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Political Players Vie for May Day Support

By Alexander Bratersky

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Rally participants march behind a banner for the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia. **Igor Tabakov**

Breaking with recent tradition, President-elect Vladimir Putin and President Dmitry Medvedev joined in a mass rally of trade-union supporters for the annual May Day celebration of labor in an effort to boost working-class support.

Both leaders walked among marchers — in an appearance reminiscent of the Soviet era when officials often did the same. In recent years, Russia's leaders have opted not to take part in the celebrations.

One female marcher asked Medvedev and Putin to make their appearance at the rally an "annual tradition," to which Medvedev responded positively, Gazeta.ru reported.

City police estimated that 150,000 people attended the rally, which started at the Belorusskaya metro station and ended on Manezh Square. Independent estimates put the number of participants closer to 60,000.

The demonstration was organized by the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia, a pro-Kremlin trade union.

Medvedev used the occasion to sign an international labor organization bill aimed at protecting workers from abuse by their employers, the presidential press service announced.

To further burnish their working-man bona fides, Medvedev and Putin dropped in for a beer after the rally at a bar owned by Andrei Kobzon, the son of crooner and Duma Deputy Iosif Kobzon, RIA-Novosti reported.

Despite the public glad-handing, the sentiment driving recent anti-Kremlin protests was not far away.

Some opposition groups staged smaller pro-labor rallies Tuesday in Moscow and cities around Russia, although organizers of the nonsystemic opposition marshaled their strength for a sanctioned protest on May 6, on the eve of Putin's inauguration. Several protesters were detained in both Moscow and St. Petersburg.

At the main Moscow rally, flags of the ruling United Russia party were carried by many, but when asked about them, most declined to speak.

“I am for stability. If a country will be stable, stability will be at work and with the family too,” said one marcher who identified himself with only his first name and patronymic, Vladimir Alexandrovich.

But the boosterism was also met with an open display of cynicism that some rally attendees struggled to hide.

“I would tell you what I honestly think, but I am afraid that I will lose my job,” said one woman, who said she works for the city government.

“I don't belong to a trade union, so I can't tell you how independent they are,” said one middle-aged man, who wore a yellow baseball cap reading: “Trade Unions of the Pharmaceutical Industry.”

The crowd also expressed indifference to slogans broadcast over the loudspeakers, remaining largely unresponsive to exhortations that they chant “glory” to the various official trade unions.

The slogans praising authorities were even contradicted by some rally banners, demanding greater transparency and higher pay.

“Prices have gone up, salaries should too,” one poster read.

Some posters took pot shots at opposition activists involved in recent protests against alleged fraud in December's State Duma vote.

“Hamsters don't work,” read one, referring to a nickname given to opposition bloggers.

While passing Manezh Square, the rallies were greeted by city officials, among them Andrei

Isayev, a United Russia party heavyweight who was a left-wing trade union leader during the 1990s.

But soon after walking past officials, many participants threw away their United Russia party flags and posters praising Putin, and left to go about their daily routine.

“Glory for a clean conscience! Glory to the guys who don't believe in this garbage,” said one student, dropping a flag of the student union on the ground and walking off with his friends.

Across town, hundreds of union supporters and pro-democracy activists gathered at Krestyanskaya Zastava Ploshchad to call for a reform of the Labor Code, which they say makes it impossible for workers to organize independent trade unions or hold strikes.

“Trade unions have been deliberately weakened,” said Boris Kravchenko, president of the All-Russia Confederation of Labor, which organized the rally with the liberal Yabloko party and the social-democratic A Just Russia party.

The attendees were diverse, with everyone from Yabloko activists to migrant workers to anarcho-syndicalists waving flags and chanting slogans such as “Power to the people!”

But despite such spurts of enthusiasm, the crowd seemed listless, perhaps disappointed by the turnout, which was poor compared with the Kremlin-backed event.

Speeches by A Just Russia leader Sergei Mironov, Yabloko leader Sergei Mitrokhin and former Astrakhan mayoral candidate Oleg Shein managed to lift the crowd's spirits only temporarily.

“The strength of unions today is mostly symbolic. But it's a good symbol, a great symbol,” Shein said afterward.

Attendees and speakers lamented the weakness of the independent labor movement. Yura Tyurin, 26, a nonunionized luggage handler at Sheremetyevo Airport, said he would join a union if there were one worth joining.

“I heard something about a union after I got my job. But the union doesn't do anything except give out boxes of chocolates at New Year's and help single mothers,” he said.

Kravchenko said he was optimistic that the labor movement would grow stronger, but said his group wouldn't be joining up with the middle-class protest movement that sprouted in December.

“The self-appointed leaders of 'Bolotnaya,' in my opinion, have chosen the wrong tactic,” he said. “Their slogans — free elections, free political prisoners — are out of touch with the majority of workers.”

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