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Labor Union Lawyer Jailed for 6 Years by Kazakhstan Court

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ALMATY, Kazakhstan — A Kazakh court has jailed a lawyer who advised striking oil workers on their rights, prompting human rights bodies to accuse the authorities of stifling dissent and quashing labor union activity.

The city court of Aktau in western Kazakhstan sentenced labor union lawyer Natalya Sokolova to six years in jail on Monday after finding her guilty of "inciting social discord" and "organizing illegal gatherings."

"Trying to stop someone like Sokolova from talking to workers about issues like wage disparities amounts to arbitrary and illegitimate interference with the right of the freedom of expression," Rachel Denber, deputy director of the Europe and Central Asia division at New York-based Human Rights Watch, said in an interview from Moscow.

The criminal investigation was based on a complaint issued by oil company Karazhanbasmunai, or KBM, which has been hit by a workers' strike lasting since May.

The ongoing strike, which has also engulfed a bigger oil company, Uzenmunaigas, operating in the same region, is unprecedented for modern Kazakhstan. KBM is jointly owned by CITIC, China's biggest state investment company, and Kazakhstan's London-listed oil and gas firm KazMunaiGas Exploration Production, Kazakhstan's No. 2 oil producer.

The striking workers are demanding that KBM stop interfering in the work of their labor union and increase their wages.

KBM management could not be reached for comment.

Sokolova told the trial that she did not organize the strike or any illegal meetings but acted in her official capacity as legal adviser to the union, appearing at the invitation of workers who wished to consult her about wages.

"Kazakhstan shouldn't be abusing the criminal justice system to put down legitimate union activity or shouldn't misuse the criminal justice system to limit the way people can address workers' issues," Denber said.

Galym Ageulov, an activist with the Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law, said Sokolova had not been not permitted to summon witnesses in her defense. Her husband, Vasily Chepurnoi, represented her in the closed-door trial.

Ageulov also said video evidence displayed in court that appeared to support the prosecution's case had been selectively edited and inaccurately reflected her public statements.

"In all her statements, [Sokolova] acted as the conciliatory party, she simply acquitted her duties as a lawyer, explaining to people how they should behave within the confines of the law," Ageulov said.

(Reuters, AP)

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