

Astrakhan Hunger Strike Grows 10 Times Larger

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Former mayoral candidate Oleg Shein speaks at a rally in Astrakhan. **Courtesy of John Cox**

Thirty-five people joined the hunger strike protesting alleged falsifications in the Astrakhan mayoral vote, increasing the number of strikers from four to 39 as hope grows among protesters that they will soon reach their goal of overturning the election results.

In a blog post Monday, former mayoral candidate Oleg Shein published the new list of the 39 people now participating in the hunger strike.

Shein is on day 40 without food, though he did drink juice in a concession to Central Elections Commission head Vladimir Churov after he agreed to review footage from the election.

After reviewing the videos, Churov said Friday that procedural violations during the March 4 mayoral election were found in more than half the city's polling stations, fueling optimism on the part of Shein and his supporters that the results could be overturned. Shein, running as a candidate for the Just Russia party, officially received 30 percent of the vote, losing to United Russia's candidate Mikhail Stolyarov, who won 60 percent.

With most of the hunger strike's goals reached, its focus has shifted toward the release of several of Shein's supporters who are in police custody.

"I think we have achieved an unprecedented decision by the election commission that there were violations in 130 of the 200 polling sites in Astrakhan," Shein said in a radio interview with Kommersant-FM, RIA-Novosti reported.

"Thus, we have fulfilled the most important task at the federal level, and the goals of the strike, in principle, have been reached. In Astrakhan, detentions and arrests of our friends continue, so as I said yesterday, the hunger strike will only stop when the repression against the people stops, and specifically when our arrested comrades are released from prison," he said.

A number of Shein's supporters have been arrested at unsanctioned protests in Astrakhan. In one incident Friday, four activists were arrested after trying to hold a "Funeral for Free Speech," laying a memorial wreath at a local television station.

Writing on his LiveJournal blog Monday, Shein called on his supporters to stop picketing, saying he feared provocations that could lead to more arrests.

He wrote that a total of at least 30 people were being held, of whom 80 percent came from other cities.

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