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Politics, justice and the new Russian strike

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Abstract

After almost a decade of passivity, Russian workers are once again striking. For the first time since the 1990s, labor unrest has spread across the country, affecting foreign and domestic investors, well-to-do industrial and natural-resource enterprises and infrastructural installations. But unlike in the 1990s, these strikes have accompanied an economic boom, suggesting that patterns of Russian labor unrest are beginning to resemble those in other countries. Analysis of several recent strikes, meanwhile, suggests the early emergence of a new labor proto-movement, characterized by feelings of entitlement and injustice that stem in part from government rhetoric, while pushed into opposition by the state's refusal to accommodate genuine labor mobilization.

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For the first time since the “Rail Wars” of the late 1990s, Russian workers are making national and international news. While the foreign media have focused on strikes at Ford Motor Company near St. Petersburg, and on the Moscow rail system, a broader wave of strikes has been gaining momentum in a range of industries across Russia. In sectors as different as paper processing, mining and transportation, and in

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cities large and small, strikes have been occurring at an apparently accelerating pace. In this article we analyze the current wave of strikes, putting it in the context of previous strikes in post-Communist Russia and in the broader context of strike patterns in the economies of developing countries. We make two central claims. First, the current strike wave is significant, less for its size than for the fact that it represents important changes in the nature of strikes and labor representation in Russia: specifically, Russia's strikes are undergoing 'normalization' both in terms of timing and targeting, reflecting a greater degree of institutionalization of Russia's state and economy than in the past. Second, we argue that the strike wave matters as a potential challenge to the managed and monopolized system of political interest representation that has been constructed in Russia over the last decade, including but not limited to labor relations.

Since at least 2006, a rash of strikes has been spreading across Russia. Just how serious the "rash" is, is hard to tell. Official data record only "legal" strikes, and since a judge can be found to rule most industrial actions "illegal," only a handful of strikes are recorded each year: a mere eight were reported in 2007. However, it seems clear there is much more strike activity than the authorities are willing to recognize. Data collected by the Institute of Collective Action identified at least 35 strikes in 2007, with the longest lasting 3 weeks (www.ikd.ru). Moreover, the pace and intensity of strike activity seems to be increasing. A survey of events reported to the international trade union website LABOURSTART in April of 2008 identified more than 25 separate strikes or hunger strikes in progress in that month alone. While the recent wave of strikes is still small when compared within the strike waves of the late 1980s and 1997–1999, it is undoubtedly the most substantial mobilization of Russian workers since the beginning of the Putin era. Moreover, in this article we argue that the strike wave of 2007–2008 heralds significant changes both in strike patterns themselves and in the nature of labor representation.

In terms of strike patterns, contemporary Russian strikes, while still thoroughly grounded in national context and informed by local meaning, are beginning to bear more resemblance to strike patterns in both developing and OECD countries. Seven decades of Communism and two decades of post-Communism in Russia meant that the country lacked both a market economy and a functioning state, both of which have shaped industrial relations elsewhere. As a result, patterns of labor protest in Russia in the immediate post-Communist period were quite different from those found outside the former Soviet Union, both in the nature and timing of strikes and in the relationship between strikes and patterns of labor mobilization. However, the new rash of strikes suggests that this may be changing.

In most economies, whether in the OECD or in developing countries, strikes tend to be "pro-cyclical", in that there are more strikes in economic upswings and fewer in downturns (Ashenfelter and Johnson, 1969). By contrast, strikes in post-Communist Russia had, until recently, been "counter-cyclical", common during economic crisis and largely absent during periods of growth. However, as we will show, contemporary strikes in Russia are now more the result of rising expectations in a growing economy, rather than the product of economic decline. Workers are increasingly conscious of the profits being made by firms in the boom of the 2000s,

and so many of the strikes in contemporary Russia are typical “business cycle” strikes, in which workers seek to take advantage of the greater bargaining power over employers given to them by a growing economy and tighter labor markets. While there are still strikes centered on demands for unpaid wages in failing enterprises, the majority of the new strikes involve demands for improvements in wages and working conditions, couched in terms of justice and entitlements. Important, too, in the current wave of strikes is the role of inflation, which is eating away at real living standards even as the overall economy grows. Rising prices are one of the most frequently cited complaints amongst strikers in Russia today.

In addition, strike patterns in most countries have historically been quite closely tied to underlying patterns of labor organization, with strikes tending to be more common when representative labor organizations are establishing themselves (Snyder, 1977). Previously, patterns of strikes in Russia had been more influenced by local wildcat (non-union) actions or by patterns of elite political relations rather than by independent labor organizing (Robertson, 2007). Again, the new wave of strikes provides evidence that this may be changing. The highly politicized strikes of the 1980s and 1990s seem to be giving way to strikes that are largely about economics and relations between employees and employers. The state is still, of course, an important player in strikes, as it is in strikes in all market economies, but in most cases it is no longer a primary or even a key player in the individual disputes.

Another major development, we argue, is that along with rising expectations there is a growing tendency for workers to demand genuinely representative labor unions. While so-called “alternative” unions have long been a feature of labor politics in the post-Communist period, they appear now to be emerging from a period of stagnation and are once again asserting themselves, in response to pressure from below from workers. Despite a Labor Code that stacks the deck heavily against them, Russian workers are demanding a voice and doing the difficult work of forcing employers and the government to listen.

None of this, of course, is to suggest that there is any normative compulsion or analytical benefit to an insistence on convergence with Western models of labor mobilization and industrial relations. Rather, our suggestion here is that there are aspects of the new wave of strikes that fit more naturally into global, comparative contexts than did the strikes of the 1990s, which were more uniquely Russian (though not entirely). The context we refer to, moreover, is not specifically Western (and even the Western modes of industrial relations differ significantly from country to country), but includes the experience of other post-communist transition countries, as well as Latin American and other developing countries.

Furthermore, to the extent that Russian labor activists seek to establish a more ‘European’ model of industrial relations, they still have a long way to go. Rights to free collective bargaining and organization are abridged both in law and, even more so, in practice. Labor relations in Russia are still marked by authoritarianism. Despite the new-found energy of the alternative unions, trade unionism at the workplace and at the regional and national levels is still dominated by Communist-era successor unions in the so-called *Federatsiia Nezavisimyykh Profsoiuzov Rossii* (Federation of Independent Labor Unions of Russia, or FNPR) (Gritsenko et al., 1999). With a quasi-monopoly on

representation guaranteed by the Labor Code of 2001, FNPR unions are para-statal organizations intended to manage workers rather than represent them. Nevertheless, we argue here that the current wave of strikes helps to highlight for workers the essentially repressive role that the FNPR plays, and so is putting the FNPR under considerable pressure to transform itself into a more representative body — pressure that the FNPR has thus far vehemently resisted.

The second major implication of Russia's new round of strikes, we argue, is that these strikes may represent the beginnings of a challenge to the managed and monopolized model of interest representation developed under Putin. Management of the system is predicated on general acceptance by workers of the organizations permitted by the state to represent them. If the state is not able to keep up with the growing expectations of workers and with its own promises, acceptance of the legitimacy of the dominant institutions might disappear and the project of managing society from above could be put in jeopardy.

The article is organized in five sections. We begin by reviewing the nature of strike patterns in the post-Communist period in Russia, highlighting the unusual nature of strike patterns in this period. We then analyze the new strike wave, looking in turn at each of its key elements: strikes in foreign-owned enterprises, in profitable Russian-owned enterprises, in transportation and the public sector and in failing enterprises. In the third and fourth sections we move on to analyze the emerging changes in labor representation, looking first at the reemergence of alternative labor unions and then at the response of the official unions. Finally, we consider the implications of the strike wave for Russia's system of interest representation, by looking at how the Russian state's promises have rebounded in the form of demands for economic justice that are difficult to integrate within the prevailing institutions governing labor relations.

Post-Communism and the strike

There has been quite a cottage industry of studies looking at strikes, protest patterns and politics in post-Communism, and in Russia in particular. While workers played a major role in the Soviet collapse (Crowley, 1997), the conventional wisdom was that there has been no industrial protest of note in post-Communist Russia. David Mandel asks, "Why is there no revolt?" (Mandel, 2001). Sarah Ashwin analyzes "The Anatomy of Patience" (Ashwin, 1999), Paul Kubicek examines "worker passivity in the face of severe economic crisis" (Kubicek, 2002, p. 618) and Kaspar Richter notes "the absence of any sustained protest movement" (Richter, 2006, p. 134).

However, Robertson (2007) demonstrates that there has been considerable variation in the extent to which Russian workers have been mobilized in the post-Communist era. While many workers were indeed passive in the Yeltsin years, others were, in fact, highly mobilized. On the other hand, the image of generalized passivity seems to apply better to the early Putin years. In this section we review this history and, in particular, look at the eclipse of alternatives to the Soviet successor unions in the early Yeltsin years. This meant that when strikes did emerge they were either

largely wildcat actions born of desperation, or were actions coordinated from above by regional leaders seeking to influence the center. Both of these elements have made strike patterns in post-Communist Russia highly unusual from an international perspective.

In July 1989 organized labor burst onto the Soviet political scene in an unprecedented and dramatic fashion as 400,000 miners, from the Ukrainian Donbas, through the Karaganda coalfields of Kazakhstan, to the Sakhalin mines of the Russian Far East, went on strike. The 1989 strikes represented a turning point of enormous significance and were followed by the creation of a genuine grassroots workers' movement in the coalfields of the Soviet Union. From 1989 to 1991, this movement came to play a significant role in the politics of the disintegration of the USSR through an alliance struck between the miners on the one side, and Boris Yeltsin on the other (Ilyin, 1999).¹ However, once control of the mines was passed from the Soviet government to that of the Russian Federation, it soon became clear that the majority of the mines simply could not survive without state support and the interests of the miners and Yeltsin's shock-therapists diverged (Ilyin, 1999, p. 252).

The story of the miners' unions is closely mirrored by other new unions in the post-Soviet period. The most prominent of these was a confederation of unions known as *Sotsprof*. An offshoot of the Social Democratic Party, *Sotsprof* provided an umbrella for newly emerging local unions, and represented workers in a number of areas, most notably in the budget sector. In the dying days of the USSR, *Sotsprof* and the Social Democrats were useful to Yeltsin and he turned control over the Russian Ministry of Labor to the Social Democrats in 1991. However, like the miners, the Social Democrats were rapidly isolated by both the neo-liberals in the Yeltsin administration and the forces representing industrial interests, and they disappeared off all but the most detailed maps of the Russian political landscape.

As the Yeltsin administration began to co-opt powerful industrial interests in 1992 and 1993, it also moved closer to the leaders of the Soviet successor unions in the renamed FNPR. While Yeltsin personally may have had little time for Soviet-era dinosaurs like the FNPR, his government recognized the potential advantages of making the FNPR its main partner in labor relations. After all, the government's economic reform agenda seemed likely to lead to the closure of many enterprises and, as the successor to the all-encompassing Soviet trade union confederation, the FNPR had a broad reach into practically every workplace opened before 1991. It would be the FNPR's job to manage any potential unrest that might arise.

Though officially opposed to the government, the FNPR found the incentives to cooperate with the government to be very strong. The union had inherited 31 million members and billions of dollars worth of property from its Soviet predecessor, and Yeltsin could have taken all this away with the stroke of a pen. This made the FNPR an excellent partner for the government, enormously vulnerable and dependent upon the ongoing favor of the administration.

¹ The origins of this alliance are the subject of some dispute. For opposing views see Clarke et al., 1993, p. 161–2, and Crowley, 1997, p. 123.

Deliberately excluded by this deal were Russia's workers. The cooptation of the major unions, combined with economic, social and political collapse, left them largely demobilized and usually unable to overcome the enormous obstacles to collective action that they faced. In a few isolated sectors, such as dockers and air-traffic controllers, independent unions were able to establish themselves, but for the most part Russian workers were either unrepresented, or were in unions intended to manage rather than mobilize them.

Nevertheless, the second Yeltsin term saw the emergence of large waves of strikes across Russia, largely as a result of economic crisis and the collapse of the system of payments and governmental transfers. Even according to conservative official statistics, Russia had 111 workings days per 1000 workers lost to strikes in 1997 and 56.1 in 1998. This compares to 3 and 4, respectively, in what Ekiert and Kubik (2001) call "rebellious Poland" (Robertson, 2007, p. 784). Moreover, these official statistics are likely to greatly understate the level of protest. Internal Russian government data, for example, suggest that the 1998 figure could be almost twice as large as the published numbers.

Whatever the size of the strikes in the late 1990s, they were widespread across different sectors of the economy. Most prominent in the media among the strikers of this period were the miners who took to blocking railroads and who occupied the *Gorbatyi Most* in Moscow during the summer of 1998. However, in terms of numbers the leading role in this wave was taken by budget sector workers such as teachers and healthcare workers who made up almost half of the days lost to strikes in 1997 and 1998. Yet the strike wave went considerably beyond these two highly publicized groups, with about a quarter of all strikes taking place in non-mining industry, and fully 16 percent in the machine building sector, which includes the manufacture of cars, trucks, ships, industrial equipment and the like.

From an international perspective, the strikes of the Yeltsin era were quite unusual. Unlike most strikes in market economies, these were not workers challenging working conditions or wages. Nor were they, for the most part, workers fighting to defend threatened jobs. Instead, more than 95 percent of strikes were about unpaid wages, legally owed by employers. Though unemployment remained surprisingly low during the economic collapse of the mid-1990s, unpaid wages to workers in Russia amounted to some R22 billion in the first quarter of 1996 (some 71 percent of the monthly wage bill) and rose to R38.7 billion (or 114 percent of the monthly wage bill) by the end of that year (Desai and Idson, 2001, p. 47).² As the decade continued the problem of unpaid wages grew even more serious. By September 29, 1999, the total debt on wages had reached more than R56 billion, with more than 17 million workers at 107,000 enterprises not being paid on time.

In some places, like Khakasiia, Primorskii Krai, and Kemerovo, regional political authorities and the unions embraced the workers' case, and huge strike waves took place pressuring the central government for intervention to solve the wages crisis. However, this only happened in places where local elites had poor relations with

² Amounts are converted into new rubles for ease of comparison.

Moscow, and there never emerged a well organized, coordinated campaign across the country (Robertson, 2007). Instead, protests were numerous but isolated and mainly local in nature. Nearly half of Russia's regions, including the most important places like Moscow and St. Petersburg, saw virtually no strike activity at all.

In those places where strikes did take place, they were more born of desperation and a sense of moral outrage than out of any real expectation of success. Many of the strikes in industry were in enterprises that were not profitable anyway and cutting production did little to harm employers. Strikes in public services such as education and health also seemed to have little effect, largely because chronic underfunding meant that these institutions could no longer usefully employ all those on the payroll.

Frustration with the ineffectiveness of strikes led many to resort to more direct actions. These came in two primary categories: efforts to impose costs on the state, and those that inflicted costs on the protesters themselves. The former are most famously exemplified in Russia by the so-called "rail wars." During the spring and summer of 1998, the tactic of blocking major rail connections across Russia, and in particular the Trans-Siberian railroad, had become so common that on May 20, 1998 Interior Ministry (MVD, *Ministerstvo Vnutriykh Del*) offices in the provinces began enumerating rail blockades in a separate section of their reports to Moscow (as they already did with strikes and hunger strikes). Although the "rail wars" are most often associated with coal miners, and the miners of the western Siberian province of Kemerovo in particular, other workers in sectors that depended directly on the Federal government were also involved.

The other common form of direct action taken by workers was to harm themselves and cast the moral blame on the government. In at least 30 cases reported by the MVD, this action took the ultimate form of public self-immolation or suicide. There were also reports of self-maiming that would appear periodically as different people took extreme measures to publicize their fate. Much more common, however, was the announcement of a hunger strike. Indeed, more than 840 different hunger strikes took place in Russia between 1997 and 2000.

The frequent resort to hunger strikes is a clear sign both of the desperation and of the atomization of Russia's workers in the 1990s. Hunger strikes have long been a weapon of choice for those with no other means to exert pressure than their own moral suasion. Prisoners, for example, have often taken to hunger strikes to publicize their demands either for improvements in conditions, to claim political status for their incarceration, or to draw attention to broader political causes in the name of which they felt they were being jailed. In Russia, there is a strong tradition of hunger striking prisoners that stretches at least from the Decembrists of the 1820s through Stalin's Gulag, to Brezhnev era dissidents. What is interesting is the adoption of the tactics of the incarcerated by workers. This is indicative of the sense of powerlessness and desperation felt by many Russians who suffered from the fiscal crisis of the Russian state and economy more generally in the second half of the 1990s.

By the time Vladimir Putin came to power in 2000, the strike wave of the Yeltsin era was already over. The number of marches and rallies recorded each month by the MVD fell from a peak of 160 per month in March of 1999, to 46 in August, 25 in

October and a mere 20 in December. Strike levels, which had peaked at 196 strikes per month in November of 1998, also fell rapidly. The month of September 1999 saw only 31 strikes in the MVD reports, traditionally troublesome October only 32 strikes, and December only 40. In 2000, no more than 450,000 working days were lost to strikes in the whole country. Moreover, as Putin's first term went on the level of strikes and protests seem to have dropped off further. Official data for 2000 show 817 strikes taking place that year, 291 in 2001, 80 in 2002 and only 67 in 2003. This general trend in the official data is supported by anecdotal evidence. Thus, just as economic growth was really taking off in Russia, and labor markets were tightening, circumstances that elsewhere produced major increases in strike activity, strikes in Russia were declining rapidly.

Nevertheless, consolidating control over labor and the unions was one of the first priorities of the new regime. The result was a new Labor Code passed with FNPR support in 2001 that substantially reduced workers' rights, while squeezing out alternative unions and consolidating the quasi-monopoly of the FNPR. Three elements of the reform stood out that really hurt the alternative unions (Ashwin and Clarke, 2003, p. 114). First, in order to be recognized to take part in the negotiation of a collective agreement at the enterprise level, a union must be a primary organization of an all-Russian trade union. This is problematic for unions that are essentially local in character, as most of the alternatives are, having emerged from local conflicts or strike committees rather than being part of a broader national movement.

More damaging is a second provision that requires that all unions create a joint negotiating team within a period of 5 days where more than one union is present in an enterprise. In the absence of such an agreement the majority union takes responsibility for negotiations. This means the FNPR affiliate can simply exclude competitors by not talking with them.

Third, the Labor Code requires that, in order to be legal, strikes need to be confirmed by a majority vote of a meeting attended by two-thirds of the entire labor force of an enterprise. This makes it very difficult for many alternative unions that only represent a particular group or section of workers within an enterprise to organize a legal strike.³

Taken together, these elements created a system for governing labor relations that gave the FNPR a central role in the management of dissent and in channeling workers away from strikes in particular, and independent organizing in general. For several years this system delivered the kind of industrial peace for which it was designed. Nevertheless, despite the restrictions, a range of wildcat, often illegal, strikes have recently broken out across Russia. In the next section, we review in more detail some key strikes that illustrate the broad range of the strike wave and some key lessons.

³ Alternative unions have long had trouble undertaking legal strikes. In an interview with the author in November 2000, President of *Sotsprof*, Sergei Vladimirovich Khramov claimed that of approximately 100 court cases per year challenging the legality of strikes, over 80 percent of the cases concerned *Sotsprof*.

The strikes of 2006–2008

In this section we analyze some key elements of the strike wave that has taken place in Russia in the last few years. We look in turn at each of the most important elements, focusing on strikes in foreign-owned enterprises, in prosperous and profitable Russian-owned enterprises, in the transportation and budget sector, and finally in struggling Russian enterprises. We describe the main outlines of strikes in each of these areas, showing how many of the features of the new strikes are different from those of the 1990s, illustrating the important role played by emulation, and showing how this contemporary wave of strikes has been influenced both by the continued economic growth that Russia experienced until 2008 and by patterns of independent labor organizing.

Foreign-owned enterprises

The most high profile among the recent wave of strikes have taken place at foreign-owned companies such as Ford's plant in Vsevolozhsk near St. Petersburg and Renault's Avtoframos plant in Moscow. Other foreign-owned plants outside the car industry have also been the site of strikes or protest actions, including the Nestle plant in Perm', the Coca-Cola and Heineken plants in St. Petersburg and Leroy Merlin Vostok in Mytishchi, where workers have been demonstrating in defense of their right to form a union affiliated with the alternative union federation *Torgovoe Edinstvo*.

The fact that the Russian labor movement is reemerging in foreign plants is one aspect in which the latest strike wave resembles labor relations in other emerging market economies. Foreign direct investment is often associated with high profile strikes or labor organizing campaigns in the developing world, and this is particularly true in countries like Russia that do not enjoy high levels of political democracy or well-developed systems of workers' rights and labor relations (Robertson and Teitelbaum, 2009). Why this should be the case is not completely clear, but there are a number of possibilities. It may be that workers feel safer or more protected in challenging foreign employers who have weaker political connections and cover than a prominent domestic employer might have. Similarly, it may be that union organizers think that foreign employers are more likely to feel constrained in their reactions to organizing drives, fearing negative international publicity. Alternatively, it might be the case that workers feel that foreign employers in multi-national corporations have deeper pockets and so are a "softer target" that will be more likely to respond to demands. Whether for these or some other reasons, for a labor movement that is struggling to establish itself in difficult circumstances, foreign-owned enterprises might be a relatively protected place to begin. In Russia, the Ford Motor Co. plant in Vsevolozhsk, outside of St. Petersburg, has played a major role in this process.

Ford

The Ford plant in Vsevolozhsk has been home to a small labor union since the plant was opened in July 2002. Initially affiliated with FNPR, the union started small and grew slowly, counting only 113 members by the summer of 2005. That summer,

though, the company sent union leader Aleksei Etmanov and a colleague to a seminar for Ford union leaders in Brazil, where their eyes were opened to the possibilities of labor mobilization. The Russian union leaders gathered some ideas, joined together with colleagues in other countries in a Transnational Information Exchange network and learned that Ford was planning to increase output at Vsevolozhsk but had no plans to increase salary. That led to the first strike (Vishnevski, 2005). Workers at the Vsevolozhsk plant first threatened to strike in September 2005 and, on November 2, held an hour-long warning strike, demanding increased wages (Shevchenko, 2005a; *Vremia i Den'gi*, 2005). Later that month, Etmanov's union held a week-long 'Italian strike', after their September demands were ignored, although management expressed its willingness to continue negotiating with the union (Shevchenko, 2005b). Eventually, Ford was forced to deal with the union and sign a collective bargaining agreement (Viktorov, 2007).

That was only the beginning. In early 2006, the union announced plans for a full-scale strike to protest what workers saw as a lack of improvement in relations with management, although they backed off when a court banned the strike in April of that year (Shevchenko, 2006). At around the same time, the FNPR kicked the Ford union out of the Federation for 'extremism' (Frolov, 2007). By the time a new round of collective bargaining began in early 2007, though, the union had regrouped, holding a protest on February 8 to complain that management was not negotiating in good faith (Sovetskaia Rossiia, 2007a). They were joined by port, railroad and electricity workers, as well as activists from the Communist Party and other left-wing parties and political groups (Sovetskaia Rossiia, 2007b). Gennadii Ziuganov, leader of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF, by its Russian acronym) came to the picket line, "cursing the bourgeois for exploitation of the working masses". The next morning, Federation Council Speaker Sergei Mironov expressed his solidarity but spoke mostly about pensions, which were of little interest to the workers, whose average age at Ford is 25 (Butuzova, 2007). Eventually, the sides reached a salary agreement that was seen widely as a victory for the union.

Claiming that Ford was failing to live up to its obligations in the February agreement, workers began an open-ended strike on November 20, 2007. An earlier strike planned for Nov. 7 had been declared illegal by a Leningrad Oblast court and the new strike was allowed only after the union agreed to maintain a minimum level of activity at the factory. Meanwhile, workers at the Renault Avtoframos factory in Moscow held a rally in support of the striking workers at Ford (Samarskie Izvestiia, 2007). The workers demanded an increase in pay of at least 33% and a shortened night shift (Vecherniaia Moskva, 2007). In addition to pay demands, however, workers were upset about perceived inequality, with middle managers reportedly earning some 200,000 rubles per month, compared to less than 20,000 rubles for the average worker (Pozdnyakova, 2007). Some 1500 workers took part in the strike, demanding pay raises from 1 March 2008 (Sovetskaia Rossiia, 2007c). The walkout lasted only 3 days, but was followed by a smaller action involving only key workers (Bychina and Shevchuk, 2007). In January 2008, the workers and the company agreed to a new collective bargain, including pay raises ranging from 16 to 21% and a range of other bonuses (Bychina, 2008; Shevchuk et al., 2008).

The success of the Ford strikes resonated elsewhere, both in the region and in the industry. Thus, in a copycat action, dockworkers at the St. Petersburg seaport struck in December 2007, even as Ford was struggling to piece together shifts from non-striking workers in mid-December (*Sankt-Peterburgskie Vedomosti*, 2007). And in response to the November 2007 strikes at Ford, management at AvtoVAZ in Tol'iatki held meetings with its independent union *Edinstvo* – despite earlier refusing to recognize it – and agreed to include a *Edinstvo* representative in collective bargaining (*Yur'eva*, 2007). For its part, the *Edinstvo* union said it would use the Ford result as grounds for seeking higher salaries (*Shevchenko*, 2007).

Despite its general tactic of dealing – if not always willingly – with the union, Ford worked to mobilize the local government to its defense, which accused Etmanov's union of playing politics. Thus, district government head Igor' Samokhin said:

The European management of the plant is proposing good conditions to the workers. The problem is with the trade union leadership, whose ambitions are endless. Their influence over the workers is such that even those who, according to management information, were not planning on participating in the strike crumbled and supported the majority (*Shevchenko*, 2007).

After the November 2007 strikes, Ford attempted unsuccessfully to fire Etmanov. Similarly measures have been attempted against independent labor leaders at Heineken and the Russian Post (*Bychina and Shevchuk*, 2008).

Russian-owned enterprises

Strikes, protests, and the emergence of new unions are far from being limited, however, to foreign-owned companies. In fact, strikes have taken place in some of the crown-jewels of Russian industry, including in the oil and gas sector, in mineral extraction and in Russian manufacturing plants. In this section we review three of the most prominent strikes in these areas; Surgutneftegaz, AvtoVAZ and the Red Riding Hood coal mine. These strikes illustrate the emergence of independent organization among workers in successful Russian-owned enterprises (as well as the authorities' efforts to suppress it), the change in the nature of the demands of Russian workers to wage increases and better working conditions, and the adoption of justice frames based on social responsibility to make these demands.

Surgutneftegaz

Unrest at Surgutneftegaz (SNG) – one of Russia's largest remaining private oil companies – began in July 2006, when workers struck for unpaid salary, picketing the corporate office and compelling the regional prosecutor to intervene and force management to pay back wages (*Zav'ialova*, 2006). The protest grew, however, and by the middle of the month as many as 1500 workers took to the streets, demanding increased and restructured salaries and improved treatment by management (*Sovetskaia Rossiia*, 2006). The action spread quickly, with a 3000-person picket in the nearby oil town of Liantor – likewise an SNG town – by the end of the month,

and then renewed protests in October in Surgut, Liantor, Megion and Nizhnevartovsk, all key Siberian oil towns (Nikolaeva et al., 2006; Titov, 2006).

The protests were organized by *Profsvoboda*, an independent union affiliated with *Sotsprof* and led by Surgut crane operator Aleksandr Zakharkin (Gazeta, 2007). The 2006 strikes and protests involved *Profsvoboda* cells at seven SNG units in Surgut and other cities (Nikolaeva et al., 2006). Significant support was provided by the KPRF, whose Surgut office served as strike headquarters and whose local leader, Sergei Deryabin, took on the tasks of obtaining protest permits and managing relations with the media and the police (Sovetskaia Rossiia, 2006).

As *Profsvoboda* began building momentum for the strikes, SNG tried first to head them off by promising a pay raise, although the offer – on average, 1000 rubles per person per month – proved insufficiently attractive. Next, the company tried intimidation, spreading rumors that participating workers would be identified and fired (Sovetskaia Rossiia, 2006). After the workers nonetheless went ahead with the protests, SNG CEO Vladimir Bogdanov announced that he would negotiate but only through the official FNPR union, *Neftegazstroiprofsoiuz* (Oil and Gas Construction Labor Union, NGSP). This, too, backfired, reportedly leading to a mass exodus of NGSP members to *Profsvoboda*. A new salary offer, on the other hand, proved to be more effective, with workers seeing increases of 10%–52% (with the largest raises coming in Liantor, which had seen the largest protests) (Nikolaeva et al., 2006).

To ensure that the events of the summer and autumn of 2006 did not repeat themselves, by the end of 2006 SNG management had come together with the local authorities, loyal media outlets and the FNPR unions to undermine and marginalize *Profsvoboda*, locking the independent union out of negotiations and calling into question the independent union's motives and financing, calling them 'radicals' and suggesting that they were serving or being manipulated by outside forces (Kopnov, 2006). Bogdanov, citing the involvement of the KPRF, accused the Communists of provoking the strike for political purposes (Nikolaeva et al., 2006). Sergei Lepilin, head of the FNPR affiliate at the Russian-British joint venture TNK-BP, which had been hit in the October 2006 protests organized by *Profsvoboda* and its *Sotsprof* allies, told the regional newspaper *Novosti Yugry*, "We know about these problems and are working to solve them. But demonstrations – that is no way to go about it" (Titov, 2006). And in another local newspaper, NGSP representative V. Bykov delivered the following invective:

It is not by chance that they use Soviet-era language – the cult of the working man is still alive in our memories, and that's where the urge of radical trade union leaders to break or smash the employer comes from. This urge, as we have seen, fires up the left-radical political parties (which is understandable), as well as the right-wing radicals (by which I mean *Sotsprof*, with which their *Profsvoboda* is associated). These radicals have their own goals – to achieve the same situation in labor relations as exists in the West. For them the working man is just cannon fodder (Bykov, 2007).

For good measure, a key *Profsvoboda* leader in Surgut, Aleksandr Sokolov, was severely beaten (Kukolevskii, 2007).

Early in 2007, meanwhile, FNPR and its affiliate NGSP attempted to gain back some of their lost credibility, leading workers in Surgut out into the streets in January and February to demand higher wages (Gorshkova, 2007), and mobilizing regional workers again in April of that year as part of a nationwide rally for increased pensions. *Profsvoboda*, however, demonstratively refused to take part. Citing FNPR's formal partnership arrangement with ruling political party *Edinaia Rossiia*, Zakharkin said at the time: "We don't see any sense in participating in this event, because the FNPR is completely under the control of the authorities. The recent campaign to raise pensions is populist and bears the hallmark of an election campaign stunt" (Kozenko, 2007).

AvtoVAZ

Independent trade unionism at the massive AvtoVAZ plant in Tol'jatti has had a shaky history. The main independent union, *Edinstvo*, burst onto the scene in 1996, when a strike it organized shut down the plant for two weeks and led to the resumption of full, on-time payment of salaries. At its peak, the union had 3500 members. But by 2007, however, that figure had fallen to somewhere between 600 and 1500, by various estimates (Krylov, 2007). Nevertheless, with one eye on developments in Vsevolozhsk, workers at AvtoVAZ were perhaps in a combative mood when, on July 1, 2007, employees of several shops received notices that their base salary would be cut to 6000 rubles a month, with further earnings to come from overtime and bonuses. Angry workers gathered for a meeting, wrote several collective letters and began an Italian strike on July 9, lasting for a week (Speranskii, 2007). In mid-July, workers at three VAZ shops demanded pay increases to 25,000 rubles per month, and they struck again for 3 h on August 1, 2007, with some 400 workers from three shops taking part (Bondarenko, 2007). The demand for 25,000 ruble salaries was seen as a reaction to the ruling party *Edinaia Rossiia*'s own election campaign slogan "25 thousand rubles a month – its real" (Mekhanik and Kvasov, 2007). *Edinstvo* repeated the protest again on September 19, with 500–600 protesters. According to Petr Zolotarev, leader of the independent *Edinstvo* union at VAZ, the August 1 strike forced management to start negotiations, although management deny any connection between the strike and negotiations (Kaledin, 2007).

The primary reaction of AvtoVAZ management – led by representatives of *Rosoboronexport*, the military-industrial holding that owns the company – was pressure. Prior to the August 1 strike, in late July, Zolotarev complained that VAZ, together with law enforcement, were trying to prevent the strike by putting pressure on *Edinstvo* and its activists, including the arrest of Anton Vechkunin and Mikhail Doronin, who were distributing union literature, and the accusation of 'extremism'. In addition, by some reports, two strikers were fired and approximately 200 were docked pay after the August 1 strike (Petrov, 2007). Outrage at these actions was a major factor in contributing to the September protest (Malinin, 2007). United Civic Front opposition activist Marina Litvinovich compared the reaction to the VAZ strikes to that faced by the Dissenters' Marches, saying "The methods the authorities are using at VAZ are identical to the ones used against participants in the Dissenters' Marches; the technology of preventing actions and of isolation

leaders and activists. They also tried to accuse the ‘Dissenters’ of extremism” (Kaledin et al., 2007).

The local press in Tol’iatti and neighboring Samara, the regional capital, moreover, gave overwhelmingly negative coverage of the strike, calling it a failure, giving predominantly the company line and casting Zolotarev and *Edinstvo* in a negative light that seemed designed to support the charge of extremism levied by the authorities (Romanenko, 2007). They also cast the strike as explicitly against *Edinaia Rossiia*, the ruling political party (Krylov, 2007). Although former *Edinstvo* leader Anatolii Ivanov is a member of *Edinaia Rossiia*, the union in its current form is seen as closer to the local leaders of *Spravedivaia Rossiia* (Just Russia), a competing Kremlin-backed political party (Aleksandrova et al., 2007).

Red Riding Hood

On 27 March 2008, an entire shift at the *Krasnaia Shapochka* (Red Riding Hood) bauxite mine – 123 miners – descended into the mine and refused to return to the surface, remaining at a depth of 500 m and demanding a 40% pay rise, improved working conditions and investment to prolong the life of the mining region. The strike was supported by the *Nezavisimyi Profsoiuz Gornikov Rossii* (Independent Union of Miners of Russia), led by local leader Valerii Zolotarev. V. Zolotarev himself immediately joined the hunger strike, and on 28 March, the strikers were joined by the workers of the remaining two shifts at the mine, which is the largest in the important Severouralskii bauxite mining region (SUBR), owned by Rusal. The same day, to prevent the strike from spreading to other mines, Rusal stopped all work at all of its mines in the region (Korotkikh, 2008a). In another move evidently meant to keep news from spreading, the local newspaper in Severouralsk, *Nashe Slovo*, was prohibited from covering the strike by the local authorities (Mingaleva, 2008).

On April 4, the miners returned to the surface, having been promised concessions by the company. They quickly realized, however, that the promises had been a ruse devised to end the strike and, while they could not descend back into the mine, some of workers continued with the hunger strike.

To outside observers the strike seemed unexpected, although the stage had been set as early as summer 2007. On 14 August 2007, Zolotarev filed suit against Rusal for ceasing the transfer of member workers’ union dues to the union’s account. The union also accused management of harassing workers into doing extra shifts on two to three Saturdays a month in order to increase production, and in general of backing out of an agreement reached between the union and Sual – the mine’s former owner – after a successful strike in October 2003, citing lowered salaries and worsening working conditions (Uralpolit, 2007).

Regional Duma Deputy Evgenii Artiukh, a member of the *Spravedivaia Rossiia* party and a long-time friend of the independent union at SUBR, likewise attacked Rusal for refusing to consider pay increases, saying that Rusal was, in essence, backing off from promises made earlier by Sual and wondering why, if Sual could offer increased pay, Rusal could not. There had been a growing degree of social tension at the mine ever since Rusal acquired Sual and took control of the enterprise (Amurpolit, 2008). Rusal had been hit by other strikes as well, including a strike in February at the Krasnoyarsk

Aluminum Plant. Across the company and at SUBR in particular, workers have been complaining of decreased ‘social responsibility’, including cancellation of summer camps and other social programs for workers and their families, as well as lowered salaries, even as the company’s profits hit record highs (Korotkikh, 2008b, c).

Transport and public sector strikes

Alongside the strikes in foreign- and Russian-owned private sector firms has been the emergence of a new round of strikes in the public sector. As noted above, budget workers (*biudzhetniki*) had been a major element of the strikes in the 1990s, given the widespread crisis in the budget sector in that period and the failure of the state under Yeltsin to live up to its obligations. More generally though, public sector workers play an important role in labor movements throughout the world and in the advanced industrial economies of the OECD in particular. At a time when levels of union membership in the private sector have been falling in the richer countries due to the pressures of globalization and anti-union legislation, unionization rates, and the propensity to militancy, have remained high amongst public sector workers.

Prominent in the latest strike wave are transportation workers. The most high profile action began on April 28, 2008, when members of the *Profsoiuz lokomotivnykh brigad zheleznodorozhnikov* (Union of the Locomotive Brigades of Railroad Workers) held a day-long wildcat strike, involving some 100 rail workers on two suburban Moscow commuter train lines, severely disrupting operations. The union is part of *Sotsprof* and held the strike despite the fact that federal law bans rail strikes. Workers demanded a more equal pay scale, bringing salaries up to the higher end of the current R40,000–60,000 range, and the return of seniority bonuses that were cancelled in April 2007. FNPR responded by claiming to be making the same demands but called the strike a public relations action by the independent union to try to attract members (Kozenko and Mironenko, 2008).

The Moscow train workers are just part of a broader group of transport workers who have recently been on strike. The list includes the dockworkers of the St. Petersburg port, truck drivers and trolley bus drivers in Astrakhan, and bus drivers in Perm’. Once again, this phenomenon echoes both the previous history of the labor movement in post-Communist Russia, and the experience of labor internationally. Transportation workers throughout the world have been quite effective in using their strategic location as a way to exercise leverage over both their employers and the state. Moreover, transport workers, notably dockers and air-traffic controllers, were amongst the few groups of workers in Russia in the 1990s that were able to build independent unions and organize themselves effectively. Consequently, workers in transportation have also been targeted by the state for retaliation and strikes have been ruled illegal on both the railroads and in air-traffic control.

Failing enterprises

There are also, however, still some elements of the strike wave that resemble the kinds of problems that afflicted Russian workers in the 1990s, including

non-payment of wages and hunger strikes. However, as the examples in this section show, these tend to be localized phenomena related to failing enterprises (or fraudulent management) rather than a systemic feature of the economic system. Nevertheless, it is clear that hunger strikes remain an important part of the repertoire of protest for Russian workers.

Recent examples include 125 workers from the Visherskaia Paper Company (VBK) in Krasnovishersk in Permskii Krai, who undertook a hunger strike in February 2008, claiming R10 million owed to them by the company that went bankrupt on 12 February of that year with more than R400 million in debts (Konfederatsiia Truda Rossii, 2008). The hunger strike ended when the workers were sued by the city administration for illegally occupying the building in which their protest was taking place. In another case, on April 4, 2007 17 vendors in Komsomolsk-na-Amure announced a hunger strike in protest against the closing of the city market in which they rented space (Kommersant, 2007). Similarly, on April 8, 23 employees of the Captain's Club restaurant in Krasnoyarsk occupied the restaurant demanding the payment of wage arrears of up to 5 months. 6 of the employees announced that they were going on hunger strike in protest at the management's alleged offer to pay back wages in kind rather than money (NGS Novosti, 2008).

The reemergence of the alternative unions

A key element in the new strike wave is the new lease on life the strikes have given to alternative union confederations that emerged in the 1990s but that struggled under Yeltsin and in the early Putin years. As these cases show, over the last few years we have seen the reemergence of a range of alternative unions including *Edinstvo*, the liberal union confederation *Sotsprof*, the Trotskyite union *Zashchita Truda*, the KPRF-allied *Konfederatsiia Truda Rossii* (Confederation of Labor of Russia) and the *Vserossiiskaia Konfederatsiia Truda* (All-Russian Confederation of Labor). The apparent revival of these unions comes from the same source that rendered them weak in the 1990s: the alternative unions have to grow from the ground up. Unlike the FNPR, these are unions of activists built from below, uniting and organizing groups of militant workers, in response to locally based actions at the level of the enterprise, or even of one shop within an enterprise. In the stronger economy of recent years, with companies growing and keen to continue production, such actions are more possible than they were in the context of the 1990s economic collapse. Unlike the FNPR, for these unions the experience of struggle and the creation of organization at the local level generally predated the involvement of the national confederations.

Nevertheless, in many cases the confederations play a useful role, ranging from moral support in Severouralsk and Vsevolozhsk, to being a key resource in Surgut and Tol'iatti, and serving as the primary 'locomotive' of the Moscow rail strike. In the Surgut case, for example, *Sotsprof's* network of activists proved crucial to expanding the unrest beyond Surgut itself, to Liantor, Megion and other oil towns. Likewise, connections through *Sotsprof* helped labor leaders at Ford and AvtoVAZ come together with their colleagues at Avtoframos and Nokian Tires to form the

Inter-regional Union of Automotive Workers in order to offer mutual support and coordinate demands (Mekhanik and Kvasov, 2007).

Indeed, the alternative union locals are quite explicit about their organizational ties. Thus, the website of the Ford union includes links to the *Edinstvo* union at AvtoVAZ, the *Profsvoboda* union at Surgut, the *Profsoiuz lokomotivnykh brigad zheleznodorozhnikov* that organized the wildcat rail strike in Moscow, and others in Arzamas, Tomsk, Belgorod and elsewhere around Russia. There is, needless to say, no link to the FNPR (<http://www.ford-profsoyuz.ru/>. Accessed 1 October 2008). The banner atop the *Edinstvo* website includes, alongside *Edinstvo*'s own logo, the logos of the Ford union, the independent union at the GM-AvtoVAZ joint venture, an independent rail union in Syzran' and the Transnationals Information Exchange that was key to spurring the initial strike at Ford (Mekhanik and Kvasov, 2007).

On the one hand, these linkages serve quite concrete purposes, providing local unions – which are, in almost all cases, the instigators of strikes and protests – with resources and expertise, as well as with conduits for sharing information. It was thanks to the relationships subsumed under the *Sotsprof* and MPRA umbrellas that workers at other factories and in other regions were able to join the picket line at Ford, for example. And *Sotsprof* is a major source of the information that the local unions distribute to their members, concerning labor laws and market developments in particular.

But on the other hand, there is also a perceptual role played by these linkages. For example, *Sotsprof* leader Sergei Khramov is frequently quoted in articles about strikes, playing up the importance of his organization. And Khramov is abetted in that effort by the striking unions' opponents, whether management, FNPR local leaders or even the local authorities, who generally seek to portray local conflicts as being artificially engineered from the outside by 'radical' forces such as *Sotsprof*. Both sides exaggerate the role of *Sotsprof* in these strikes. Nonetheless, the presence even of a low level of interaction, combined with the rhetorical importance of *Sotsprof* and demonstrations of solidarity by workers in other places allows striking workers to perceive themselves as part of a movement and it is clear that the idea of a growing labor movement is held not only by the workers, but by journalists, analysts and other opinion leaders, as evidenced by many of the news reports cited in this article, in which the strikes and protests discussed here are seen in the context of one another.

The FNPR

The perception of a growing independent labor movement has had an impact on the FNPR as well. In its role as a virtual or ersatz union meant to displace labor mobilization while precluding the need for the state and employers to engage in true tri-partite negotiations, the FNPR faces a dilemma. On the one hand, it cannot tolerate the appearance of significant non-FNPR mobilization: such mobilization would pull down the façade of legitimacy that FNPR claims, while simultaneously demonstrating the organization's failure at its mission of marginalizing the alternative unions. On the other hand, the FNPR cannot absorb and assimilate truly

grassroots mobilization into its own structures, which are designed to dissipate rather than transmit grievances. Any attempt to bring true grievances on board could either lead to an organizational split or force the organization to break its relationship with the state.

To cope, the FNPR seems to have developed a three-fold strategy of reaction. The first element is to continually malign and marginalize independent unions. For example, it paints *Sotsprof* and its local affiliates as ‘radicals’ and ‘extremists’ and alleges that strikes and protests are being engineered as political ploys to garner electoral support for one party or another, or simply to provide ‘PR’ for *Sotsprof* while feeding the ‘personal ambitions’ of Sergei Khramov, Aleksei Etmanov and other labor leaders (what those ‘personal ambitions’ might be is generally left up to the reader’s imagination). The second element is to pursue “safe” forms of militancy, bringing workers out into the streets to demand more corporate social responsibility, increased pensions and the like, but generally without reference to specific grievances and almost exclusively without work stoppages. To underscore the benign nature of such ‘mobilization’, FNPR often marches together with *Edinaia Rossiia* loyalists and formulates its demands to mesh with the party’s own rhetoric. Thus, in April 2007, when FNPR organized a nationwide ‘day of protest’ to demand higher pensions, it came hand in hand with an announcement by *Edinaia Rossiia* that the party would seek to push a pension increase through the Duma.

The third element of FNPR’s strategy has been to reconsolidate its ties with the state and employers. The relationship with the ruling *Edinaia Rossiia* party has already been mentioned, and while *Edinaia Rossiia* leaders studiously avoid involvement in specific labor disputes, they have not hesitated to requite the relationship in general, marching through central Moscow on May Day 2008 with some 20,000 people gathered by the party and the FNPR (Stepin, 2008). In addition, the FNPR’s frequently and loudly repeated accusations of ‘extremism’ have fit easily into the ‘anti-extremist’ frame of the law enforcement apparatus, and local labor activists have found themselves facing criminal charges of extremism in several of the cases described here. And, although Ford and AvtoVAZ have dealt with the independent unions, all of the employers cited here except Ford have also duly noted FNPR’s loyalty, seeking generally to distribute whatever concessions are made through FNPR channels and reiterating their position of dealing only with the FNPR-affiliated locals.

Regime response

The strike wave of 2006–2008 represents a challenge both economically and politically. While it is not possible at this stage to estimate the economic effects of the wave, and while they will have in any case been obscured by the global economic downturn that began in 2008, it is clear that Russia could ill afford wage costs to rise significantly at a time when inflationary pressures were already threatening to take the shine of recent economic performance. Adding wage-cost pressure to high and rising international commodity prices and growing government spending could have created a dangerous mixture.

Politically, too, the strike wave has potentially threatening implications for the current regime. The power of example is strong. Russian and international experience demonstrates that strikes can become very contagious indeed if it becomes apparent that taking industrial action is effective. If this happens, the strike wave could change from being largely a problem for employers to being one for the state. Furthermore, the example of workers making progress by organizing and protesting outside of state-sanctioned structures is unlikely to be lost on others dissatisfied with the narrow politics of Putin's Russia. As a result, the Kremlin is unlikely to want to create the impression that it can be forced into making compromises by action in factories and on the streets.

Furthermore, the Kremlin is increasingly caught in a dilemma of its own creation. Two new problems seem to emerge from these cases that we have not seen before and that can be traced back to the state. One of these is that much of the protest can be seen as a direct response to the regime, and the socially-oriented rhetoric the ruling group employs. Thus, when workers at AvtoVAZ demanded salaries of 25,000 rubles per month, they were directly reminding their state-controlled bosses — all of whom are members of the ruling party — of a *Edinaia Rossiia* campaign promise. Similar references to *Edinaia Rossiia* campaign promises were reportedly made in the railroad strike. This sort of appeal seems particularly resonant against the backdrop of political-economy developments during Putin's second term, which saw increasing industrial consolidation and growing state or state-linked ownership of major industrial assets. It is not, for example, a tremendous leap for workers at AvtoVAZ or the Russian railroads to demand that their state-owned employers live up to the promises of the political elite, even if the companies are formally 'private' and autonomous.

The second problem, closely related to the first, is workers' evidently declining perceptions of 'social responsibility', that is, the degree to which they are taken care of by larger institutions, both employers and the state. A similar logic to that described in the preceding paragraph applies in the area of social responsibility, a recurring theme in *Edinaia Rossiia* rhetoric and in Vladimir Putin's annual 'state of the nation' addresses as president, and in much of his rhetoric as prime minister. Having heard the state tout the importance of social responsibility, and having seen some companies, at least for a time, increase their standards, perceived decreases in social responsibility are also leading to strikes. Thus, in both Surgut and Severouralsk workers struck in response to what they saw as the failure of their employers to live up to promises. Those promises need not be explicit or direct. In Severouralsk, Rusal was accused of backing away from promises made by Sual, the previous owner of the *Krasnaia Shapochka* mine; in Surgut, meanwhile, SNG had been generally inconsistent in its 'social component', and in any case was perceived as failing to live up to the standards set earlier by Yukos. And at Ford, workers demanded that their foreign-owned employer exceed Russian standards of behavior — which the workers recognized as being low — and treat them no differently than if they had been workers in Germany or the United States.

While all of the strikes reviewed in this article are primarily local phenomena, the appearance of these new problems points to a nascent generalization of grievances

from the particular to the universal. While workers in the 1990s struck out of desperation, workers in Putin's second term strike out of a sense of entitlement. As workers in an increasingly prosperous and ostensibly socially responsible Russia, they demand more than just a job and a wage: they demand a good job and a competitive wage. Certainly, an improving market allows them to do this, and labor militancy generally increases along with economic prosperity. But citing an exclusively structural and economic logic obscures the fact that the workers in these cases seem to act not simply on an opportunity, but on a sense of justice that is enabled by, but eventually transcends, the economic context.

The initial, if somewhat tentative, move from particular to universal grievance — informed by the increasing coherence of the independent labor movement, the retrenchment of the FNPR and the emergence of new, contextual problems — feeds into a much more fundamental shift in the development of independent labor as a social movement. The sense of injury engendered by the failure of the state and employers to live up to rhetorical obligations, combined with clearly identifiable 'culprits', provides the basic building blocks for an injustice frame. The belligerent response of the movement's opponents, including the FNPR, employers and the state, who increasingly act in concert, serves only to strengthen the perceived injustice, further entrenching workers' local concerns in the context of generalized dissent. Moreover, the refusal of 'official' political organizations, such as FNPR or *Edinaia Rossiia*, to take workers' concerns on board and transmit them to the policymaking arena, indeed the general inaccessibility of the state itself, forces disaffected workers into alliances with the Communist Party and other opposition groups, regardless of any prior views workers may have held about the regime and its leadership.

It is worth noting here that many of the strikes, like most 'wildcat actions', have their roots in long-held grievances, often going back one or more years prior to the development of actual unrest. But just as the recalcitrance of the FNPR forces disgruntled workers towards the independent unions, these simmering grievances are not transmitted through Russia's monopolized and atrophied media and civil-societal infrastructure. As a result, strikes seem to an outside observer to arise 'out of the blue', unexpected blips against a backdrop of general social peace. To an insider, however, they would appear as logical and easily understandable reactions to an untenable situation. Thus, the ease with which workers across industries and regions have begun to show solidarity with one another, as well as the quick 'contagion' effect of copycat strikes, again both on a regional and an industrial basis. All of this means that the apparent stability of Putin's "managed society", built as it is on top-down organizations, is extremely fragile.

Workers' shifting perception of the means and ends of labor unrest inevitably reflects back on their perception of organized labor itself. In a remarkable anecdote, Ford labor leader Aleksei Etmanov told of his own changing perceptions after his visit to Brazil:

Last spring they sent me on a two-week trip to an international labor conference in Brazil. On heading off, I was sure that all a union meant was

a Christmas present for the employees and a collective booze-up once a year. After the trip I understood; the union doesn't give anything, a union fights. Recognizing "the low level of consciousness" of most workers and the fact that the collective is not used to fighting for its rights, I decided to copy the example of my Brazilian colleagues and hold seminars explaining the correct way to declare a strike, explaining what a collective agreement is, and what basic rights are guaranteed by labor legislation. It is not a secret to anyone — the more a welder knows, the more he is worth. We would like to free ourselves from the "vertical" of the FNPR, because so far we have received no support from them. We are going to fight for our rights by uniting the trade unions of the region (Rossiia, 2006).

In a separate interview, he added:

In Brazil, it is not just drivers, but also metal workers who participate in protest actions. Therefore, they more quickly achieve increases in wages that are struggling to keep up with inflation. What is most important there is that, despite unemployment, casual laborers do not mess things up for the strikers, because there solidarity is not an empty word, but is real (Loshchikhina, 2006).

Thus, for Etmanov, the revelation of the possibilities of labor mobilization helped him re-frame the difficulties he perceived in Russia. It did not take him long to convince his co-workers to look in the same direction. And, for an evidently growing number of Russian workers, a similar shift in perception may be increasingly easy to make — even without a trip to Brazil. If so, the implications for the Putin-era political system could be serious indeed.

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