

Russian Car Plant Workers Take to the Streets After Months Without Pay

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Sergei Porter / Vedomosti

Former employees at Russian car part manufacturer AvtoVAZagregat have taken to the streets to demand their unpaid wages.

Approximately 90 protesters blocked a major highway in the company's hometown of Tolyatti for an hour, the Interfax news agency reported.

AvtoVAZagregat, a company which once employed 2,500 workers, went bankrupt in the fall of 2015 after losing its contract with AvtoVAZ, the Russian car manufacturer which produces Lada automobiles. The majority of former employees still have not received their full back wages.

Samara Region Governor Nikolai Merkushkin promised to help AvtoVAZagregat to settle its debts after the company was unable to find a buyer, and has reportedly transferred 156.6

million rubles (\$2.4 million) towards workers' unpaid wages.

Neither Merkushkin's office or the company itself has revealed how much back pay remains on AvtoVAZagregat's books.

A meeting between workers and Merkushkin to tackle the issue further was unsuccessful, with the politician reportedly telling employees that their problems should be taken up with the factory, rather than the government.

A meeting transcript published by the Zasekin news portal reported that when one former employee asked when they could expect their back pay,

Merkushkin replied,

“Well, I can tell you that if you are going to use that tone, then never.

Never! Go ask the people who upset you so much.”

A government representative has since said that the fragment had been taken out of context as a “pre-election provocation.”

“[Russia's ruling party] United Russia formulates not only the pro-government agenda, but also the protest agenda,” said political analyst Mikhail Vinogradov. When one of its members makes an unpopular public statement, it often receives wider coverage than statements made by the opposition and thus has a “mobilizing effect.” he said.

Demonstrations such as the one staged by former AvtoVAZagregat employees are a rarity in Togliatti, said local Autostat agency CEO Sergei Tselikov. Similar rallies were last seen in the region during the economic crisis of 2008–2009 in relation to the AvtoVAZ plant, he said. There were two motivating factors behind the protest, said Tselikov: former employees' frustration over losing their jobs and wages, and the upcoming State Duma elections.

State Duma Elections are to be held again in Russia on Sept. 19, 2016..

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