The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Hunger Strikes in Industrial Heartland Test Loyalty to Putin

By The Moscow Times

November 06, 2012



Workers warming themselves under a tent during their hunger strike near a steel mill in Verkhnyaya Sinyachikha. **Alissa de Carbonnel**

VERKHNYAYA SINYACHIKHA, Sverdlovsk Region — Factory smokestacks tower over weathered wooden houses in this provincial town, part of the industrial heartland that helped propel Vladimir Putin into the presidency.

Towns like Verkhnyaya Sinyachikha in the vast metals and manufacturing province of Sverdlovsk in the Ural Mountains, some 2,000 kilometers east of Moscow, have long been regarded as the backbone of support for the former KGB intelligence officer.

But that loyalty has been tested by hunger strikes over unpaid wages in at least three factories in Sverdlovsk this year that have prompted authorities to step in to rescue the biggest employers.

The government subsidies are reminiscent of generous industry bailouts that stemmed social unrest during the 2008-09 global economic crisis and signal Kremlin concern that support from working-class Russians, long inured to quietly shouldering hardships, could be at risk nearly 13 years after Putin rose to power.

"The first time he ran, we voted for him. The second too, but this time we didn't," said Igor Ilyukhin, 41, one of 47 steel mill workers who fasted for 11 days for unpaid wages, camping on the rotten planks of an abandoned building near the shuttered gates of their bankrupt employer.

It is not clear how widespread such rumblings of working-class discontent with Putin are. He won nearly two-thirds of votes, handing him a third presidential term in May, and told a TV interviewer before his 60th birthday last month that "the overwhelming majority of people still support me."

During his election campaign, Putin depicted blue-collar workers as the "real Russia" and pitted them against the mainly middle-class protesters who have staged big rallies against him in Moscow and were referred to by him as "chattering monkeys."

But the hunger strike in which Ilyukhin took part was the fourth this year by former workers of the plant that until recently employed 400 people in Verkhnyaya Sinyachikha, a town of 9,800 people 145 kilometers from the regional capital Yekaterinburg.

Hunger strikes have also struck a truck-manufacturing plant and a smelter owned by Russia's largest aluminum producer RusAl in two separate factory towns in the Urals region.

Another strike is threatened in the region by 98 workers of a small-parts manufacturer who have given their bankrupt employer until Nov. 6 to pay the wages they are owed.

"Maybe we're tired of how we're living," Ilyukhin said.

A way to get paid

The workers, hunched around a smoky campfire in padded state-issue overalls, said that striking was the only way to get paid, and that it was a safe bet the government would step in to ensure they were when they did strike.

"We strike and they pay us a bit. We strike again and they pay us a bit more. We don't know where the money comes from," said Andrei Zhukov, taking a pragmatic view of what may seem like a desperate tactic. Zhukov, one of the organizers, said it was easy to gather a list of willing strikers by word of mouth — despite this being the fourth yet by former workers — and register the protest with the town hall.

A visit by police to the homes of two participants did little to dissuade them from striking.

"We're used to being paid late but we want what we are owed, nothing more," he said. For Zhukov, that meant 20,000 rubles ($639) severance pay and back wages, though many who took part in the strike that left about half the group in the hospital asked for much less. Monthly pay at the plant was about 9,000 rubles.

"For us, this is real money," Zhukov said.

Industry leaders and economists warn that the government's hands-on approach to resolving crises, including at privately owned factories like that in Verkhnyaya Sinyachikha, is stalling reforms.

The tactic is shortsighted and increases the country's problems, they say, if there is a drop in the price of oil — the main driver of Russia's budgetary largess.

"The state is now taking ever more facilities, industries, entire sectors under its wing," metals tycoon Vladimir Potanin, Russia's fourth-richest man, told Reuters in September.

"As long as the government has strength, it keeps them ticking over, then at some point — bam! — it's a problem," he said. "Efficiency is not growing and there is no competition."

'For stability'

The hunger strikes in Sverdlovsk, a region that was once the power base of late President Boris Yeltsin, hark back to the economic mayhem that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and, with it, Communist central planning.

In the decade that followed, workers went unpaid for long spells and some lived off produce from their kitchen gardens.

"In the 1990s, everything was a mess," said Igor Kholmanskikh, a former tank factory foreman whom Putin appointed as his envoy to the Urals region this year.

A man of few words, the ruddy-faced 43-year-old offered during a television call-in show with Putin last December to travel to Moscow with "the boys" and wipe the streets clear of protesters.

"He is our 'Plumber Joe,'" Kholmanskikh's spokesman said, drawing a parallel with the U.S. Republican party's championing of an American who questioned then-presidential candidate Barack Obama on tax policy during his 2008 campaign.

Clenching his broad hands and looking ill at ease with his sudden elevation from factory floor to the opulent, marble-lined halls of his seat of power in the region, Kholmanskikh stuck closely to the Kremlin's party line to woo blue-collar support.

Putin is owed gratitude for presiding over an oil-fueled economic boom in his first two terms from 2000 until 2008, Kholmanskikh said, warning that protests in Moscow could throw Russia back to the turmoil of the 1990s.

"Life has changed, people now have work and social safety nets and life's got better," he said. "Obviously, this is due to Vladimir Putin becoming the country's leader. That is why one of our first campaign slogans was: 'We are for stability!'"

Putin's government is now working to meet that pledge, turning to a host of stopgap measures to keep doors open at factories that have been mismanaged or are simply unprofitable.

When more than 85 workers at truckmaker AMUR held a second hunger strike in Novouralsk demanding nearly a year's worth of back salaries in September, local authorities ordered state-owned tankmaker Uralvagonzavod to hand over part of its orders.

Regional opposition deputies say the intervention — before mayoral elections in the region on Oct. 14 — was little more than a move to plug the gap at the aged plant burdened by 4.5 billion rubles in debt, 28 million of which is wage arrears.

In another industrial town where three city council members joined hunger strikers, Putin ordered electricity tariffs lowered by 30 percent for the Bogoslovsky aluminum plant, owned by RusAl, in the town of Krasnoturinsk. "Take any of our enterprises; they all rely on support," Potanin said. "The government encourages us to pass the hat."

Calls for new policy

Built in 1770, the steel mill in Verkhnyaya Sinyachikha is a cornerstone of this factory town. A snow-dusted statue of Soviet state founder Vladimir Lenin stands at its gate and until recently it was still the second-largest employer. Like hundreds of other remote factory towns scattered from Russia's far north to eastern Siberia — where the closure of a single plant could throw a whole population out of work — it has seen little investment and struggled to stay profitable since the end of Soviet economic planning.

"They (industry owners) have no clear plan or understanding of development, they pass on the weight of incompetence onto the government's shoulders," Sverdlovsk regional governor Yevgeny Kuyvashev said at a televised government meeting last month.

He called for a new policy aimed at helping industry to modernize to remain competitive.

In a sign of possible trouble to come, the Kremlin's chief federal inspector in the Sverdlovsk region said last month that some 50 more enterprises were on the verge of bankruptcy.

The town of Rezh may be the next hot spot, if workers are not paid before the Nov. 6 deadline they have set.

"We need to anticipate the fires, not put them out when they are already burning," said Anton Danilov-Danilyan, a former Kremlin adviser. "But in some cases, the social cost of closing a plant is more significant to the state than the cost of maintaining the factory."

Divided Russia

The Kremlin's firefighting style of economic management has set Putin up as a champion of the workingman — an image he has cultivated by publicly dragging wealthy businessmen over the coals when they face problems at their plants.

Such performances serve as a counterweight to accusations by critics of cronyism and anger simmering over the widening gap between Russia's rich and poor.

Putin's appointment of Kholmanskikh, dismissed by critics as a Kremlin puppet, has gone down well in his own province.

"If he is a man of the people, then he is better qualified than any official who ... learned from his businessman father how to take bribes," said Dmitry Fomenkov, 26, a construction worker in Yekaterinburg.

Despite frustration with the local authorities, and dissatisfaction with their lot under Putin, many workers still struggle to see any alternative to him, a factor that could play into the president's hands.

Many residents voice an almost visceral dislike for the largely middle-class, Moscow-centric opposition protesters, who they say have no understanding of what it is to grapple with everyday problems.

"At those protests, they insulted us — the workers," said Albina Tatarinova, 50, stamping her feet in the light snow by the campfire in Verkhnyaya Sinyachikha.

"They called us 'cattle.' We gave them their own back: Of course, we voted for Putin. There was no alternative."

Related articles:

- Activist Stops Eating in Bid to Join Putin's Council
- Moscow Court Bans Air Traffic Controllers From Striking
- Prisoners Strike en Masse to Protest Fellow Inmate's Death/a>

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/11/06/hunger-strikes-in-industrial-heartland-test-loyalty-to-putin-a19159