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Crushing Russia's Labor Leaders

By Boris Kagarlitsky

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While the public's attention is focused on the 20 suspects arrested in connection with the May 6 protests, we should not forget other political prisoners who fell under the boot of the repressive regime even sooner.

In early February, members of the presidential human rights council called on the president to release Valentin Urusov, a trade unionist from the Sakha republic. Urusov did not promote any anti-government slogans and did not call for overthrowing leaders. He only fought for higher wages and better working conditions for employees, but that turned out to be enough to land him in jail.

Urusov's problems began in 2008, when he led workers at Alrosa in a strike for better working conditions. After that, he was suddenly charged with drug possession and arrested. The case against him looked so flimsy that the Supreme Court of the Sakha republic freed the union leader in May 2009 and ordered a retrial. However, the district court delivered a second guilty verdict, dismissing the defense arguments.

The Sakha law regarding strikes is written in such a way that any form of collective action is effectively prohibited. The law is clearly biased in favor of official trade unions linked to the government and United Russia. In sharp contrast to official rhetoric that portrays Russia as a "social state," it has become almost daily practice to wage attacks against labor leaders, fire activists who have joined free trade unions and bar trade union representatives from access to workplaces. What's more, there is no functioning mechanism to safeguard labor rights, and companies often refuse to enter into collective bargaining with employees.

The fortitude Urusov has shown in prison and his refusal to plea bargain has made him a hero of the Russian labor movement. Labor leaders in other countries have even taken an interest in the fate of the activist, and he has been nominated for this year's Arthur Svensson International Prize for Trade Union Rights.

The International Labor Organization as well as European and global labor groups have repeatedly appealed to Moscow to review the verdict, and a letter in support of Urusov signed by dozens of European intellectuals was met by Russian authorities with either silence or ambiguous and empty promises. At the same time, however, the fact that a member of the president's own human rights council has now taken up the call shows that the international pressure is having an effect. This time, the authorities will have difficulty ignoring an appeal from a Russian body that is known to be loyal to President Vladimir Putin and his policies.

For Russia's free trade unions, obtaining Urusov's release is a top political priority and a matter of principle. At stake is not merely the fate of a single activist — even one that has become a hero and a symbol of the movement. The message from the International Labor Organization to Russian authorities spoke of the need for fundamental reforms to the country's labor laws and practices. The relationship between government, employers and employees must change. Company owners will eventually have to accept the fact that in Russia, as in most other countries, workers have the right to strike and to establish their own organizations that are independent of the state. But as long as the repressive system is used to wage attacks against workers struggling for their economic rights, any talk of a social partnership between government and the people rings hollow.

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