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Russia

Repression of Russian Left Activists

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The campaign in Kagarlitsky's defense has not subsided, but on the contrary is gaining momentum. His case, however, is the tip of the iceberg of the repressive system in our country, which is devouring yet more victims.

While Boris is a well-known figure whose fate is in plain sight, many who are convicted or under investigation in political and semi-political criminal cases are unknown not only to the general public, but sometimes also to civil activists.

At the end of last year, having been released for two months from a pre-trial detention center in the northern city of Syktyvkar, Kagarlitsky himself was determined to fight for the freedom of political prisoners and overcome the information blockade around their persecution. At the beginning of April, already in a pre-trial detention center in Zelenograd city, in Moscow region, he wrote in an open letter to left-wing activists:

“Political unity and political maturity are achieved through political activity. And in today's conditions, when political action and self-organization in our country are extremely difficult, helping like-minded people who find themselves in prison becomes not just a humanistic activity, but also an important political gesture, a practice of solidarity. Today, when such an initiative has finally received practical implementation, it needs to be supported, we can and should unite around it. After all, the first step will be followed by other steps. In order for the future to come, we must work now.”

Who's Being Persecuted?

According to circles close to Amnesty International, there are now more than 900 political prisoners in Russia. The actual number of punishments for persecuted activists is much higher. They did not include those who were actually imprisoned for politics, but, formally on trumped-up criminal cases.

Fabrication of criminal cases is a favorite method of dealing with trade union leaders. Anyone who actively opposes the current order and the current government can go to jail, and more and more leftists are among them.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, according to Vladimir Lenin, the most advanced squad of the working class in Russia were metalworkers. Nowadays, many sociologists and politicians consider healthcare workers to be the most organized and capable of defending their interests.

By virtue of their profession, they protect not only their own economic interests, but also the remnants of the public healthcare system (free for the population) that survived the neoliberal reforms of recent decades. Objectively, then, healthcare workers protect the interests of every resident of Russia.

In 2012 the trade union “Action” of healthcare workers was created. One of the most militant and capable independent trade unions in our country, present in 57 regions, Action is now part of the Confederation of Labor of Russia (CLR), the second largest trade union association in Russia.

The Action union includes workers not only of public clinics but also private ones, where the owners especially do not

like any trade unions. Furthermore, there is no place for shop-level disunity of people in the healthcare system: Action brings together doctors, paramedics, nurses, orderlies and students of medical institutes and colleges on an equal basis.

It also includes representatives of other professions working in medical organizations, for example, ambulance drivers.

The Alexander Kupriyanov Case

Among trade union activists, there are traditionally a high proportion of people with leftist views. One of these is Alexander Kupriyanov, a psychotherapist from the city of Bryansk, also known as Doctor Pravda (Truth) thanks to his YouTube channel of the same name.

He had tried to create an independent trade union at his work back in the mid-2000s, and after the emergence of Action he joined it. Then Alexander moved on to political struggle, holding street actions, participating in the activities of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF), running for elected bodies at various levels.

In the Bryansk region Alexander Kupriyanov organized rallies and pickets, both on health issues (torture in the Trubchevsky psychoneurological boarding school, the death of children in the Bryansk perinatal center, labor problems of healthcare workers), and on other topics like the forced resettlement of a World War II veteran from supposedly “dilapidated” housing in the center of the city to the outskirts.

The angry regional authorities could not tolerate this for long. In 2018 Kupriyanov was arrested on charges of fraud. According to the materials of the “case,” he was allegedly involved in imposing loans on patients for treatment in the interregional system of “Med-Life” clinics, where he previously worked. A total of 22 people are involved in this case.

Kupriyanov was not related to the owners, administration or accounting department of the clinic, who actually solicited clients to take out loans. As the chief attending physician of the center, he dealt only with medicine. The authorities decided to use a real fraud case to get rid of their opponent. (It is characteristic that actual investigations were carried out in “Med-Life” clinics in other cities, but not in the Bryansk clinic where Alexander worked.)

Alexander Kupriyanov spent a year in the pre-trial detention center — the maximum period of pre-trial detention under this article of the criminal code — and due to lack of evidence, he was released. However, the criminal case was not closed. After leaving prison, Kupriyanov parted ways with the opportunist Communist Party of the Russian Federation on fundamental issues and was expelled from the party for criticizing its conciliatory policies.

He joined the Solidarity Action Committee (SAC), where he began supporting imprisoned leftists, labor and trade union activists. Alexander became one of the founders of the Public Council of Citizens of the city of Bryansk and the Bryansk region, and later began collaborating with the revealing newspaper “For Truth and Justice.”

On August 15, 2023, the newspaper and the Public Council held a round table of the Bryansk public against corruption. Already on August 16, Kupriyanov as one of the organizers of the round table was summoned to the investigative department of the police in Cheboksary, the capital of the Republic of Chuvashia. The still-open criminal case was reclassified it to the more serious criminal article of “organizing a criminal community.”

Now Alexander lives at home in Bryansk, but remains under investigation. According to the preventive measure (prohibition of certain actions), as an accused person he is prohibited from sending and receiving postal and telegraphic items, using the internet and other means of communication. He needs to get acquainted with the case materials (560 volumes), which involves long trips to the city of Cheboksary, located more than 1000 km from Bryansk.

The last major episode in the Kupriyanov case occurred in the second half of February 2024. On February 21, he was detained right on the street in Bryansk and taken to Cheboksary. The next day, a district court hearing was held there to change the preventive measure to detention. The investigators' petition was based on the fact that, while free, Alexander continued to use the Internet.

Thanks to the conscientious work of lawyer L. Karama, the principled position of judge E. Egorov and a public campaign of the defense, the investigators' petitions were rejected by the court, and the preventive measure for A. Kupriyanov remained the same. But the danger hanging over Kupriyanov remains. He has yet to prove his innocence when the case comes to trial.

Anton Orlov Imprisoned

Another example of repression against trade unionists is the case of Anton Orlov, coordinator of the Action trade union in the Republic of Bashkortostan. A member of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation and a small interregional organization, the Union of Marxists, Orlov is currently in prison on charges of large-scale fraud.

Anton is not a doctor by education but joined with medical teams at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, when the Republic's medical staff worked to the limit of their physical capabilities, often without additional salary. Seeing such injustice, Orlov as a young communist, joined the "Action" trade union and soon became its Republican coordinator on a voluntary unsalaried basis.

During the two years (2020-2022) of Orlov's work in the trade union, membership of the Republican organization increased fourfold; the salaries of ambulance crews increased; double pay on weekends was established, and pregnant employees were released from work while maintaining their average earnings.

The most successful trade union campaign was the "Italian strike" (working to rule) of February 2022 in Ishimbay, where ambulance doctors demanded payments for working in incomplete teams.

The strike led to the intervention of the labor inspectorate and the prosecutor's office, as well as the resignation of the head physician of the district hospital, leading to a noticeable response in the press and on television. The strikers' basic demands were met.

The accusation against Anton was brought in the midst of the Ishimbay strike, which clearly indicates the political background of the fabricated "case," in which he was considered a witness, involving two episodes of fuel supplies that weren't delivered by the companies Nefte-Service and Hermes after payments had been made.

Orlov had once worked as a commercial director at "Nefte-Service," but had no access to the company's accounts. Relations between two commercial organizations should be settled by an arbitration court, but the Republican Prosecutor's Office, without factual evidence, saw in this story the theft of 11 million rubles.

Representatives of trade union structures, one of whom, Chairman of the CLR, Boris Kravchenko, is a member of the Presidium of the Council for Human Rights and Civil Society Development under the President of Russia, were not allowed to appear at the trial as defense witnesses.

On September 23, 2022, Anton was sentenced to six-and-a-half years in a general regime colony and a fine of 250,000 rubles. It is curious that other defendants in the case testifying against him, whose guilt was actually proven, received shorter sentences. In February 2023, the appeal court mockingly reduced the prison term by three months.

This was not enough for the authorities, and after the official bankruptcy of Nefte-Serv-ice LLC and the payment of debt to the victims, another criminal case was opened against Anton Orlov under the article “fraud committed by an organized group on an especially large scale.”

Thanks to the efforts of lawyer Larisa Isaeva, the second case was repeatedly returned for further investigation due to numerous procedural violations. Finally, on June 26, a new trial began. Anton Orlov again found himself in the dock, as the only accused member of a supposed “organized group.”

Under the “Strong State” Cult

Among left-wing political prisoners there are even more politicians than trade union activists. For example, just for participating in a street action that is not coordinated with the authorities, you can easily end up in prison.

In Putin’s Russia, with its cult of a “strong state” and a “steady hand,” not only every branch of the military, but also every law enforcement agency received its own professional holiday, which the entire Russian people were ordered to celebrate. December 20 is a holiday for the ubiquitous Federal Security Service (FSB).

On December 20, 2021, members of the radical leftist youth association “Left Bloc” celebrated this day in their own way. They decided to congratulate the gendarmerie in a grotesque form: they stretched out a banner at the entrance to the FSB Directorate for the South-Western Administrative District of Moscow and lit smoke bombs, something that security forces are especially afraid of on the streets of large cities.

The state security officers did not appreciate the congratulations, and it was not difficult to identify those congratulating them, because a video of the action was posted on the Left Bloc channel. A few days later, the congratulators began to be detained, and a criminal case was opened against two of them, the anarchist Lev Skoryakin and the communist Ruslan Abasov.

In the interpretation of the investigation, the innocent joke of the young people was interpreted as follows: a group of people, by prior conspiracy, committed an attack on a government institution using weapons, and even motivated by political hatred, which is considered an aggravating circumstance.

Based on the testimony of an intimidated minor participant in the action and fabricated evidence, Lev and Ruslan were sent to a pre-trial detention center, where they spent nine months. Then the court replaced their preventive measure with a “prohibition of certain actions.”

After leaving prison, the defendants hastened to hide, thereby violating the order not to leave the region of permanent registration. Ruslan Abasov went to Bosnia and then to Croatia, where he currently lives. Lev Skoryakin, whose

passport was confiscated during the search, went to the capital of Kyrgyzstan, Bishkek, where a foreign passport was not required, and began applying for a visa to Germany.

In Bishkek, Lev was arrested several times by Kyrgyz security forces. He spent more than three months in prison, awaiting extradition to Russia. Then the General Prosecutor's Office of Kyrgyzstan refused the Russian side's request for his extradition; in September 2023, Lev Skoryakin was released.

However, he did not have to rejoice for long; already in October he was detained again, and this time handed over to the Russian side. Lev was transported to Moscow in handcuffs. Upon arrival at the capital's Domodedovo airport, he was beaten and tortured.

During the many-hour interrogation, FSB officers tried to extract information from him about left-wing organizations in Russia and about human rights structures that help political activists escape persecution. However, the interrogators never received the information they needed, and the exhausted Lev was taken to a pre-trial detention center.

For several weeks, the Left Bloc and human rights activists searched for the missing Skoryakin and eventually found him through a lawyer.

In December, a trial was held at which the prosecutor requested a sentence of five and a half years in prison for the defendant. On December 13, 2023, he was found guilty under the article "hooliganism involving violence against government officials" and sentenced to a fine of 500,000 rubles, from which he was released due to his long stay in prison.

Fearing a prosecution appeal against the relatively lenient sentence, Lev hastened to leave for the Armenian capital Yerevan, and in March 2024 he moved to Germany on a humanitarian visa.

Criminal Offense: Studying Marxism

It is quite possible to become a criminal in modern Russia without going to street protests or lighting smoke bombs, but simply by reading and discussing the classics of Marxism. And here even the mandates of regional authorities will not protect us.

In Ufa, the capital of the Republic of Bashkortostan, there was a Marxist circle, in which many have participated in the last decade. The creator of this particular circle, Alexey Dmitriev, is a young intellectual and, by the way, also a doctor (pediatrician-otolaryngologist), a person with incredibly broad interests from mathematics to political science.

No less prominent in the circle is Dmitry Chuvilin, until March 2022 an opposition deputy of the Kurultai (Parliament of Bashkortostan). The circle took upon itself the task of educating people. Priority was given to the study of philosophy, especially logic and critical thinking.

In the warm season, the circle organized gatherings in nature, with members of the Union of Marxists, the Left Front and other left-wing organizations from different regions of Russia. In addition to education and scientific discussions, many members of the circle worked in trade unions, participated in elections at various levels, wrote articles, blogged and tried to cooperate with the media.

Repression of Russian Left Activists

The emerging connection between theory and practice, the ethos of self-organization of the working people, relatively wide popularity by the standards of unofficial politics, and attempts to create an interregional structure distinguished the Ufa circle from many others.

The state perceived this as a threat, especially with the start of the war against Ukraine, modestly called the “special military operation.” A month after the outbreak of hostilities, early in the morning of March 25, 2022, FSB officers broke into the homes of 15 members of the Marxist circle.

Many were beaten during arrest. Searches in apartments were carried out with particular passion, with everything turned upside down in search of the material basis for bringing charges under the monstrous article of “terrorism.”

FSB officers confiscated all media, camping equipment, philosophical, political and historical literature of the left, which appears in the case materials as “extremist.” The operatives were particularly intrigued with the camping equipment: walkie-talkies as a means of communication, entrenching tools to dig around tents, camouflage-style tourist clothing, including one for a 10-year-old boy, and even children’s binoculars.

Subsequently, these items began to appear in the case materials among the evidence of the criminal activities of the circle. During the search, two grenades were planted on one of the Marxists — he allegedly hid them in the wood stove, which was heated daily.

On that day, 14 people were detained and taken to district police departments. Five members of the circle were taken into custody, the rest were left as witnesses and released. Doctor Alexey Dmitriev, former deputy Dmitry Chuvilin, entrepreneur Pavel Matisov, odd-job worker Rinat Burkeev and pensioner Yuri Efimov have been in pre-trial detention for more than two years.

Since Dmitry Chuvilin was a parliamentary representative, the decision to initiate a case was made personally by the head of the Russian Investigative Committee for Bashkortostan, Denis Chernyatyev. Immediately after the court decision on the arrest was announced, Chuvilin declared the political nature of their persecution and went on a hunger strike.

Though a member of the Kurultai parliamentary faction in the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, he did not support Chuvilin, issuing the standard philistine formulation: “We do not know all the facts. We are not completely sure of his innocence.”

The main points of the charge were preparation for a violent seizure of power, creation of a terrorist community, calls for terrorist activities, public justification of terrorism and its propaganda on the internet, and preparation for the theft of weapons. It is curious that the indictment accused the defendants of reading the works of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels and Vladimir Lenin, which have not yet disappeared from the shelves of almost any Russian library.

Moreover, studying the articles of the famous Soviet teacher Anton Makarenko and performing songs from the most popular Soviet films about the Civil War also appear as evidence of the criminal activities of the circle. From all this it is concluded that the accused were preparing an attack on law enforcement officers and military units, the seizure of military weapons, the commission of terrorist acts and even the seizure of power.

Funny? In such a sacred matter as the persecution of dissidents, the Russian government is not afraid to appear funny, because it is confident in its impunity, as well as in the passive indifference of the people, who have supposedly lost their sense of humor.

The main “evidence” of the accusation is two grenades. At the same time, the case contains an unanswered petition from defendant Pavel Matisov to conduct an investigation into the origin of the grenades and how they got into his wood stove.

The Informant, the Trial, the War

The entire basis of the indictment was taken from the testimony of one informant — Sergei Sapozhnikov, who joined the circle in the spring of 2020.

In 2014-2015, Sapozhnikov fought in the militia of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People’s Republic as a squad commander. At the end of 2017, Ukraine put him on the international wanted list in a criminal case initiated in July 2014 in Dnepropetrovsk. The Security Service of Ukraine accused Sergei of robbery with injury leading to death.

Sapozhnikov was detained in Ufa in November 2017 and sent to a pre-trial detention center, from where he was released in April 2018. Why he was released remains a mystery. After the investigation began, members of the Ufa circle began to suspect that Sapozhnikov was recruited by the FSB and in 2020 specially introduced into the organization as a provocateur.

The investigation’s pressure on the remaining members of the circle was aimed at neutralizing those who could resist the official version of the prosecution. But one of the circle members was on vacation in Turkey in March 2022. After news came from Ufa about a search of his house and the arrest of his comrades, he and his family were forced to make the difficult decision to emigrate.

Already in the USA, he wrote several articles to reveal the case from the inside, in which he gave an alternative version of what was happening and exposed the provocateur.

On January 30, 2024, hearings of the so-called “case of Ufa Marxist circle” began in the Central District Military Court in Yekaterinburg. At the very first hearing, one of the defendants, Yuri Efimov, stated that the accusation was fabricated, and the main witness was a provocateur.

It is obvious that a case of 30 volumes will take a long time to be considered. Only a few meetings took place over six months. It seems that even the court is embarrassed by the absurdity of the situation and does not yet know how to behave.

In the first days of Russia’s imperialist aggression in Ukraine, when it became clear that a “blitzkrieg” would not work and a protracted war would sooner or later cause discontent among the workers, the State Duma, obedient to Vladimir Putin, hastened to adopt additions to the Criminal Code and the Code of Administrative Offenses of the Russian Federation.

The most famous innovation was the so-called “article on discrediting the Russian army,” under which several thousand people were convicted in administrative cases (Administrative Code of the Russian Federation 20.3.3) and several dozen for repeated violations in criminal cases (Criminal Code of the Russian Federation 280.3 — up to three years in prison).

In fact, anyone who actively expresses their non-acceptance of a “special military operation” can be charged under

this article. And this is not always required!

A Young Hero

On the night of February 24, 2024, on the second anniversary of the beginning of the aggression, a very young communist Daria Kozyreva was arrested in St. Petersburg for pasting a piece of paper with lines in Ukrainian from his poem “Testament” to the monument to the great Ukrainian poet Taras Shevchenko:

Daria Kozyreva, in the hands of the state, maintains her smile.

Oh bury me, then rise ye up
And break your heavy chains
And water with the tyrants’ blood
The freedom you have gained.

Daria became imbued with communist ideas as a teenager; she read *Capital* at the age of 12. Before her arrest, she participated in the work of two left-wing organizations and circles associated with them. As she grew up, Daria moved from Stalinism-Hoxhaism to authentic Leninism.

From the beginning of the “special operation,” Daria, assessing it as an imperialist war, did not limit herself to routine condemnation of what was happening — she acted. In January of this year, she was expelled from St. Petersburg State University for a post on social networks against new articles of the criminal code, where Daria ridiculed Russian claims to “denazify Ukraine.”

Even before reaching adulthood at 18, she came to the attention of law enforcement officers because of an anti-war inscription on Palace Square in St. Petersburg. She and her friend received the first report for discrediting the army in August 2022 for tearing down a poster in Patriot Park, calling for service in the active army under a contract.

At that time, the punishment was administrative. A secondary offense of this kind implies criminal liability, and Daria was imprisoned in a pre-trial detention center for the leaflet on the monument.

Eighteen-year-old Daria Kozyreva perceives repressions against herself as proof of a completed duty, as recognition by her enemies of the importance of her struggle. It is characterized by a sacrificial principle in the best traditions of the Russian revolutionary movement. This helps the resilient young woman endure the hardships of imprisonment.

Comrades who correspond with her and saw her at the trials note that Daria is in a great mood and is determined to fight to the end. In all the photographs from the courtroom, Daria smiles widely. In an open letter to the opposition newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*, which has been published only in electronic format for more than two years, she writes:

“On the evening of the 25th, I learned about the criminal case — and was in some kind of desperate delight. I smiled and joked during the search, and continued to smile when they brought me to the temporary detention facility. And there, on the night from the 25th to the 26th, I realized: that’s it, now my conscience will calm down. It tormented me for two damn years. I felt like I wasn’t doing enough; and even though I had anti-war actions on my record, my conscience told me: if you remain free, it means you haven’t done enough.

“Sometimes I didn’t understand what right I had to walk free, while brave and honest Russians were locked in prison.

I understood that if the 'Putin regime' lasted any longer, then my chance of getting to prison was quite high. Essentially, what was supposed to happen, happened. I didn't expect that they would decide to put me for Taras Shevchenko — oh my God, this is absurd! Well, the merrier! Shevchenko is my favorite poet and it is a special pleasure to suffer for him.

"... I'm not afraid of getting sentenced. If necessary, I would give my life for my beliefs, but here they will only take me away for a few years. I gladly accept this bitter cup and drink it to the dregs with pride."

A Regime in Fear of Solidarity

The fate of several leftwing activists we've discussed here — different in views, type of activity, and temperament — clearly indicates that in today's Russia the efforts of the state as the repressive apparatus of the ruling class are aimed at eliminating, uprooting all resistance to the established regime, at eliminating any alternative, no matter how harmless at first glance it may seem, at settling scores with those who think and live "not according to ours."

The regime sees, and rightly so, a threat in any manifestation of freedom, and dissent. Therefore, not only the radical left, but anyone who raises a voice against the established order, in defense of the oppressed, is at risk.

Democratic procedures like elections have long turned into a fiction, and this is not really hidden from anyone. An active and radically thinking citizen cannot count on the opportunity to act in the legal political field. But this is not enough.

It is not enough for the state to drive all consistent and energetic oppositionists into the "ghetto." It needs them to not even pose a potential threat.

There is still enough space in prisons and penal colonies, and it will always find a suitable law to send anyone we don't like there — and if suddenly there are not enough laws, it will adopt new ones. What does it cost, with such a parliament!

As the repressive policies of the authorities increase, opposition from the left and democratic forces increases. In addition to campaigns to protect specific political prisoners, structures are emerging that aim to unite efforts and politically formalize the struggle for the release of those who suffered for freedom, for the ideals of equality and social justice.

One such structure is the Solidarity Action Committee. This organization already existed in the second half of the 2000s, when it sought to coordinate the activity of trade unions, strike committees and left-wing organizations, establishing information exchange and mutual assistance between them, and contributed to the development of a common position.

In less than five years of its existence, the Committee carried out dozens of actions and solidarity campaigns, the largest of which were a 28-day strike at the Ford plant in Vsevolozhsk and a two-month "Italian strike" in the Seaport of St. Petersburg. At that time there was a rise in the class struggle, weak of course but, by the standards of post-Soviet Russia, quite worthy of attention.

Now, unfortunately, the realities have changed: the labor movement is in a rut, and the problem of political

persecution has come to the fore.

The committee resumed its work in the spring of 2022, with the outbreak of war and an attack on people's social and political rights. Without refusing in principle to work with centers of self-organization of workers, the new SAC in its practical activities is primarily engaged in helping repressed leftists, workers and trade union activists.

We took the cases and are directly involved in the protection and support of many of the above-mentioned activists: Boris Kagarlitsky, Alexander Kupriyanov, Anton Orlov, Lev Skoryakin, Daria Kozyreva. Members of the SAC from Bashkortostan provide assistance to the "Ufa Five," monitor the progress of the trial, disseminate information about the views and fate of comrades in trouble, and support them with letters and parcels.

While defending specific activists, we do not forget about the political and economic struggle for the liberation of labor and humanity as a whole from the dictatorship of capital. Every action we take is aimed at making wage workers aware of their class interests and organizing to fight for these interests.

We consider it extremely important to strengthen ties of international solidarity. The current moment requires all the progressive left forces of the planet to unite and organize to fight for a future in which there is no war, exploitation, poverty and injustice.

The world should belong to those who shed their blood, sweat and tears for its benefits. We are confident that our foreign comrades will provide us with all possible support. We express the same readiness!

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