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Kazakhstan :

Nazarbayev regime murders strikers

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On Friday December 16, 2011 Kazakh police attacked a gathering of striking oil workers in Zhanaozen (or Janaozen, a town of 100,000 inhabitants on the coast of the Caspian Sea), who have for some months been occupying the town's central square, demanding trade union rights and a wage increase. The pretext for this attack was that the square was to be used for ceremonies marking the twentieth anniversary of Kazakhstan's independence.

When the strikers, joined by the local population, began to defend themselves, the police opened fire. The official government press release spoke of 11 deaths, 86 wounded (including 6 police officers) and 70 arrests, but independent sources speak of dozens of deaths and hundreds of wounded. Military reinforcements were rushed to Zhanaozen, the authorities blockaded the town, cut communications (telephone, internet and so on), invoking a state of emergency and curfew from 11 pm to 7am.

We publish below an interview with Esenbek Ouktechbaev, president of the new "Janartou" ("Renaissance") trade union and one of the leaders of the Socialist Movement of Kazakhstan, a Kazakh anti-capitalist organisation. Ouktechbaev, a leader of the oil workers strike, had to go into exile in Moscow this autumn, because the regime of Nursultan Nazarbayev had prosecuted workers in the oil workers on strike in the region [Oblast] of Mangystau, as well as taking measures against the independent trade unions and left activists who worked with them. In this interview, carried out in Moscow before the latest attacks on the workers, Ouktechbaev presents the situation of the new Kazakh trade union movement and the oil workers' struggle.

Against state terror in Kazakhstan, the Kazakhs workers need the solidarity of the world workers' movement. The website LabourStart is organising a campaign of petitions against the repression: <http://www.labourstart.org/cgi-bin/...> (J.M.)

Tell us about your first involvement in the workers' movement...

I worked in an electric train repair factory in Almaty. I began as a worker, then I received a technical education and became an engineer. During the five years which preceded the strike, I headed the department of standardisation and I was the Internal Audit Director [responsible for the verification of financial reports] I had access to the documentation originating from all the subdivisions of the factory.

The enterprise had nearly 3,000 employees and 53 departments. According to an official decree of the government of Kazakhstan, it fell into the category of strategic factories and could not be privatised. It was however privatised without the prior agreement of the whole of the workforce. We suspected that this was not a clean business and that somebody was profiting from it. All the more so in that the factory was located in the very centre of Almaty and that the land there was very dear "Euros" up to 200,000 dollars per 100 m². The whole factory occupied more than 3 km². The factory did not have the least problem, as its main client was the state through the company "Kazakhstanemirjoly" [Kazakhstan Railways] - it was responsible for the repair of passenger trains and locomotives.

However, starting from 2008, wages began to be paid late. Delays of one or two months were common. Then the number of employees fell from 3,000 to 2,200, or 800 redundancies. Wages fell by 50% in a period of inflation when the factory was not short of work. In June 2009, wages had not been paid for five months. According to my analysis as auditor, the company had been brought to the edge of bankruptcy. It could only survive for two or three months. I decided to oppose this. I began to set up a strike committee. That was done clandestinely, from May 2009. Discontent grew, not only among the workers, but also among the management "Euros" supervisors and foremen.

The workers did not even have money for a meal in the factory canteen or to go home on public transport. Some walked many kilometres and others did not even leave their workplace, so as not to waste their strength. That is what obliged us to form a strike committee. I began to mobilise the most reliable people among the supervisors. The number of participants in the strike committee gradually rose to 50. The meetings took place outside of the factory, in the greatest secrecy. We prepared the strike for around a month and a half. The date planned to start it was June 22. So as not to reveal our plans before time, we met the press under a false pretext and outside of the factory. Once the workers as a whole, night shift and day shift, or more than 2 000 people, were gathered in one of the workshops we brought the press in little buses and began the meeting. We prepared a statement addressed to the Prime Minister, the Minister of National Security as well as the Public Prosecutor. During the meeting the statement was debated and adopted. We also voted for a motion of no confidence in the president of the factory trade union committee for their passivity.

At this time the factory was de facto occupied by the workers. Our main demand was not even the repayment of wages not received. The accent was put on the nationalisation of the factory. All the more in that the name of the owner remained unknown. The word was that the factory was directed by one of the cronies of the President of Kazakhstan through figureheads. The minutes of the meeting were signed by all the 2,200 persons present. At the initiative of the collective, and under the control of the judicial authority, a deep going examination of the management of the factory was carried out. The list of violations brought to light represented 72 pages of the report rendered by the commission set up for this purpose. In spite of all that, the directorate of the company began legal proceedings to have recognised the illegal character of the strike, and it won. I was designated as the main person guilty for the launch of this illegal strike. On September 2 I was renvoyé on various grounds.

We tried to organise an early trade union conference and to re-elect a union committee. However, under the pressure of the Federation of Trade Unions of Kazakhstan and the rail workers' union, the election of a new committee was postponed. At this time, waves of spontaneous protest broke out in the factory. A call for the assassination of the director of the factory as the main person responsible for the events was launched. I succeeded in dissuading the workers in revolt and in saving the life of the director. He was forced to make a statement to the press according to which the factory would not close and would continue to operate for another 15 years.

That means that, in spite of the repression and your dismissal, the situation has improved?

For sure! The strike made the factory directorate understand that they could not go too far at this point. Whatever happened, we have all the same won some victories, although we were not going to succeed in creating an independent union, because the sectoral union of rail workers, which was part of the Federation of Trade Unions of Kazakhstan, was frontally opposed. The local authority and the judicial authority also blocked the process.

How did you get involved in union work in the oil extraction sector?

In 2008, I began to participate in various social movements; I was notably active in the groups of debtors of credit and mortgages. That was where I got to know the young people belonging to the workers' movement. We organised meeting with different trade union organisations. I participated in the work of the Centre for Cooperation of Trade Union Groups. Then in 2009 we created a committee for the formation of an independent trade union throughout the Republic, because the workers began to understand that the official unions did not fulfil their functions: they did not defend the workers and were only concerned with collecting dues from their members.

I was a member of the committee set up. In November 2010, during the founding congress, the trade union "Janartou", which means "Renaissance", emerged. The Socialist Movement of Kazakhstan was among the initiators of the project. It included not only trade unions but also social movements. Some regional official unions also joined "Janartou". In total, the union has 40,000 members across the country. Unhappily, under various pretexts, the

Ministry of Justice refused to provide it with its national registration. We began legal proceedings against the ministry but the representatives of this institution refused to appear before the Court on several occasions. However, according to the legislation in force, our work is legal. The founding congress has taken place and we are on the point of receiving our registration.

Can we say that the workers in the oil sector have been those who have most actively struggled for the defence of their rights in Kazakhstan? Why is that so?

Yes, we could say that. In Kazakhstan, the oil workers strike lasts since 2008, with periodic jumps. The enterprises in this sector are spread over four regions: Mangystau, Atyrau, Aktioubé and Kyzylorda. In Atyrau, strikes have taken place since 2008. We have always had links with the strikers and have brought them legal aid. In March 2010, a strike took place in the city of Zhanaozen, in Mangystau. The main demand concerned wage increases. Thanks to this strike, an increase of 30% was won. However, the other conditions stipulated by the agreement made were not respected, which has led to the conflict today. The employer, the company "OzenMounaĀGaz" and the secret services were equally guilty of repression. For example, a drug trafficking case was mounted against one of the strike committee leaders, Tagan Kochanov. 5,000 workers at the factory then went on strike for five days to demand his release. Given the losses that represented, the authorities were forced to release Kochanov. The workers in the oil sector have quite a significant experience of this kind of action.

What is the current situation in the south of Kazakhstan?

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the processing industry was virtually nonexistent in Kazakhstan. The factories which had not been closed were practically destroyed. The conditions for the formation of broad workers' collectives which could self-organise and represent a real force were not then met. The specificities of oil extraction render necessary the creation of big companies, and thus of broad workers' collectives.

The current strike, which has lasted since May 2011, has been unleashed by a more current conflict. The workers demanded the revision of the mode of payment and the introduction of a risk bonus. That was done in accordance with a decree of the Kazakh government. Initially an official union was present in the enterprise, but its president had been bought off by the employer and it took no action. The workers organised a conference. The whole of the committee was re-elected. The representatives of the new independent union attempted to recover the official stamp and documents of the previous one, but access to the union office, situated in the administration buildings, was refused to them. A complaint was filed but the legal authorities, instead of concerning themselves with the problem, began repression against the activists and the lawyers of the union, notably against Natalia Sokolova. Attacks by criminal bands became more and more frequent; numerous activists in the movement were attacked. We are also threatened with armed attack and the houses of some activists were opened fire on. At the request of the deputy director of the company "KarajambasmounaĀ" the lawyer Natalia Sokolova was arrested. She was held in provisional detention for eight days, then for two months. In the end, she received a sentence of six years imprisonment for having started a social protest, according to article 164 of the criminal code. She was also charged for organisation of an illegal gathering, which was in itself absurd! It was the workers themselves who should decide the time when they gathered. An appeal procedure has been launched but our legal system is totally dependent on the executive power, so it is not very likely that the verdict will change.

Another union leader, Akjanat Aminov has also been placed under arrest for organisation of an illegal gathering. He suffers from diabetes and is dependent on insulin. During his four months of imprisonment, he was not allowed access to his insulin. It was virtually torture... in fact it is torture. Given his state of health, the court authorised his conditional release with a deferment of two years, but he has been deprived of his right to trade union activity. Hundreds of union activists have been subjected to administrative sanctions. Last August 2, the union leader Jaksylyk Tourbaev was murdered at his workplace. The day after there was to be a union meeting where he had a

good chance of being elected head of the committee. It should be said that the enterprise has an armed guard unit and that entry is categorically forbidden to outsiders. Then on August 18, Jansole Karabaleva, the daughter of one of the union leaders, aged 18, was kidnapped and murdered. Attacks with firearms or petrol became increasingly common, as did physical assaults. The activist Esteñ Karachev as well as journalists from the independent video portal "Stan", Asan Amilov and Orken Bisenov, were also attacked. None of these cases have been considered by the legal authorities.

The number of strikers present on the picket line has been as many as 18,000. At Zhanaozen the strike has been maintained 24 hours on 24. Meetings have been organised every day. The strikers meet regularly on the central square of the town as they meet at work, that is, according to their hours of work, some at day, some at night. Some of the workers are however obliged to work, because in this region nearly all the families have credit obligations. But most of them find some time after work to come to support the strikers at the square. Also, many pay a small part of their income into the strike fund.

In the oil regions of Kazakhstan, the unemployment rate is high, which is significant. To find a job in another sector apart from extraction is very difficult. That is why jobless youth feel a great solidarity with the strikers. In any big Kazakh family you find one or two employees in the oil sector and some unemployed. An unemployed union has been created. It already has a thousand members and it supports the strike.

The administration has attempted to put an end to the strike through the use of strike-breakers. But this action by the directorate of the company has failed in a fairly amusing manner. Safety clothing is not supplied to workers in the oil sector. They are obliged to buy it, that is why they wear it for a very long time. The strike-breakers had received new clothes and were thus immediately detected. It was, then, their ignorance of the real life of the workers which played against them. The members of the union have often recognised police among the strike-breakers detected, it should be said that the solidarity in relation to the movement is great, the directorate and the local authority cannot employ workers from the factory to do this work

This strike launched on the basis of economic demands is in the course of becoming very political. Currently the main demands are the release of the lawyer Natalia Sokolova as well as a halt to the repression and provocations. We also demand the reinstatement of all employees laid off, trade union freedom and freedom to meet. These are the conditions under which the strikers will sit at the negotiations table.

What are, in your view, the perspectives for trade union struggle in Kazakhstan as a whole, and more specifically in the oil extraction sector?

The employees in the oil sector are ready to struggle seriously and they will not give up on their demands. Even if they succeed in suppressing them now, the strike will start again in some time. The booming Chinese expansion has become a factor of irritation, and not the least. The company "Karajambasmounañ" is 50% owned by the Chinese "Citic"; and "Aktobemounañgaz" is 94% owned by the Chinese "CNPC". In the companies active in the exploitation of the resources of the mountains, the situation is no better, above all for the miners. In the mines of the companies "Arcelor-Mittal" and "Kazakhmys", located respectively in Temistaou and Djezkazgane, there is a pre strike situation.

As for employees in the public sector, they are not ready to go on strike at this time. They are too isolated in their work conditions and viewpoint. That is why the authorities are permanently trying to manipulate them. For example, in certain institutions, it is not rare that the employees are obliged, in the context of elections, to vote for the candidate that has been indicated to them. The authorities are also tempted to get at the oil workers through their relatives employed in the civil service. Thus the main hope of the struggle and solidarity between the workers rests currently on the mine and oil industries of Kazakhstan.

Talk to us a little about your political views what in your opinion; would be the possible social and political alternative for Kazakhstan and more broadly the CIS?

I am a convinced socialist. Twenty years of independence for Kazakhstan has allowed us to decide whether or not it was worth renouncing what we had inherited from the October Revolution, to the benefit of an illusory abundant capitalism. In the 20th century, the Soviet Union represented the sole challenge to world capitalism and a significant factor of humanisation of capitalist relations in the world. Following its collapse in 1991, we saw not only the privatisations and the installation of a wildcat capitalism in the countries of the CIS, but also a transformation of the social state in the West. The economy has been abandoned to the spontaneity of the markets, and the current crisis is only the price of such a policy. In twenty years, we have all had the opportunity to convince ourselves that the principles of socialism are situated at a much higher level than those of capitalism, and that capitalism is a dead end.

Of course, the principles of socialism were not fully realised in the Soviet Union. Errors were committed, but there were also advances: medical care was free, as was secondary and higher education and there were numerous social advantages. All this was lost during the process of transition to capitalism. We have arrived at a situation of an extreme gap between the poor and rich within society. Naturally, the rich only represent a small part, and all the rest are impoverished. I believe that this situation is untenable. It only benefits the people who currently hold the reins, they use their position in the spheres of power to merge authority and private ownership. Before property belonged to the people, they have made the state itself their property. They have got used to drawing immense profits from it and they will never renounce their policy. In the Socialist Movement of Kazakhstan we have raised this slogan: "Change policy or we will change representatives!" We believe that power in Kazakhstan, but not only there, should belong to the workers.

Interview given on November 16, 2011 in Moscow to Léonid Tereschenkov