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Belarus - Ukraine - Russia

The Chernobyl catastrophe

20 years on and still a killer

The worst industrial catastrophe in history is not yet over. After the accident, the Soviet authorities sent between 600,000 and 800,000 people to the plant to clean Chernobyl, without taking the trouble to ensure their safety. Many died, others continue to suffer somewhere in the former Soviet Union. Twenty years on, at least five million people still live, study or work in areas that are contaminated - and will remain so for thousands of years to come.

In Belarus, which persistently justifies its title as the "last dictatorship of Europe", the repression of trade unions gives the authorities free reign to pursue the economic rehabilitation of the contaminated areas, based on the use of forced labour and the exploitation of migrants. In Russia, the *Chernobyl Union* is fighting to defend the rights of the "liquidators", at a time of growing economic ultra-liberalism. In 2005, an unjust social reform stirred an unprecedented response from civil society groups. In Ukraine, the trade unions defending the last 4,000 workers employed in the exclusion zone have to contend with the indifference of the authorities, which allocate only the scraps left over from their budget to radioprotection programmes. Thus, endangering the lives of both workers and the population at large.

Since her birth in Gomel (Belarus), a few weeks after the Chernobyl disaster, Ana has scarcely left her bedroom in a rundown wooden house. Her grandmother looks after her on her own.

An impossible assessment

The explosion that took place on 26 April in reactor no. 4 of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, and the resultant fire lasting for over 10 days, released levels of radioactivity one hundred times higher than the Hiroshima bomb.

Badge of a Ukrainian dosimetrist who lives and works in Chernobyl.

Radionuclides were scattered by the wind. The result was what has been termed "leopard spot" contamination. The worst affected regions are those close to the nuclear plant in Ukraine, Belarus and Russia, but the fallout stretched over hundreds and even thousand of kilometres (1). For many years, the leaders of the former Soviet Union made every effort to play down the real impact of the catastrophe.

In the weeks following the disaster, 120,000 inhabitants were evacuated. Their bodies had already been exposed to very high doses of radioactivity. Some 350,00 people were moved to "clean" areas by the state rehousing programmes. Between 600,00 and 800,00 men and women were mobilised to "liquidate" Chernobyl, including people from the area -miners, construction workers, soldiers and reservists. Having been provided with inadequate protective equipment, those taking part in this operation to secure and clean-up the area, were exposed to high levels of radiation. The medical records have been purposefully ill-kept: many of the "liquidators" are either not on record or their readings have been underestimated or falsified, complicating the task of obtaining their sickness or disability benefits.

The intensity of the exposure to radiation and the nature of the contamination have determined, and continue to determine, the human impact of the catastrophe. The various radioelements released by Chernobyl disintegrate progressively, a process lasting between a few days and several million years, depending on their type. For example, iodine 131 disperses quickly, but is nonetheless responsible for the dramatic increase in thyroid cancer among children. The gravest health risk is posed by strontium and caesium, as these will take several generations to disappear.

A 30 kilometre exclusion zone was established around the reactor. It also stretches into Belarus, as the plant is only 10 kilometres from the border. The territories officially recognised as contaminated cover an area of 140,000 km2, and are categorised according to the density of the radioactive fallout. At least five million people live on land where the level is above 1Ci/km2 (2), and 200,000 others are living in areas with concentrations of between 15 and 40 Ci/km2. Areas with levels higher than 40 Ci/km2 cannot be inhabited (yet several thousand people can be can always be found). Legislation in the three countries provides for a variety of social programmes (re housing, prophylactic care, free school meals, sanatoriums, etc.) as well as numerous countermeasures (use of mineral fertilisers, special food additives, etc.). The implementation of such measures varies according to the level of contamination in the area. It also depends on the finances available. Chernobyl continues to weigh heavily on the national budgets. In overall terms, the Chernobyl programmes of the three countries are gradually dwindling, and there is a trend towards replacing them with economic redeployment activities in the affected areas. The worst example of this trend can be seen in Belarus, where President Lukashenko is pushing people to rehabilitate the zones, claiming that there is practically no trace of radioactivity left, and there is no more danger. His opinion is shared, at least in part, by United Nations agencies.

In a report published in September 2005, experts commissioned by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the World Health Organisation (WHO) and several other UN institutions drew up a generally positive report on the impact of what they refer to as an "accident" rather than a catastrophe. They set at 56 the number of deaths that can be directly attributed to Chernobyl (47 fire fighters and rescue workers, and nine children who died from thyroid cancer). In total, they estimate that the accident should not cause more than 4000 deaths, claiming that, apart from the increase in the number of thyroid cancers and health problems among thousands of workers exposed to very high doses in April 1986, "…there is no grave impact on the health of the rest of the population in the neighbouring zones, nor wide scale contamination that could still constitute a serious threat to human health, outside a few restricted access zones." The report also states that programmes encouraging dependency and a sense of victimisation should been replaced with initiatives that broaden perspectives, support local development, and restore people's confidence in the future (3).

Many other experts (scientists from public and private research centres, environmental organisations, human rights defence organisations, etc.) firmly refute the conclusions of this report. Their criticism is twofold. Firstly, given that the IAEA's mission is to "accelerate

and increase the contribution of atomic energy to peace, health and prosperity in the world", they express doubts as to its independence vis-à-vis the nuclear industry. The latter clearly has every interest in playing down the consequences of Chernobyl and accidents in nuclear power plants in general, so that it can continue to prosper. They also call into questions the impartiality of the World Health Organisation on this issue. In 1959, the two organisations (IAEA and WHO) concluded an agreement whereby they committed never to take a public position that could harm the other. The same experts also censure the failure to take account of factors specific to Chernobyl, such as the fact that the doses in the affected areas are limited but constant, and that the main source of radiological exposure comes from the ingestion of radioactive particles in foodstuffs. Often snubbed by their counterparts in the West (4), several Russian, Ukrainian and Belarus researchers have brought to light all kinds of extremely worrying interactions between the concentrations of radionuclides in children's bodies and their state of health. In Belarus, the studies of Professor Bandajevsky, the director of the Gomel State Institute of Medicine, indicate that, in addition to the thyroid, the heart and the immune system could also be seriously affected by even relatively low doses of caesium 137. Today, in the hospitals and clinics of the Gomel region, doctors and specialists unanimously confirm the development of "old age illnesses" among an ever-growing number of children, such as heart disease, cataracts, diabetes, etc. ●

(1) In France, the IRSN, the public body in charge nuclear expertise and protection, estimates that the fallout of the "Chernobyl cloud" could lead to 300 deaths from cancer in France alone. Its British counterpart, the NRPB, charts the number of deaths in Western Europe at between 1000 and 3000.
(2) The Curie is an old unit of measure, increasingly being replaced by the Becquerel. 1 Curie/km2 is equal to 37 Becquerel/km2.
(3) "Chernobyl's Legacy: Health, Environmental and Socio-Economic Impacts" (www.iaea.org)
(4) The long contested link between the thyroid cancer incidence and Chernobyl has finally been validated.

Belarus: a deadly rehabilitation programme

In Belarus, the country worst affected by the radioactive fallout, President Lukashenko is doing everything possible to speed up the implementation of his policy of repopulating the contaminated regions, claiming that there is no longer any danger, and exploiting the easiest targets - young graduates, migrants, the jobless and prisoners.

Fields stretching as far as the eye can see, interspersed with patches of lush vegetation, the natural landscape is deceptively beautiful in Dubroveloc, a village in the Dobrush district of Gomel. According to Valentine, the Mayor, the level of radiation in the village centre is 30 ci/km2. In the surrounding areas, the average varies between 15 and 40 Ci/km2, with peaks as high as 70 Ci/km2. This explains the strict controls at the zone's entry and exit points for foreign journalists. But Belarussians are being welcomed with open arms to come and take part in the renaissance of the village. The authorities plan to set up several hundred "agro-villages" in the next few years, and Dubroveloc is one of them. Revitalising the agro-industrial sector is among President Lukashenko's top priorities, a policy that includes rehabilitating the agricultural land in the areas contaminated by radionuclides. During a brief visit to the Gomel region in 2005, he declared that not a plot of land should be left unfarmed. In Dubroveloc, the message was received loud and clear by the kolkhoz leader, who is full of praise for the "Luka" method. "For over a year now, we've had the full backing of the government, and we can see the results - our yields are higher than those of Western countries. You should come back in summer to see the enthusiasm of the people who come and join us to work in the fields. We even have two champions among us. During the last harvest, they alone gathered a thousand ton of grain. It's a record in the region. They received a diploma of honour and a good bonus. All that is thanks to our president. He's someone who understands our problems, he himself was even a Sovkhoz director before leading the country."

But, the village is still far from being revived. With only 180 inhabitants (75 of whom are children) remaining out of the 2,500 living there prior to Chernobyl, Dubroveloc still looks like a ghost town, and is only repopulated during harvest time, when the seasonal workers arrive. It has to be said that the local leaders do not set much of an example. Neither the Mayor nor the kolkhoz leader live in the village. They prefer to commute to work from their homes, tens of kilometres away in a "clean" region. Although recently connected to the gas supply, another government priority, many families continue to heat their homes with wood, as they cannot afford to pay the gas bills. They do this despite the danger of recycling radioactivity. The smoke from the wood used as fuel emits radionuclides. Radioactive ashes are used to fertilise the vegetable plots. But, this is just one aggravating factor among so many in an economy where people are struggling to make ends meet. In order to survive on their meagre incomes, all the inhabitants of Dubroveloc eat the fruit and vegetables they grow in their gardens, and the milk, eggs and meat from the few animals they keep. It is all contaminated. Just like the grain, the feed they give their animals, and the horse manure used as fertilizer.

According to the Mayor, regular controls are carried out on these local products. She admits, however, that the level of radioactivity is often several times higher than the level above which their consumption is officially prohibited, but she does not have the heart to confiscate them. "We try to convince them to throw them away themselves. When it's milk, we tell them to make it into cream, butter or cheese. Processing it reduces the level of radioactivity." An official from Dobrush, who works in a radioprotection department, has seen similar cases. "The radiology institute of Gomel asked me to supply it with samples of the wild mushrooms widely consumed in the region. A few days later, one of their researchers called me to ask if I had collected them next to the plant, the Becquerel level was so high. (1) International organisations have suggested that we should scatter the forests with chemicals that reduce the level of radioactivity. But it's simply not realistic. We cannot even manage to apply such counter measures in the State farms, where, regardless of what those in charge might say, the use of Prussian blue and potassic fertilizers is far from systematic." As for small and private farmers, they do not have access to such products, unless they pay for them themselves.

"We eat what we produce ourselves,

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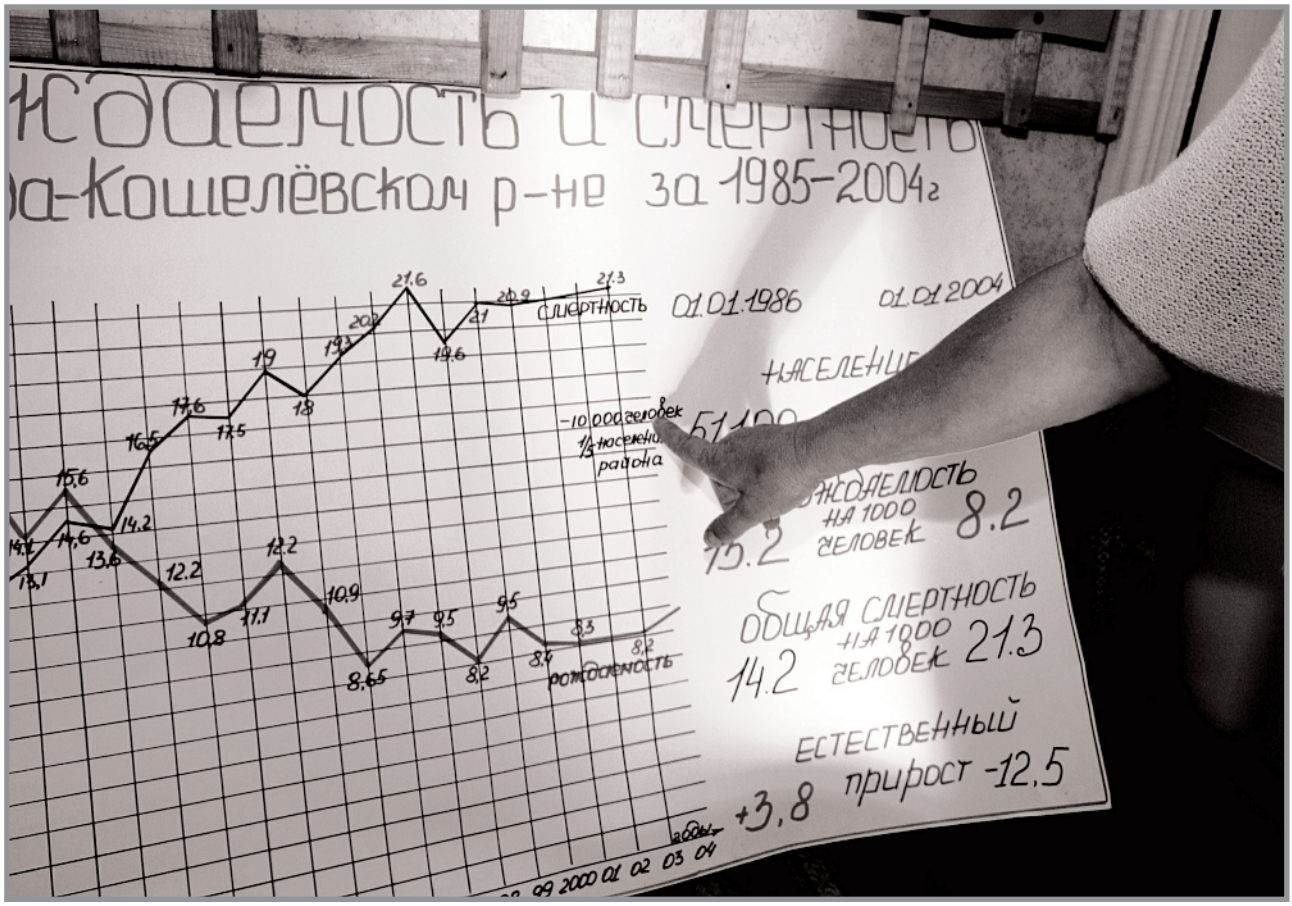
and very little else," says Lida, a 26 year-old mother of one with a husband working at the kolkhoz. "I don't remember anyone coming to check our milk or any of our other produce. We never recieved fertilisers or these products you mention." Lida wants to leave the "zone". Her father has been in the Moscow region for several weeks. "He is looking for a job and housing, so that we can live more healthily." This will be the second time Lida and her family have been uprooted. In 1992, they left war torn Abkhazia and took refuge here (2). Seven other migrant families live in Dubroveloc. The Belarus authorities exploit every possible opportunity to repopulate the contaminated zones - young graduates, bus loads of jobless people from Gomel sent to work in the most contaminated fields and paid in kind (tomatoes, onions, etc.), and thousands of prisoners (3). As an independent journalist living in Gomel explains: "It's a very malleable labour force. But the conditions in the prisons are so bad (overcrowding, tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS, etc.) that I don't think they're unhappy about working in the contaminated zones. Besides, most of them are prisoners reaching the end of their sentences, and they even receive a little money for it. They are mockingly referred to as the 'chemists'."

MIGRANTS EXPLOITED BY THE THOUSAND

Larissa and Slavia miss the valleys of Amou-Daria and Syr-Daria. These Uzbeks, of Russian origin, live with their five children aged between one and 15 in the Khoiniki district of Gomel. They still dream of their home country, which they had to leave in the early nineties. "We soon realised that we had we were no longer wanted there when we lost our jobs," explains Oleg, a blond giant with a cheek deformed by an abscess that was poorly treated - for lack of money. "All our friends and acquaintances of Russian origin were in the same boat. We were born there, but for the new leaders, we were just Russians who should be sent back home. There were adverts in the newspapers offering work and accommodation." With two children already, Larissa and Slavia did not spend too much time thinking about it before they moved to Strelichevo. They were not too worried about moving to one of the regions most contaminated with radioactivity. "In Uzbekistan, we used to live next to a uranium mine, so it didn't make much difference," explains Slavia. His main concern lies elsewhere: ensuring the survival of the seven members of his family with the small wage he earns from working as a farm labourer. He is also worried about the administration's delay in processing their application for naturalisation. "We have been waiting for a positive response for years. We are only registered here. As foreigners, we have no access to free health care. Our children can go to the sanatorium like the others (4), but without Belarus nationality, they will not have access to higher education."

Like Slavia, most of the kolkhoz workers and those living in Strelichevo come from the Central Asian republics that became independent after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. They either fled from wars or a socio-economic situation made worse for the Russian minorities who had been living there for several generations, but had become targets with the rise of extreme nationalism. Others come from Chechnya or more nearby countries, such as Ukraine and Moldova, or the neighbouring regions. The one thing they all have in common is the precariousness of their situation, which employers and even unscrupulous local officials are quick to exploit. In 2005, in the Narovlia district, (so badly hit by the nuclear disaster in 1986 that the authorities had evacuated the inhab-



Trends in death (rising) and birth rates since the Chernobyl disaster in the district of Buda-Kasaleva, over 150 km from Chernobyl.

itants from 35 of its 74 villages), a judge was taking pay offs for speeding up the naturalisation process. The scandal impacted negatively on the entire migrant population. For many years, their massive influx into Belarus had been used as propaganda, with the regime claiming that it was proof that the country was a haven of peace and prosperity. But as the country's reputation on the international scene becomes increasingly tarnished, the authorities are becoming increasingly repressive towards anything that might undermine the country's integrity, starting with the foreign nationals.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the main beneficiaries of the relatively large pay rises of the last two years are those working for the State apparatus. The pay rates in the police and armed forces often reach between € 350 and € 450 a month. Meanwhile, in the countryside, the agricultural workers have to settle for what the kolkhozes are willing to give them, which is usually between € 15 and a € 100 a month. "The amounts written in our contracts are never paid," they explain. The situation is worse for Slavia and the others, given that they live in the affected areas. Agriculture was, and still is, the main economic activity in the region, but in 1986, radioactive particles descended on the area in huge quantities. According to experts from the Ministry for Emergencies and the Protection of the Population against the Consequences of Chernobyl, Strelichevo and the entire district of Koiniki are blackspots on the map of contaminated areas in Belarus. But, the funds allocated to their departments (radioprotection, prevention, etc) are in freefall, whilst the economic rehabilitation programmes are increasingly well funded by the Chernobyl Committee - the government body in charge of coordinating the activities of the various ministries concerned with the catastrophe.

TURNING TO VODKA

Determined to redress the economic situation of the contaminated regions at any cost, the Belarus authorities can rely on the informed advice of the IAEA and the World Bank. In a joint report published in 2001, they pointed to what might be the most advantageous counter measures for Belarus. One of them consisted in backing the agrifood sector and processing companies, as processing reduces the amount of radionuclides in the final product. The two institutions took the example of Strelichevo. "Practically the entire grain production of the Khoiniki district fails to comply with the accepted standards on radionuclide content. Distillation is clearly a preferable solution, but the distilleries in Strelichevo do not have the capacity to cover Khoiniki and the neighbouring districts. The grain that cannot be distilled serves as cattle feed."

The old distillery, dating back to 1912, does not stand proudly in the centre of the village. Two members of the management confirm this impression. "The factory has been running under capacity for several years. For the moment, we are still producing and selling fruit-based wines, 100 per cent natural, with no artificial colouring. All the ingredients are good, even the waste products, which hardly contain radionuclides, and are given to the cattle. But we hope to relaunch the distillery by September 2006. The Chernobyl Committee has invested a lot of money in the renovations underway." Indeed, cabins full of electronic equipment are parked in the snow-covered factory yard and land surveyors are busy at work around the building.

For the moment, the factory employs 44 people, mainly women, who earn the equivalent of € 80 a month. The distillery depends on a kolkhoz, which employs another 360 people. "Four out of five employees are migrants," confirms one of the two managers. "Yes, we have placed adverts in all the former Soviet republics. We had to do this, to repopulate the village, which was practically abandoned, so that we could relaunch the kolkhoz". The process is still underway. A family from Kazakhstan arrived last month. The men generally come to try it our first, to see if it suits them, then the process of bringing their family over begins.

The fully renovated school reopened in 2004, offering a complete cycle of eleven years of basic schooling to 250 pupils, almost all of whom are the children of foreign workers. Four of the teachers are from Kazakhstan, the others are young Belarussian graduates, forced to accept their first postings here for at least two years. The head of the school admits that the level of radiation in Strelichevo is high (15 to 40 Ci/km2), but tries to be reassuring. "The children benefit from three 'clean' meals a day and spend two months a year in sanatoriums. The medical attention is very good. We are visited by a multidisciplinary team from Gomel every year. They are highly reputed specialists. They have sophisticated instruments and carry out numerous tests on the children. They were here this morning, it's a shame you missed them." At the village clinic, the head doctor, a Tatar, is not very forthcoming about this medical visit, refusing to give any indication of children's state of health, on the grounds that he does not want to isolate the figures he has from the Belarussian context. And unfortunately, he does not have the latest national statistics.

The "liquidator"

I was a young journalist at the time. I was covering the clean up of the area. But it was a blackout, we were censored. It was only in 1989 that people started to see more clearly. It was the year when a protest convoy of machine workers and tractor drivers was organised by a Belarus trade unionist. They went to Moscow to demand that the truth be told about the actual consequences of the catastrophe. The authorities in Belarus continue to deny the facts, even today. In Koiniki, 90 per cent of the wheat harvest should be destroyed, it contains so much strontium. But do you think they destroy it? It's criminal to send young people there, and to do nothing for those living there.

- "X", a journalist in Gomel

COMPULSORY POSTINGS

Helena, aged 22, a recent medical school graduate, dreams of going on to specialise and becoming a surgeon. In October 2005, after being unsuccessful with her application to enter a university in Moscow, she returned to Belarus to continue with her studies. But, an official letter sent to her home address shattered all her hopes. The letter from the Health Ministry announced that she had received a two-year posting to a hospital in Mozyr, a town in the zone contaminated by the radioactive fallout from Chernobyl. "I protested, but in Belarus, it's really impossible to assert one's rights. Today, after exhausting every possible recourse, I have lost all confidence in the justice of my country," explains Helena. She is now determined to leave for Western Europe to pursue her dream.

After completing her brilliant studies at the linguistic university of Minsk, Oksana, aged 24, was informed that she had to take a teaching post in a school in Braguine, one of the most contaminated districts in Belarus, located just on the border of the exclusion zone. "I have been hiding for over a year," she explains. "I'm not registered and I no longer receive any kind of social benefits. I stayed in Minsk for a few months with a friend who is in the same boat, trying to get by with little jobs here and there, but we're still living under the Soviet system here. Finding a job in an area that you have not studied is impossible. Having depleted my resources, I went back to live with my family. In a recent letter addressed to my parents, the minister threatens that they will have to reim-

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burse the cost of my studies, which would be an astronomical amount of money."

Unlike Helena and Oksana, Katia, aged 25, resigned herself to accepting a post as a maths teacher in a small town south of Moguilev, a region highly contaminated by Chernobyl, despite being relatively far away from the plant. The contamination of the soil here can vary immensely from one village to the next. "I also received three job offers from schools in Minsk, but the authorities here made it very clear that I had no choice." Having completed her two year posting, Katia is now free to leave, but is hesitant, despite the dangers of living in a contaminated zone and suffering from "the blood pressure of an old woman", which she attributes to Chernobyl. She is actively involved in a parents' association that is trying to raise awareness among the population and the authorities about the persistent risks of radioactivity.

A vestige of the totalitarian past, which has not quite passed, these "compulsory postings" were re-established by a law passed in 1997, then confirmed by a decree in 2002. The measure allows the State to send young graduates, who have studied free of charge, to any part of the country to work for two years. It applies to all the professions, although it would seem that teachers, doctors and engineers are the main targets. Graduates who have paid for their studies and those with dependents are exempt. When recruiting graduates, employers systematically ask the young applicants to furnish proof that they have completed their two-year postings, to avoid heavy fines supposedly equal to the cost of the studies. At the beginning of 2001, the Belarus Students' Association was actively campaigning for the repeal of this law. Its director, Irina, explains: "This law violates the Constitution, which guarantees the right of citizens to freely choose their place of work and residence. Our Association had launched a campaign against it. We organised pickets in front of the universities and carried out surveys. The students were obviously almost all against compulsory postings. At the same time, we discovered that very little was known about the law. It's still the case today. But it's quite understandable, given that so many new decrees are being passed. We have been operating informally since our Association was officially dissolved by the authorities at the end of 2001."

Considered by the Belarus Students' Association as a form of forced labour, these "compulsory postings" are all the more despicable when the young graduates are sent to contaminated zones. Like Helena, Oksana and Katia, many young people of childbearing age, who want to start a family, are forced to work for two years in regions where their health is at risk. It's almost impossible to determine how many people are affected by this measure. The information supplied by the authorities is limited to specifying that three graduates out of four meet their obligations. It is also known that two million people live in 3,668 Belarus towns and villages that are officially considered to be contaminated. According to our sources, and the observations gathered during three stays in these contaminated areas, there are several young graduates in virtually every town or village, working as teachers, nursing auxiliaries, doctors or agronomists. When demonstrations are held, and particularly during the commemoration of the anniversary of the catastrophe, the opposition urges the government to bring an end to this practice. Last year, the young activists forming the (prohibited) Zubr movement, organised a demonstration to protest against these posting in front of the Moguilev State University. But, rather than repealing the law, the authorities are toughening its application. In 2004, while speaking about the reform of the health sector, Lukashenko stated that there should be more rigorous controls in this area, suggesting that doctors trying to avoid compulsory postings should be stripped of their qualifications. Over the last few months, the government has been seriously considering increasing the length of the postings from two to five years. ●

The same shackles as 20 years ago

"In 1990, in the town of Gomel in the contaminated area, we organised a strike at Gomselmash, a mechanical engineering company employing 45,000 workers. There were no social programmes worthy of the name and there was no information on the risks associated with radioactivity. We were determined to go all the way. And that's what we did, with a group of 300 strikers starting out from Moscow, intent on meeting top officials at the Kremlin. We arrived right in the middle of the 28th Communist Party Congress. This was our chance! A wind of reform was blowing through the USSR. There were also plenty of foreign journalists. Prime Minister Rykov promised there would be a committee of inquiry, and duly kept his word. Three days later, the first experts arrived in Gomel. All the parties, including the members of the strike committee, had signed a protocol containing a set of recommendations. This document is deemed to constitute the basis of all social measures taken by the USSR to eliminate the consequences of Chernobyl. It's an event that's almost forgotten today. There's a documentary film that retraces this historic episode in which the workers managed to get things moving. But given the present political situation, there's no risk of seeing it on Belarusian TV. The official line tries to deny it all. The masses shouldn't be shown that they can actually influence their own destiny. Today, we're weighed down by the same shackles that were forced onto us back in the Soviet era. Nonetheless, Chernobyl remains a major issue, and the unions must continue their fight in connection with it.

Alyaksandr Bukhvostaw, chairman of the Gomel strike committee in 1990, is today the joint president of the trade union of the radioelectronic industry, automobile industry, metalworking and other branches of the economy, one of the country's independent trade unions under constant attack from the Lukashenko regime.

(1) The Becquerel measures the activity of a radioactive source.

(2) Abkhazia is a small self-proclaimed republic, having seceded from Georgia and benefiting from the support of Russia.

(3) There are almost 600 prisoners per 100,000 inhabitants in Belarus. Only the Cayman Islands, Russia and the United States do worse (cf. International Center for Prison Studies)

(4) The "sanitization" of children in sanatoriums outside the contaminated zones is one of the social benefits provided for by law in Belarus, as well as in Ukraine and Russia.

(5) One of the specific biological features of mushrooms is that they tend to absorb radionuclides in huge quantities. But they are gathered, consumed and sold in large amounts in Dubroveloc and throughout the region.

Chernobyl, Ukraine - an exclusion zone full of workers

Access to the exclusion zone 30 km around the Chernobyl reactor.

Years after the closure of reactor no. 3, Chernobyl continues to affect the lives of thousands of workers, whether they work at the plant, inside the exclusion zone, or in a Special Economic Zone.

Evgueni Kozlov opens the meeting of the workers' committee in his office at 2 pm. His office is decorated with a union flag. Some 20 men and women listen to the President as he informs them of the latest news from the trade union front - the promised money that is not appearing, and the agreements not respected by the employer. A familiar scene, the difference being that the employer is the Chernobyl plant and that the union office is less than 300 metres from the dilapidated sarcophagus covering reactor no. 4. Between 10,000 and 12,000 men and women were working at the plant, or within the exclusion zone, when reactor no. 3 closed in December 2000. Only around 8,000 remain. They include office staff, security guards, cooks, technicians, engineers, doctors, and other workers, such as 69-year-old Anatoli Niezgazinski. Anatoli has been working at the plant since 1980 "... except for the few months after the catastrophe," he points out. Anatoli is now in charge of the equipment and the water pumps in the immediate perimeter of the plant. The retirement age at Chernobyl is 50 for men and 45 for women, but the pensions in Ukraine are so low that almost a thousand employees who have reached this age, continue to work the same old shifts - 15 days on, 15 days off. Generally, they live far from the invisible rays that kill in small doses.

"We are under good medical observation and the maximum exposure standards are respected," says Evgueni, in a mechanical tone. This phrase is heard often inside the exclusion zone (1). It throws light on the remarks made on the previous evening by Viktor Odynytsya, director of the Psycho-Social Centre in Slavoutich, the town built for Chernobyl workers in 1987. In his consultations with the plant workers, the psychologist has looked closely into the management of stress in extreme

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circumstances, and has drawn this conclusion. "One cannot live with an eye constantly on the dial showing the number of micro-roentgens per hour. The burden is unbearable. Either you leave, or accept things the way they are." A teacher from Slavoutich has a different view of her neighbours' mentality. "They know they are taking unreasonable risks. They don't talk about it much, but you just have to observe them, that way they have of considering themselves to be a breed of their own, sometimes with the feeling that they are owed everything."

Evgueni is not oblivious to the reputation clinging to them. But he rails against those who consider them to be privileged or hotheads: "Two-thousand-five-hundred hryvnias a month (€ 400) for handling highly radioactive materials, from morning to night, do you think it's too much?" Another unionist agrees: "It's true that the context we are working in is exceptional, there is no other place like this, but we are certainly not proud of it. The prestige of working in the nuclear industry disappeared long ago. The government even tried to cut the wages of the workers taking the greatest risks. As for the lowest salaries, they are no more than 750 to 1000 hryvnias (€ 120 to € 160). The truth is, we have no alternative. If we had the chance, we would work elsewhere." Another worker adds: "It's a sad place. When we think about it, we tell ourselves that this plant produces nothing any more. Nothing but death. We have no idea what the impact is of the small doses of radioactivity being absorbed by our bodies, day-after-day. Or rather- we do - we can guess, just by observing each other."

THE IMPACT OF SMALL DOSES

No one, in fact, yet knows the full health risks of prolonged exposure to even small doses of radioactivity, as is the case with the atomic energy workers. When the civil nuclear industry was set up, the decision of the experts who defined the international standards for protection against ionising rays was made on the basis of the only information available: the impact of the explosion of the atomic bombs in Nagasaki and Hiroshima. In other words, brief but very high doses of radiation. They defined a threshold under which they believed radiation to be harmless. But more recent studies tend to show that this threshold does not exist, that even minimal exposure to ionising rays is dangerous and can cause cancers (2). There is clearly no such thing as zero risk, not least in Chernobyl. Many experts agree that a review is required of the exposure standards and the radioprotection measures for workers in the nuclear industry, all the more is given that, after a number of difficult years, it is once again in expansion. The civil nuclear industry is expected to grow considerably in the years to come, particularly in highly populated emerging countries, where health and safety standards, and, more widely, workers' rights and freedoms, are far from guaranteed.

Many uncontrollable parameters

"The background radiation near the administration is 65 microroentgens per hour and 1.08 milliroentgens per hour near the observation lodge of the sarcophagus. The controllable parameters of the sarcophagus are within the limits established in the operating procedures." Whilst the Chernobyl plant management plays the transparency card, it is restricted to the elements available to it. But, the problematic management of the site, work underway and to be undertaken, the coordination of and the conflicts between the numerous actors on the ground (State enterprises, foreign companies, financing problems) and all the other uncontrollable parameters, are legitimate causes of concern for the unions and their members. The workers are sure of only one thing: the risks they take are being measured day-after-day on the small external dosimeter they all wear.

The sarcophagus covering reactor no. 4, where some 200 tons of nuclear fuel remains, was built in record time and under very dangerous conditions. Quite naturally, it soon displayed structural weaknesses. The roof tiles are about to cave in. The west wall has shifted 50 centimetres. Over 20 years, the dilapidation of the shelter has caused huge openings to appear, estimated at 1000 m2 overall, allowing radioactive waste to escape and thousands of cubic metres of water to seep into the destroyed reactor. Some of the water has been pumped out, but the rest mingles with the fuel and either evaporates or flows into the subsoil underneath the reactor. An earthquake of 4.3 on the Richter scale is all it would take for part of the sarcophagus to crumble. Complex stabilisation and consolidation works are underway and will last for several months. We should then see the start of one of the most challenging works ever: the construction of a new cover - a gigantic dome to be assembled offsite and then placed on top of the current structure. This construction should make it possible to dismantle the sarcophagus, extract the fuel inside and ultimately, decommission the reactor.

The cost of building the dome, which is being funded by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), is estimated at almost $US 2 billion, an amount that makes life much easier for the global giants of the nuclear industry. They are already heavily involved in other projects that are way behind schedule - the construction of storage and treatment centres for waste from the plant's reactors and the deposits within the exclusion zone. Indeed, during the clean-up operation, a huge quantity of radioactive waste was quickly buried in containers and, in hundreds of badly situated trenches that proved to be prone to frequent or continual flooding. To quote the experts of the IAEA: "To date, a broadly accepted strategy for radioactive waste management at the ChNPP site and the Exclusion Zone has not been developed."

Three of the 8,000 workers in the exclusion zone.

The industry is also set to grow in Ukraine. Heavily dependent on its powerful neighbour for fuel, this winter saw another crisis between Moscow and Kiev over gas prices, strengthening the government's resolve to build new nuclear power plants. Atomprofspilka, the nuclear energy and industry workers' union, is very attentive to safety issues concerning its 85,000 members working at the country's 15 reactors (3). But the union would also like to see new jobs replace those lost with the closure of Chernobyl. Nuclear sector trade unionists are also hoping that the government will take advantage of the fall in its fuel bill to allocate more resources to nuclear workers, particularly to those at Chernobyl, where the need is greatest. "Since 1997, there have been endless industrial disputes. In 2002, when we demonstrated in Kiev, the onlookers encouraged us, saying it was shameful to live in a country where skilled workers and engineers, ensuring the population's safety, are reduced to going out on the streets to demand respect for their rights. Today, one of our main concerns is the absence of a credible social partner. The Minister in charge of us has changed. There is one director after another at the plant. The appointments are purely political, and each director surrounds himself with protégés with no concern for whether they have the skills required. Another worry we have is that within four years, at the latest, the dismantling of the reactors will be complete, and 2,000 technicians and engineers will have to find new jobs. On the other hand, I ask myself where we are going to find the 2,000 to 3,000 workers needed to build the new shelter. They will have to work on surfaces where the radioactivity is very high."

FROM THE EXCLUSION ZONE ...

The Territorial Trade Union of Chernobyl covers men and women from all occupations who do not work at the plant, but in the exclusion zone around it. They feel that they are even worse off than the plant workers. "We earn less than the plant workers and have only just been paid for the month of January. That's one month late. The worst thing is the radioprotection. The law is very specific about what we have a right to," explains Sergei Budianskiy, the President of the Union, nervously turning the pages of an official journal where he has underlined in red many passages of the law. "But the state enterprises employing us say they can't provide us with this protective equipment because the state has not paid them the amounts required. We are constantly in dispute with every level of the state, our employers, the territorial authorities and the government. We are constantly pressing for a change of clothes, but to no avail. The truth is that there is no budget to fund the work required in the zone. We only receive the leftovers. Like at the canteen. The food is appalling. Three meals a day are prepared with only € 1 per worker. It's obvious that we are not seen as a priority. All Ukrainians, except those who govern us, understand that we are working in a dangerous environment." In the town's former school, turned into a radioecology centre, everyone from the dose reader to the director deplores the dilapidated state of the premises and the equipment. The best specialists are leaving,

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because of the pay and working conditions. Expertise is vanishing and with it, the memory of Chernobyl, the knowledge of the land, the thousands of traps, like the nuclear dumps, the ditches dug in a hurry where millions of tonnes of highly radioactive waste and equipment were buried. "In a few weeks the thaw will come, bringing floods that will carry the radionuclides on the surface to the Dnepr. Then it will be the forest fires, which we'll have to try to prevent with our meagre resources," laments Sergei Budianskiy.

Despite being located in the exclusion zone, where it is officially forbidden to live, the small town of Chernobyl seems to be coming back to life. An office here, a room with table tennis tables there, and right next to the monument to the workers who died in the fire, a well-kept little orthodox church. The priest lives in Chernobyl, in breach of Ukrainian law. Along with a handful of "returnees", generally elderly people who have resettled in their former homes, and several hundred Chernobyl workers wanting to avoid the long journey back to their houses in Slavoutich or other towns outside the zone. They camp for fifteen days in the "Kruschevian" buildings turned into often insalubrious homes, and then leave for their 15 days "holiday", which many use to make some extra cash to make ends meet by doing small jobs in the grey economy.

...TO THE SEZ OF SLAVOUTICH

Some 50 kilometres from reactor no. 4, the town of Slavoutich is undoubtedly one of the last symbols of the former USSR. It was built just months after the catastrophe to house the workers at the plant, where three reactors were back in operation. This new "Prypiat", with eight different neighbourhoods designed and built by eight Soviet republics, claims to be much more than just a dormitory town. The elite of the town are determined, in any case, to perpetuate the idea that they are running a "model city". "In 1987, there was an atmosphere that one could describe as romantic," recounts the head of the education department in Slavoutich. "Young graduates came from all over the USSR to take part in creating this new town. In spite of Chernobyl, the nuclear industry hadn't lost its appeal. And then, there were all kind of opportunities. The demand far outstripped the accommodation and job openings. Today, we can be proud of our town. Of the 25,000 inhabitants, 7,500 are children. The average age is 29, it's unparalleled in Ukraine." Tatiana, a school teacher, has a rather different memory of this period. "I had just got married. We were desperately looking for somewhere to live and were ready to do anything to get it. We even spent a winter in a wooden house near Arkhangelsk in the Far North. Then we heard about free homes in a new town in Ukraine. For several days we descended on all the employment services, sleeping anywhere. One official took pity on us. He practically created a post for me at the office distributing the passes. My husband was not as lucky. He had to work at the plant and detested it. He's found a job as a driver since then. But we dream of leaving here. Slavoutich is, after all, in a contaminated zone and the town's future is far from guaranteed. It's true that the social and cultural fabric is solid, but there's no future for the young people. If only we had the means, we'd leave and set up a little business with our son, who has just finished his studies in Kiev. But it's too difficult to get even the smallest loans."

"At the end of 2000, the town went through very hard times, with the closure of the third reactor," acknowledges Viktor Odynytsa, the director of the psycho-social rehabilitation centre, a "gift" from the international community. It was created to combat what many Western experts believe the be the main consequences of the Chernobyl catastrophe: radiophobia and victimisation. In short, it was believed that genuine health problems were linked to a weakened psyche owing to the lack of objective information on radioactivity and the passiveness of the population. Once on site, the psychologist soon realised that, in Slavoutich at least, the radiophobia theory did not hold, given that people were coming to live there. In relation to victimisation, however, the director is sure of his facts: "The people are too passive. They should stop associating Chernobyl with all their problems: low wages, health problems, etc. The Mayor is right when he says one should only rely on oneself. And the support of the town, of course."

In 2000, this support took the form of a special economic zone. "Our aim is to provide skilled work to all the people who have lost their jobs at the plant. It's an ambitious project, and it's working well, we have already attracted 220 million hryvnias (€ 35 million) in investment and not just for any project. We don't say yes to whatever project we're presented with here, we choose high value-added ones, those that are geared towards high technology," explains Grigori Danyleyko, who has gone from a management post at the plant to being director of the SEZ. But direct foreign investment only accounts for a third of the investment in the SEZ of Slavoutich. The jewel of the zone is a plant producing beer and soft drink caps. The 16 companies in the zone include garment workshops, electronic assembly plants and a paper clip factory. Six hundred former nuclear plant employees have found work in the SEZ, although the director concedes, "there is no guaranteed minimum wages, the workers are paid piecework rates and the work is cyclical. In summer, we drink more, so we need more caps." And, of course, there's no sign of a union in the Slavoutich SEZ. ●

(1) In Ukraine, the legal ceiling on workers' annual exposure to radiation is set at 20 mSv, in compliance with the international standards of the International Atomic Energy Agency and the ILO (Convention 115).
(2) See the 2005 study in 15 countries coordinated by the International Cancer Research Agency (Lyon) available at http://www.bmj.com and the 2003 report of the European Committee on Radiation Risk (ECRR).
(3) Atomprofspilka also defends the interests of uranium mine workers.

The "liquidator"

I spent six months in Chernobyl. The unions did everything they could with the meagre resources we had to protect the workers and the population. We were the first to demand the evacuation of the surrounding towns and villages. Believe me, the Party was nowhere to be seen in the catastrophe zone, at least not in the early days. One of the authorities' mistakes was to send more than 10,000 people to a place that was even more contaminated. As soon as I found out, I immediately organised for them to be evacuated and taken to a "clean" area. I was nearly fired for doing that. My initiative didn't tally with the authorities' determination to play down the dangers.

- Sergiy Shishov, President of the Energy and Electrical Industry Workers' Union of Ukraine and former trade union leader at the Chernobyl plant.

Russia: *Chernobyl Union* to the bitter end

To date, of the 450 miners from Tula who took part in the "liquidation" of Chernobyl, 170 have died. The survivors, most of whom are under 50, are disabled and fighting to hold on to their rights.

Collection of funds held in Moscow on 23 February, "Defender of the Fatherland Day".

Wednesday, 22 February 2006, 11 am, Tula, a town 170 kilometres west of Moscow, and Vladimir Naoumov has no time to lose. It is the eve of Defenders of the Homeland day, which was made a public holiday in 2002. In many administrations and companies, the women will prepare a small buffet and propose a toast in honour of the men, who will do the same on their day, 8 March. In Tula, as elsewhere, the Party officials will get together to congratulate themselves. But Vladimir Naoumov, president of the Tula and Central Region branch of the Chernobyl Union, the main Russian association of Chernobyl liquidators, has better things to do. His association has lodged a complaint with the regional authorities and he is to appear before the municipal court at midday. "This time the dispute is over the indexation of our disability pensions. What we are demanding is that when the regional authorities send the breakdown of the budget pertaining to us to the federal administration, they should not 'forget' to account for inflation. We are fed-up with these hypocritical procedures and the appeals made by the administration to delay decisions that, in the end, are always in our favour."

The sub director of the region's Social Affairs department, Igor Krayuichkine, apologetically confirms the current imbroglio. "The liquidators depend on the federal budget, but we have a responsibility to defend the interests of the State. It's true that until now, we have not been taking inflation into account when calculating their indemnities. Each liquidator has to go to court to assert his rights. It's a long and stressful procedure. Some have been compensated, but others are still waiting. We have accumulated quite a backlog. In the meantime, the method of calculating the indexation may change – this has already happened on four occasions over the last five years – stirring up more discontent among the liquidators, who have to introduce new elements to their cases and reappear before the courts."

Although considerable sums of money are at stake, this legal battle is just one on a long list of problems for Vladimir Naoumov and his colleagues from the Chernobyl Union. During the years following the catastrophe, and after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the Russian, Belarus and Ukrainian trade unions worked tirelessly to obtain recognition of the rights of between 600,000 to 800,000 workers who took part in the clean-up operation at Chernobyl. It was by no means easy. These men and women had gone back home, to the four corners of the Soviet Union, which was in the process of disintegrating. The records bearing their names had been poorly kept and the doses of radiation they had been exposed to were purposely under-evaluated. Many of them fell ill and had to stop work. Some of them died, amid widespread indifference. There was very little the trade unions could do, in a context where everything had fallen apart and had to be rebuilt. The trade unions went through hard times, and had find ways of regrouping. For many organisations, this "existential" pursuit is not yet over. The lack of resources also forced them to concentrate on their natural mission: the defence of the workers. At the end of the nineties, at the height of the social crisis, when wage and pension arrears reached their peak, the liquidators were still able to rely on the support of the unions. But soon, they were to have to take on the job of defending their increasingly threatened social entitlements themselves.

The battles waged in the Tula region are countless. With its geographical proximity to Chernobyl and the presence, in 1986, of an abundant supply of labour, the region provided a natural source of liquidators, who subsequently went on to form the frontline in the battles for social justice. Such was their activism that Vladimir Naoumov has trouble remembering all the protests or hunger strikes waged. In 2000, for example, on learning that the Duma was once again preparing to "simplify" the calculation of their indemnities, the local Chernobyl Union organised a march to Moscow, with the participation of

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liquidators from other regions. Each time, with television images of the pitiful state of these poor people, obliged to resort to hunger strikes or march for days to assert their rights, the increasingly ultra-liberal central government was forced to give in. That is, until the next shock, even bigger than before, and effecting more people than just the liquidators.

On 1 January 2005, Law 122 on the "monetarisation of social benefits" took effect. Law 122 was 700 pages of legislation that redefined the Russian social security system from top to bottom. Discreetly passed in the middle of summer 2004, it replaced social benefits in kind with financial compensation. The provision of social benefits in kind dates back to the sixties, but the system was applied across the board in 1992, as part of the brutal price of liberalisation. The State was unable to pay decent benefits to pensioners, the disabled, veterans, students or employees. So it decided to compensate with benefits in kind: reasonable rents, free transport and medication and discounted telephone charges, etc.

The "liquidator"

Our job consisted of digging tunnels under the concrete slab of reactor no. 4, which was in danger of collapsing. We had to reinforce it, otherwise there would have been an even bigger explosion than that of 26 April. We were organised into teams and, to limit our exposure to the very high radiation, could only work three hours a day. We were breathing air that contained all the elements of the Mendelevium table. Our bosses had calculated that there was three months work, but we finished within 36 days. We were going back home by the end of June. Seven or eight years later, we started to fall ill.

- Vladimir Naoumov, aged 50, former miner, President of the Chernobyl Union for Tula and the Central Region.

Already in 2004, the best organised trade unions and social benefit associations were quick to realise the terrible impact this law would have on the most vulnerable and destitute members of society. Protests were held in numerous towns. The main trade union centre, the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia (FNPR) was able, through its political contacts in the Duma, to achieve some amendments to the law, although they were limited to issues directly affecting workers. Igor Kayenkov, President of the regional organisation of the FNPR for Tula, explains: "The FNPR tried to intervene at all levels. Our legal experts prepared 300 amendments to this law affecting virtually all of the economically active population. The legislators took them on board and 123 amendments were adopted. There are some elements of the law, however, that are worth holding on to. Many Russians didn't actually gain from the benefits, like the right to free transport, as some never use it. As trade unionists, moreover, we are happy to see money coming into the cash registers of the transport firms. It ensures the wages of the sectors' workers, and the taxes they pay can be used to finance social security."

> **"There are almost a million people on social benefits out of the oblast's total population of 1,600,000.**

Some explanation is required. Law 122 places the regions in charge of entire sections of social security and the provision of public services, but it took effect some months after a tax reform that went in the opposite direction and reduced their fiscal autonomy. In short, the poorest regions cannot cover the social obligations transferred to them. The social situation in Tula is particularly grim. Two thirds of the active population are now unemployed in this once prosperous mining and steel region, the birthplace of Tolstoy. Tula, a select town during the Soviet area, being one of the jewels in the military-industrial complex, has become, at best, a source of cheap labour for Moscow and the surrounding areas. "There are almost a million people on social benefits out of the oblast's total population of 1,600,000. The negative demographic trends within Russia as a whole are even more pronounced in this region. "We are next to last at Federal level. The death rate here is higher than the birth rate," laments Igor Kayenkov. He explains the impact of the Chernobyl catastrophe. "Seventeen out of the 25 districts are contaminated. The best land, in the south, is among the most contaminated with radioactivity. We try to find consolation in the fact that agriculture was never a major sector here."

So, on 1 January 2005, millions of Russians were hit by this government measure, among them, the liquidators. "The Social Affairs Minister tried to reassure us, saying that the law didn't affect us, because, unlike the many others on social benefits, we still came under the federal budget. We soon realised that this was yet another lie," says Vladimir Naoumov. Like the war veterans and the disabled, the liquidators continue to receive their indemnities from the central government, but the amount they now have to pay for medication alone is enough to leave them penniless. In the months that followed the changes, tens of thousands of welfare recipients took to the streets, along with the opposition parties, human rights organisations and most of the alternative trade unions, including the organisations affiliated to the Russian Labour Confederation (VKT). The wrath of such a considerable portion of the population forced the authorities to soften some of the measures, allowing those receiving social benefits to choose between benefits in kind or financial indemnities, which proved sufficient to satisfy several sections of the protest movement, such as the pensioners. But the government's "bright idea" has not fooled the more militant members of the movement. They point out that many of these benefits are no longer recognised and are incompatible with several new laws, such as the Housing Code, which only allows certain categories of those on welfare to receive free lodging. On a more positive note, many observers have pointed out that this spontaneous protest movement has taken on a more permanent character, in the shape of several civil organisations that have succeeded in forming an alliance, at least for a time. In today's Russia, this is no small achievement. ●

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