

# Labor Protests Pose New Kremlin Headache

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No sooner had protests in Moscow and St. Petersburg quieted down than strikes broke out in the provinces. For the most part, these protesters were not the same people who had turned out in December and February to demand fair elections. These demonstrators demanded higher salaries, better work conditions and the recognition of independent trade unions by their employers.

Workers at a battery factory in Saratov went on strike in mid-March. Later, oil drillers in the republic of Bashkortostan staged walkouts in the cities of Neftekamsk, Dyurtyuli and Yanaul to protest a reduction in wages. Finally, employees halted production at the Benteler Automotive plant in Kaluga. That strike was the most important and symbolic, quickly morphing from a local conflict into a confrontation between the authorities and the Interregional Trade Union of Automobile Workers, or MPRA. For Russian trade unions, the MPRA is an example of a strong and effective organization capable of achieving real concessions from employers.

The authorities responded to the work stoppage with undisguised pressure tactics. Kaluga MPRA leader Dmitry Kozhnev was summoned before a prosecutor, and riot police units were stationed at the factory. Governor Anatoly Artamonov, rather than the factory director, soon became the main antagonist for protesters.

Once again, state-controlled trade unions shamelessly showed their true colors. They were extremely active in the run-up to the March presidential election, mobilizing members and providing transportation and meals so they could join pro-government rallies in the capital. But the moment that the protection of labor rights became an issue, the unions made it clear on whose side they really stood. No sooner had the Benteler plant gone idle than Alexander Grechaninov, the head of the Kaluga branch of the pro-Kremlin Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia, rushed to the scene. In all the years of its existence, this organization has never once tried to establish a formal union at the plant. But whenever labor disputes have arisen, it invariably sided with management, using scare tactics and persuasion to get workers to return to the assembly line.

But this time, its efforts were to no avail. The workers stood firm. The plant's management and owners were forced into negotiations conducted by the governor himself. The trade unions also brought in their "heavy artillery" — Russian Confederation of Labor president Boris Kravchenko traveled to Kaluga. Once information about the strike began circulating on the Internet, sympathizers began raising money for a strike fund.

On the morning of April 2, management agreed to the strikers' demands, announcing acceptance of the trade union and the start of collective bargaining.

This sends a sign to the workers of many other businesses across Russia that, with proper organization, they can successfully fight for their rights as well. It should also serve as a warning to the authorities that the social climate is changing just as dramatically as the political mood.

Strikes are essentially prohibited in Russia, and until now they have been rare, and even more rarely successful. After initial victories achieved by the MPRA in 2007-08, a pause ensued in the development of the workers' movement because of the economic crisis and organizational problems within the new trade unions themselves. That is why the success of the Benteler strike has been so significant.

Kremlin leaders might entertain the hope that a lull in political protests in Moscow and St. Petersburg means that they can rest easy. But events now taking place in the provinces show that their real problems are only beginning.

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