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Spotlight interview with Gregory Mysyurin and Ludmila Salina (GMPR/FNPR - Russia)

"Our wages are far too low to provide us with a decent standard of living"

Brussels 26 July 2005 (ICFTU OnLine): In Kaliningrad (*), like throughout the rest of Russia, the gap between rich and poor is growing ever wider. Within the enclave of Kaliningrad, nowhere is this gulf more visible than in Yantarny, a village just as destitute as thousands of others in Russia, despite being the world capital of amber. At the end of June, amber workers held a 5-day hunger strike whilst continuing to work, which ended with a 100% increase in their salaries. This interview with Gregory Mysyurin, a trade union leader from the extraction plant, and Ludmila Salina, who works in the jewellery workshop, was conducted during the protest.

What is at the root of this dispute?

G.M. The non-recognition of our trade union organisation and the refusal to increase our wages. In May, I went to the management to negotiate a wage rise. The following day, the guards wouldn't let me enter the factory. They confiscated my pass. The director doesn't want any talk of unions and thinks I no longer have any right to enter the factory. We want justice to be done.

Why did you not turn to the courts before reaching such extremes?

G.M. It's too long a process! Only yesterday the assistant director of public prosecutions reconfirmed that the director had acted illegally. But the warnings and fines make no difference. To give an example: last year, inspectors acting within the framework of the fight against financial crime had to force their way through to gain access to the accounting files. The management was against it. We want decent wages of between 10,000 and 15,000 roubles a month, and we want them now. Look at our pay slips: the average wage is between 1500 and 3000 roubles. How can we be expected to live on that? That's why the workers decided to take this action and continue to work at the same time. We may as well be starving here at work as at home.

How is the dispute progressing?

G.M. We are examined by a doctor before starting work. He gives medical certificates to those whose health has deteriorated because of the hunger strike. For the moment, this has been the case for 7 workers. "We are continuing with the protest because there has not been enough progress. The director says he is ready to introduce a bonus system that could take the wages up to 6000 roubles, at the most. But the workers have refused. We would only receive these bonuses during the months when we are working on the extraction of amber. But, it should be pointed out that for half of the year, during the winter period, it's impossible to extract amber, so we are assigned maintenance tasks.

Is it a state-owned company?

G.M. Yes. A new management body had been appointed to restructure the company, as its debts had risen to 40 million roubles. Two new companies were formed: one for extraction and another for jewellery production. But the debts have now reached 100 million roubles. And yet the value of the amber extracted here each month is 150 million roubles. It would seem that there are a number of people with a vested interest in seeing these two companies go bankrupt.

Ludmila, what does the presence of all these women here alongside the hunger strikers represent?

L.S. We come during our lunch break and after work to give them moral support. All our wages are far too low to provide us with a decent standard of living. They have not risen at all over the last five years. During the restructuring period, when many workers lost their jobs, we didn't say a word, but now we've had enough. I don't feel any hatred towards the current director, but why should we be denied a normal wage or even be accused of stealing amber? One shouldn't make sweeping generalisations on the basis of a few isolated incidents.

What are your working conditions like?

L.S. The heating installations are in a sorry state. It is freezing in winter and boiling hot in summer. We can't open the windows. We have to cover our own meals and transport expenses. Only the guards employed in Saint Petersburg enjoy a good wage and paid meals.

How about your wages?

L.S. Most of the workers earn no more than 2000 roubles. I don't know how they manage. I have real difficulties getting by, and yet I earn 7000 roubles (I work on the shaping of the stones). I live with my husband and 12-year-old son at the home of my retired parents. The apartment is very cramped. My husband has just lost his job as a sailor. His employer owes him a huge amount of money. He'll never get it back. Heating is becoming more and more expensive; food too. All the shops in the village have to give the workers credit. Meat is a luxury, and our vegetable plots have become vital. We dress in second-hand clothes. But it's not even embarrassing anymore, as everyone does the same.

Is the whole village concerned by the fate of the workers?

L.S. Yes. Half the village used to work at the Kombinat. My parents too. I can show you my father's diplomas of honour. He used to work as a carpenter. In the past, parents never used to worry about their children getting good qualifications. They could always work at the Kombinat. Today, there are not even 1000 jobs between the two companies. The men and women from the village are now forced to look for work in the microwave factory in Kolosovka, or at the fish factory in Pionerski, whilst, in the past, the amber sector used to attract hundreds of workers from these towns.

Interview by Jacky Delorme.

(*) July 2005 marks Kaliningrad's 750th anniversary, which is being celebrated with great pomp and circumstance. It has just welcomed Presidents Putin, Chirac and Chancellor Schroeder. This former East Prussian capital, razed to the ground in 1945 and turned into a military bastion during the Cold War, 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. Until now, however, only a small minority of Russians have reaped the benefits of the customs duties and tax exemptions.

The ICFTU represents 145 million workers in 234 affiliated organisations in 154 countries and territories. ICFTU is also a member of Global Unions: <http://www.global-unions.org>

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