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Garbage Piles Up in Siberian Trash Collectors Strike

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Trash collection in parts of the Russian city of Novosibirsk has collapsed as truck drivers continue with a strike over low pay and 20-hour work days.

The walkout began last week when drivers for local waste logistics company Eco-Trans-N discovered their fleet of 86 trucks had been confiscated over unpaid debts, according to local media reports.

As garbage began to pile up, the striking drivers were given 22 smaller trucks and told they would have to work double-time without a pay increase.

"The trucks they gave us are not equipped with scoops or brush cleaners. We can't drive them through narrow courtyards or streets," one of the striking workers told local news outlet Sib.fm. "We aren't refusing to go to work, it's that we're not being provided with conditions in which we can work."

The strike has led to overflowing garbage bins across Novosibirsk, which has a population of 1.5 million.

Many local residents have expressed their outrage on social media, posting pictures of the piles of trash bags next to their homes.

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A post shared by НГС (Новосибирск) (@ngs_news)

Eco-Trans-N hadn't paid for the lease on their confiscated vehicle for three months before they were seized, Vadim Ageenko, who represents the opposition Communist CPRF party at the Novosibirsk Region Legislative Assembly, told The Moscow Times.

It is not the first time that the city's waste management problems have come under scrutiny.

An government investigation in 2019 found that Ecologia Novosibirsk, the sister company and operator behind Eco-Trans-N, had been underpaying their contracted logistics companies by up to 40 percent without giving a formal reason.

Novosibirsk governor Andrey Travnikov has comdemed Eco-Trans-N and Ecologia Novosibirsk for not resolving the ongoing crisis. "Market players absolutely cannot use city's residents as hostages and cannot sacrifice their comfort in order to resolve their commercial disagreements," he said said Monday. "[Eco-Trans-N and Ecologia Novosibirsk] took the responsibility; you have to resolve this issue, no matter the circumstances."

But Ageenko speculated Travnikov was reluctant to clamp down further on Eco-Trans-N and Ecologia Novosibirsk out of fear of their powerful owner.

Both firms were founded by Moscow-based infrastructure company VIS Group, and half of VIS' shares belong to Russian businessman Igor Sungurov, who also serves as the company's director, according to Forbes.

Sungurov had an estimated net worth of $600 million, Russian business news outlet DP reported in 2020.

"The governor might be reluctant to take action against a VIS-run company," Ageenko said, adding that the company currently held four large contracts in the Novosibirsk region, including for a bridge across Ob River, two waste management factories, and four public health clinics.

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