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Spotlight interview with Sergei Danilekov (RPD-KTR-Russia)

The struggle of the Kaliningrad dockers

Brussels 19 July 2005 (ICFTU OnLine): The region's industrial cradle, the Port of Kaliningrad (*), which is celebrating its 750th anniversary with great ceremony this July, has been the focus of a bitter social struggle over recent years. The commercial port's management and a handful of dockworkers have been engaged in a dispute since 1997. Interview with Sergei Danilenkov of the Russian Dockworkers Union (RPD-KTR).

Could you give a brief overview of this ten-year struggle?

In 1995, we formed our own organisation, the Russian Dockworkers Union, modelled on other alternative unions formed in other ports in the Russian Federation. These unions had managed to secure better wages and working conditions. We were not happy with the collective agreement that the other union in the port had concluded with the commercial port's management. But it was not just a question of wages; our right to free medical care was also at stake, along with our dignity. The dockers work with coal and dust. But we were not able to obtain more than a small piece of soap per month. We would use it up within two days. The management refused any form of dialogue with us. Under these circumstances, the only option we had left was to take strike action. That was in October 1997. We held out for two weeks. Out of the 500 dockers in the commercial port, just over half formed part of our union, and half of our members joined the strike. The port was running under capacity. The management continued to ignore us and recruited strikebreakers. We tried to rally the support of the local administration and governor, but without success. We soon understood that they were all united against us, and had to resign ourselves to go back to work. As a reprisal, the management decided to group the members of our union into teams of fifty workers, that is three times more dockers than required.

To stop you from earning as much as you did before the strike?

Yes. We are paid by the task. It was a tactic used by management to make sure we had less work, and didn't earn more than 1000 to 2000 roubles, whilst the others continued to earn around 5000. It was a very difficult time, particularly for those with families to support. Our relatives who worked at the port were harassed. We were subjected to financial and psychological pressure. They used every means at their disposal. They incited our colleagues to leave our union, promising them a bonus of a 1,000 roubles. They also told us that we could only work 40 hours a month. We were always given the worst tasks: digging ditches, shovelling snow, cleaning the toilets. More and more often, the loading and unloading work was assigned to workers who were less qualified than us. With regard to the tests we had to take each year to check on our skills for working in dangerous conditions (I saw several fatal accidents during my 14 years working at the port), strangely enough, I failed, whilst I'd always had top marks before. Many other union members were also failed.

Did you receive any support from other unions?

Yes, the allied unions of the Murmansk and Novosibirsk ports sent us funds and letters of support. At international level, the ITF's campaign had a real impact. The threats to place a blockade on the port forced the management to back down. Our situation improved for a few months, and then management began to attack us once again. We were earning next to nothing, and were forced to find ways of making extra income. Like tens of thousands of people from this region, I had no means of survival other than crossing the Polish border several times a week to sell cigarettes and vodka. It's illegal, but I had no alternative. Then in

2001, with the entry into force of the new labour code restricting our rights even further, the management did not hesitate to fire the remaining 24 members of our union, using the pretext that there was not enough work. And yet a few days after our dismissal, a port executive said exactly the opposite in an interview given to Kaliningrad's Pravda newspaper. What's more, new jobs were created.

How about the legal action you are taking?

The courts have long proved incompetent to deal with this case. In 2002, the Court of Kaliningrad ordered that we be reinstated and paid compensation. Unfortunately for us, the port was undergoing restructuring at the time. Two subsidiaries were formed. The management took advantage of the confusion to reinstate us in the old structure where there were no more dockers and no licence to carry out freight operations. In the end, we were dismissed on grounds of absenteeism.

Which led to renewed legal action?

Yes, and the ruling is very slow to come through. But things could speed up now thanks to the favourable ruling of the European Court of Human Rights regarding the admissibility of our complaint. That was in October 2004, and since then we are under the impression that the authorities are paying more heed to us. The payment of indemnities has speed up.

Do you think you will go back to working as a docker one day?

I would do anything to go back. I'm currently working on the railways. It's well paid; I receive tips. I load and unload the carriages. It's quite similar to the work I used to do. But the port is my life. The atmosphere there is unique, the responsibilities are greater. The dockers don't have someone constantly on their backs. We are assigned a new task every day and complete it as best as we can.

Do you have a family?

I'm divorced and have a seven-year-old son.

Do you think there is a link between your marital and work problems?

Of course. My wife was pregnant during the strike. It was a very difficult time. She suffered a lot, she was very stressed and nearly lost the baby. She asked for a divorce on the grounds that I could no longer meet the family's needs. My son is not well, however. I spend half my salary on medication. You know, it takes great resolve to risk losing everything. Here in Russia, people are not used to fighting for their rights, despite the low wages. But it is possible to change the course of things. Our experience with the union has taught us that we are much stronger when we are united. We haven't won yet, but we already feel that many people respect us for what we have done.

Interview by Jacky Delorme.

(*) This former capital of East Prussia, razed to the ground in 1945 and turned into a military bastion during the Cold War, Kaliningrad is now a Russian enclave separated from the rest of the Federation by Lithuania, Poland and the Baltic sea. The Kaliningrad oblast (administrative region) enjoys "special economic zone" status, which is supposed to transform it into a "pilot region", a bridge between the Russian Federation and the European Union.

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