

Worker Strikes Will Only Boost Kremlin's Popularity, Say Analysts

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Withheld salaries, unforeseen firings and pay cuts have amplified discontent in an array of Russia's economic sectors, leading to a handful of strikes political analysts said Monday were more likely to bolster workers' support for the Kremlin than weaken it.

A scattering of Russian teachers, builders and factory workers have declared strikes in protest of their working conditions, an unusual occurrence in a country with weak professional unions and a tradition of low protest activity. Dozens of construction workers building the Vostochny Cosmodrome in Russia's Far East continued their strike Monday after rejecting a proposal from management to compensate employees whose salaries had been withheld.

In the southern city of Ufa, another ambulance worker joined a hunger strike to protest management practices, bringing the total number of strikers up to 10, the Interfax news agency reported Monday.

Some 60 teachers in Siberia's Zabaikalsky region declared a strike earlier this month after not

being paid for more than three months, the first large-scale teachers' strike in Russia in more than a decade, according to the Kommersant newspaper.

Earlier this month, some workers at the Ford Sollers factory in the Leningrad region outside St. Petersburg went on strike. Trolleybus drivers in Simferopol — the capital of Crimea, the peninsula Russia annexed from Ukraine last year — refused to work after not receiving their salaries, paralyzing the city, state news agency RIA Novosti reported.

Russian political analysts doubt that the pockets of discontent in the country's struggling economic sectors could spread to other workers or the general population. The current political rhetoric that glorifies the Kremlin and portrays it as surrounded by hostile external forces has allowed President Vladimir Putin to evade responsibility for Russia's economic woes and play down a severe economic crisis.

Deflecting Blame

Strikers' economic demands are fully detached from their political stances, said Natalya Zubarevich, director of the Moscow-based Independent Institute for Social Policy think tank's regional program. Workers' dissatisfaction with labor conditions, she said, has no effect on their attitudes toward Putin, whose approval rating stands at a vertiginous 85 percent, according to the independent Russian pollster Levada Center.

"The population has been encouraged to believe the country is surrounded by enemies," Zubarevich told The Moscow Times on Monday. "The propaganda is working. Putin is not being blamed for any of the trouble. Others — the regional governor, the mayor, the [workplace] manager — are the ones to blame, according to this frame of mind. But not Putin."

The lower echelons of power, whose political survival depends on the Kremlin, are more likely to feel the pressure of strikes than Moscow, according to political analysts. Regional governors — whom recent strikes have put in an "uncomfortable" position, according to political analyst Mikhail Vinogradov — must rely on heavily indebted budgets to meet the demands of Moscow and the population.

When the Murmansk region discontinued its distribution of some social benefits earlier this month, including child benefit allowances and housing subsidies, regional authorities cited lack of funding from the federal government as the reason for the cuts. But the finger-pointing between Moscow and the regions — whose debt to the federal budget rose to 2.1 trillion rubles (\$36 billion) in December — has done little to solve issues on the ground.

"Regional governors — many of whom view their positions as sinecures and have no intention of working to change anything — understand that their job security depends on the Kremlin," said Vasily Koltashov, head of economic research at the Institute for Globalization and Social Movements. "A situation like this [the strikes] make them look bad and puts them at greater risk of being dismissed."

A 2013 video leaked by sensationalist channel LifeNews, widely believed to have ties with Russia's security services, showed Putin threatening to dismiss governors and other government officials who failed to implement his "May Orders," a series of promises from his

2012 presidential campaign. The May Orders included a 200-percent increase in doctors' average salaries by 2018 and securing 25 million jobs in the high-tech sector by 2020. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said last week that adjustments could be made to Putin's electoral promises but that they would remain a priority, the TASS news agency reported.

Watch and Wait

A poll published earlier this month by the Levada Center found that the salaries of 9 percent of Russians were currently not being paid on time. The survey, conducted among a representative sample of 1,600 people in 46 regions with a margin of error not exceeding 3.4 percent, found that 15 percent of the population expects delays in getting paid in the coming months if the economic situation does not improve.

Yet the Kremlin has remained silent in the face of multiplying labor disputes. Analysts have interpreted Putin's silence as the Kremlin's desire to downplay the country's dire economic circumstances.

"There is no need for the government to send a strong signal by intervening in the labor conflicts that are currently happening across the country," said Vinogradov, who monitors regional politics for the Peterburgskaya Politika think tank. "It is in the authorities' interest to show that the economic crisis is not as severe as experts are saying."

It would seem that the Kremlin is not ready to orchestrate a theatrical situation, preferring to minimize the crisis and focus on the rhetoric that the whole country is facing an externally created crisis. In front of a jubilant crowd gathered steps from the Kremlin to celebrate the first anniversary of Russia's annexation of Crimea earlier this month, Putin vowed that Russia would overcome "the problems and obstacles that others try to create for us from outside."

Free of Politics

Political analysts interviewed by The Moscow Times on Monday said that the current smattering of economic dissatisfaction would not transform itself into political discontent for at least one or two years, if the economy continues on its current course. Russians' appetite for public demonstrations, including strikes, remains low: A Levada Center poll conducted in February found that 86 percent of the population would not take part in a demonstration if one were to take place in their community.

The Kremlin's politics, according to Alexei Makarkin, deputy director of the Moscow-based Center for Political Technologies think tank, have little to do with a potential transformation of economic dissatisfaction into political discontent.

"Economic protests will remain isolated until the state runs out of money completely," he said. "This is what we saw in the late 1980s. People who were not being paid demanded political changes. Today, everything will depend on the economy, something the state can only influence in part."

Divine Intervention

Putin has been known to intervene on labor issues when they have reached boiling point. After workers of a key factory in Pikalyovo, an industrial town in the Leningrad region, blocked a federal highway in 2009 to protest against their salaries being withheld for three months, Putin flew in by helicopter to resolve the dispute.

Putin was shown on state television berating the three businessmen who owned the factory, including oligarch Oleg Deripaska, formerly Russia's richest man. Putin gave the businessmen a dressing down, claiming they had put their greed over the well-being of the population. The then-Prime Minister tossed a pen in Derispaska's direction, ordering him to sign an agreement on employees' payment.

Putin's dramatic interventions and public castigation of officials — including last month's outburst against his government for having canceled hundreds of suburban trains throughout the country — only reinforce his image as a benevolent leader and further deflect the blame away from the Kremlin, according to analysts.

"Strikers who present economic demands want to demonstrate their loyalty to the state, they want the state to come and fix their issues," Makarkin said. "The state will intervene, while it still has the resources to do so, and the strikers will be thankful."

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