shutting down production. A similar situation developed at the Almaty Heavy Engineering Plant, where the trade union committee organized actions against the closing of shops by new owners. Now Esenbek Ukteshbayev, leader of the strike committee at the car maintenance plant, is the subject of a prolonged court case: plant management and the authorities are trying to accuse him of having organized an "illegal strike."

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Analysts are predicting a rise in the willingness of workers to protest, and this will lead to new, more massive local actions in the various provinces of Kazakhstan. One feature of the labor disputes that have happened this year is the fact that, as a rule, they have taken place without the support of the official trade unions. Sometimes, as was the case at the Almaty Car Maintenance Plant, trade union committees have openly sided with management and acted as instruments of their policies. According to the strike committee, even the industrial union of railroad workers, instead of supporting the workforce's demands, adopted a wait-and-see attitude, which the activists themselves regarded as a show of support for the plant's owners.

In response to such attitudes, workers have begun to develop initiative groups (or strike committees, when strikes are under way), as well as participating in public associations. Thus, for example, the public association Miner's Family, in Shakhtinsk, took on the functions of a trade union organization. In Karabatan, Zhanaozen, Karabulak (home of the Almaty Sugar factory in Almaty Province), and the Almaty Car Maintenance Plant, labor actions were carried out by independent trade unions or trade union committees that were formed and elected by the rank-and-file. Another frequent way that workers show their lack of trust in the utterly rotten "Soviet" trade unions that officially represent them is to consciously quit these organizations.

In May of this year, the first coordinating session of various grassroots initiative groups, strike committees, and independent trade unions took place in Almaty. The event was to a large extent organized by the ODAK trade union association, headed by Marat Moldabekov, leader of the militant union of scientific workers. The rank-and-file and independent trade union activists who gathered for this roundtable discussed what further steps could be taken to consolidate their efforts and organize solidarity campaigns. Trade union associations and labor groups from Zhanaozen, Aktobe, Kostanay, Kokshetau, Jezkazgan, Karaganda, Ust-Kamenogorsk, Semipalatinsk, Taldykorgan, Shymkent, and Almaty responded to this call to consolidate and form a united policy front.

The session was attended by the most well-known activists of the Kazakh labor movement, including the mine workers leader and NPG organizer for Kazakhstan, Pavel Shumkin (KCPK); Ivan Bulgakov, chair of the Defense of Labor trade union association and leader of a strike by copper smelters in East Kazakhstan; Daniyar Besbayev, leader of the union of oil workers and the striking drillers at Burgylau, Ltd.; and Kanatbek Murzatov, an activist with the Jezkazgan miners. The important thing was that the first forum for discussions and dialogue amongst activists was held. True, there were also some rough patches insofar as there were two types of activists present at the roundtable. A minority of attendees, made up of functionaries, and the majority, comprised of grassroots activists, did not always understand each other correctly, and this is an objective indicator. The militant attitude of the new labor leaders, who came to the conference from the drilling sites, mines, and factory floors (unlike some of the old leaders of the independent unions that emerged in the early nineties) was a fresh breeze, a testimony to a new generation of cadres who have risen with the current wave of the struggle. Many speakers underscored the paradoxical fact that the current crisis is creating new, favorable conditions for the rebirth of the organized labor movement, and that mass actions are just around the corner.

The conference adopted a proposal by the socialists to create a permanent informational and coordinating center to assist the independent trade union movement, which would be operated under the auspices of the ODAK trade union association. The website of the new center – [socdeistvie.info](http://socdeistvie.info) – has been launched. In addition, the conference adopted a communiqué, proposed by Pavel Shumkin, whose centerpiece was the thesis that the unified struggle of workers is a struggle for both economic and political rights – that is, freedom of assembly, freedom to organize, freedom of speech, and freedom to affect legislation that harms the interests of workers. At present, we have filed documents to register a regional association of trade unions and an all-republic interindustrial union, whose purpose we have already established. In January, a new conference is planned that will feature both current and new participants in the project of creating unified organizational structures for the labor movement.

# The Activities of Transnational Corporations

A large number of transnational corporations are active in Kazakhstan, and they control nearly all the country's extractive industries. The plight of workers in the plants and mines of copper producer Kazakhmys and ArcelorMittal is particularly unenviable. It is in these places that we encounter the highest percentage of work-related injuries and on-the-job deaths. The reason for this is that the owners have no desire to spend money on new equipment and to degas the mineshafts. At a number of worksites, although plant and equipment depreciation has reached 100%, management continues to exploit these facilities. Everywhere, accident crews and rescue teams, electrical maintenance and repair crews have been laid off.

Management sometimes uses the excuse of economic difficulties to introduce "structural changes" that in fact heighten their exploitation of local workforces. Kazakh workers are treated with particular disdain at enterprises in which foreign capital has a stake. A telling example in this respect is the policy of the management of Shymkentsement towards its employees.

With the silent consent of the authorities, these "anti-crisis" measures on the part of employers lead to a deterioration of the condition of wage laborers and to a total violation of their labor rights. The notorious "intensification of labor" means in practice that workers are subjected to genuine, incredibly cruel exploitation while receiving the same poverty-level wages. Output norms are increased, and workers are made to take on additional responsibilities and combine different skills and professions – all of which, as a rule, earns them no extra pay. Layoffs and firings have now become a real billy club in the hands of bosses who force their rightless workers to double their profits.

The actions of transnational oil and gas companies have also provoked the outrage of environmentalists. Chevron is a member of the international consortium Karachaganak Petroleum Operating B.V., which is developing the Karachaganak oil and gas condensate fields in West Kazakhstan Province. At present, the courts are examining a lawsuit filed by the Green Salvation Ecological Society, the Kazakhstan Bureau for Human Rights and the Rule of Law, and the Shanyrak Public Association against the Government of Kazakhstan for its failure to protect the rights of the inhabitants of the village of Berezovka.

## Deindustrialization and the Slogan of Nationalization

The economic crisis and the property redistribution brought on by the flaring up of the political situation in the country have incited new processes of deindustrialization, which will set off new waves of layoffs and firings. The Samruk-Kazyna Sovereign Wealth Fund, a monster that embodies state monopoly capitalism in Kazakhstan (it has even swallowed up the ministry of industry), is becoming an instrument for destroying the country's major industries. Aided by the state administration, the oligarchic group of Nazarbayev's middle son-in-law Timur Kulibayev is systematically purging competitors from the market and carrying out a redistribution of property that concentrates hydrocarbon deposits and profitable enterprises and factories in its hands.

This same group is also carrying out the systematic liquidation of individual factories and issuing orders for the layoffs of workforces. After the administration at the uranium producer Kazatomprom was purged, the former minister of industry and commerce, presidential representative Vladimir Shkolnik, literally told a meeting of its directors, "We don't need to adopt new technology and improve production." This policy is now reflected in the deliberate liquidation of the manufacture of uranium tablets and other important nuclear energy products that had been sold for export.

In practice, this signifies a return to the ordinary extraction of raw uranium minus value-adding processing, which

signals the collapse of the country's nuclear industry. The Ulbinsk Metallurgical Plant is already shifting to a two-day workweek, and in the future the facility might be mothballed altogether. Where its six thousand highly skilled workers will go is anybody's guess. Naturally, after the top managers at this profitable state company were arrested, projects to build nuclear energy facilities in China were halted, and contracts with Japanese and European companies were torn up.

The lobbying of Russian producers is evident in this story: it was they who got their hands on all the profitable pieces of this nuclear pie. This, however, is not the main point. The ruling classes also hope to smash the country's large workforces in order to prevent the radicalization of the labor movement and the emergence of new trade unions. The destruction of the social base for future mass actions is in fact the goal of the actions taken by these classes. The Samruk-Kazyna Sovereign Wealth Fund has already circulated a directive to lay off thirty percent of the workforce at many enterprises, including the Almaty Car Maintenance Plant, where strikers demanded the nationalization of their facility.

The shutting down of production and the liquidation of the country's productive forces are enabled not only by the top-down directives of the haute bourgeoisie and the banks, but also by the efforts of mid-level entrepreneurs and con men who seek as quickly as possible to strip factories and plants of assets, equipment, and scrap metals, while mortgaging off their buildings and land plots to obtain loans. During periods of crisis and massive property redistribution, the bourgeoisie always tries to extract the last drop from the factories and workers it owns, only to leave a wasteland in their wake.

The events in Zhanaozen and at the car maintenance plant in Almaty have shown that the labor movement is in the process of becoming politicized. This is a reaction to massive layoffs, wage cuts, increased exploitation, and the destruction of production facilities. Workers now understand the slogan of nationalization in a way that is completely different from how it is understood by Kazakhstan's opposition liberals or government bureaucrats. For workers, this slogan symbolizes the need to save jobs and production itself. This has also invigorated the re-elections of trade union committees, where radical activists have offered themselves as candidates. All this is an important indicator of the moods that now prevail among the working masses.

## The Need for Cooperation and Solidarity

We are happy to see that the trade union movement is being reborn and renewed at the grassroots. More and more new activists and groups are emerging. Working sometimes in clandestine, under the threat of dismissal, political repression, and even physical violence, they are ready to form new workers organizations and are already forming them. These are sincere people willing to sacrifice themselves for the cause of workers; they are free of the burdens of the past and the extraneous features of contemporary NGOs. We are trying to structure this process, to direct it towards the adoption of a unified program of demands and the formation in the near future of a republic-wide association of trade unions.

In the conditions of police persecution that we face, it is thus all the more important to maintain constant contact with leading international trade unions: when our activists encounter repression, they can organize protest campaigns; when our workers take action, they can organize solidarity campaigns. The enormous practical experience in social struggle accumulated by the different national branches of the international working class is extremely important for us, and so it is vital that we facilitate this exchange of ideas and recommendations.

*Ainur Kurmanov was arrested on April 27, following a picket. He was taken to court and charged with "organising a picket" in front of a bank, Temir Bank, and given a maximum sentence of a fortnight's imprisonment on 27th April*

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2010. He will appear in court this Thursday (6th May) to appeal against his sentence. The picket was organized by the opposition social movement, 'Kazakhstan 2012', to protest over home repossessions.

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[1] This report was prepared in collaboration with the trade union association ODAK and the trade union of scientific workers of Kazakhstan.