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A Strange Corruption Case at Aeroflot

By Boris Kagarlitsky

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In Russia, nobody is surprised by stories of corruption. Neither is there anything new about the way officials accused of bribery and embezzlement easily escape punishment. Sometimes they keep up appearances by simply switching job titles, while lecturing Russians on spiritual values, morality and patriotism.

Against this backdrop, there is something very strange regarding the case of the Aeroflot pilots' union leaders who were accused of extorting bribes from their employer. Even as

Russia's courts and investigative bodies cannot bring themselves to accuse Defense Ministry officials of corruption, they have not hesitated to summarily arrest Sheremetyevo Cockpit Personnel Association activists Alexei Shlyapnikov, Valery Pimoshenko and Sergei Knyshov, and to permit the Russian media to wage a smear campaign peremptorily portraying them as criminals. Journalists have unanimously taken the side of the employers, branding the defendants as extortionists and even saboteurs and calling for harsh punishments for their alleged crimes. This stands in sharp contrast to the way these same publications extol the humanism and restraint of officials implicated in the Rosoboronservis corruption scandal.

But everything about the case with the pilots is very strange. The union leaders are charged with extorting bribes from the Aeroflot management in exchange for reducing the salaries of pilots and flight crews. The problem is that government officials are typically the ones to use their position to extort bribes, not union leaders. Ordinarily, the person in a lower position offers a bribe to someone with greater authority or power, but in this case just the opposite supposedly happened. Also, bribes and the negotiations that involve bribe-taking are usually conducted in secret, although in this case the whole country knew that pilots were demanding higher wages.

The union has described the incident as a well-planned provocation by the Aeroflot leadership. Not only did it fail to turn union members against their leaders, but it actually inspired them to demonstrate greater solidarity. In an interview with Rabkor.ru, union representative Igor Obodkov said the repressive measures against the pilots was producing the opposite effect, prompting even more people to join the organization. "The attitude toward the pilots and what has happened can be seen from the fact that people are offering legal assistance and making very large financial donations to support the detainees and their families," he said.

International Trade Union Confederation General Secretary Sharan Burrow sent a letter to Russian authorities emphasizing the need for a serious and objective investigation.

Of course, some Russian journalists immediately began looking for a Western conspiracy behind these events or for machinations by Aeroflot's foreign competitors. But there is a problem with this logic. Russia's leading two trade unions — the Russian Confederation of Labor, which is constantly trying to distance itself from the authorities, and the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia, which seems to be very loyal to them — belong to the International Trade Union Confederation. Representatives of both labor organizations sit in the State Duma and regularly support the government's proposals, its members belong to United Russia and the organization makes up an important part of the All-Russia People's Front.

This case is also a litmus test for the Russian judicial system. Are the courts capable of handing down a well-considered and well-founded ruling, or will they act as instruments of oppression in the hands of their political masters?

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