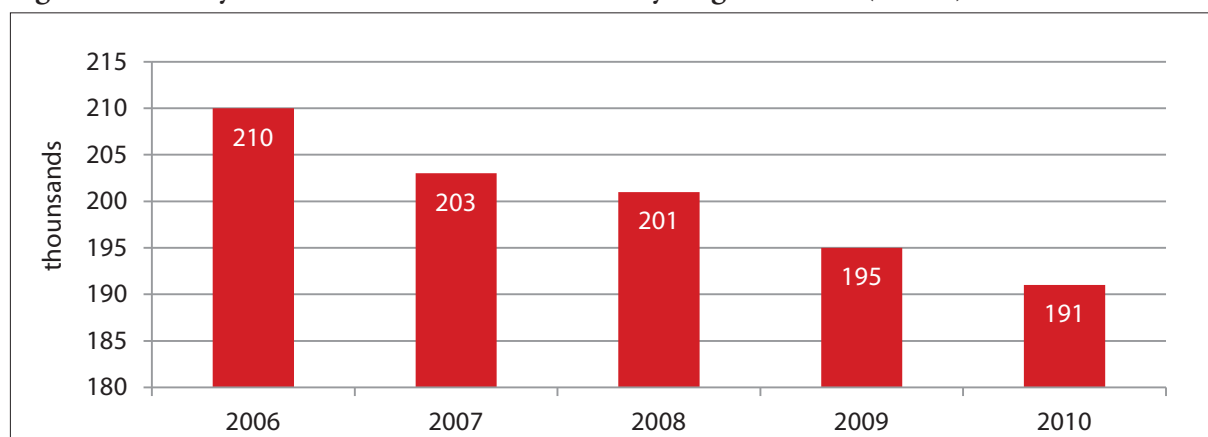


Figure 2: The Dynamics of the Number of Primary Organizations (FNPR)

Source: *Statistical evaluation of trade union membership and trade union organs in 2010*. Federal Independent Trade Unions of Russia website, <http://www.fnpr.ru/n/2/15/187/6378.html>

ANALYSIS

Labor Protests in Russia, 2008–2011

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Abstract

In Russia, both the media and experts in the area of labor relations ignore the problem of labor conflicts. A key factor in explaining this situation is the current system of keeping statistics which counts only legal strikes, even though under the existing labor code it is almost impossible to carry out such a strike. Independent monitoring of labor protests, conducted according to a methodology developed by the Center for Social and Labor Rights, shows that even though the financial crisis is over, the overall number of protest actions is not dropping and the intensity of the actions (the monthly average number of strikes) is growing. At the same time, the form and causes of labor protests are changing. The lack of mechanisms for regulating labor conflicts within the framework of the enterprise means that labor protests spill out of the factory gates and merge with other types of social protest.

Are There Labor Conflicts in Russia?

The issue of labor conflicts in contemporary Russia is complicated. There is almost no research on this question. The leading media outlets only occasionally pay attention to protests, typically covering the most extreme cases. Top labor relations experts usually ignore this issue, apparently hoping that if they do not discuss the problem, it will not exist. State agencies also prefer to close their eyes to this problem as seen by the way that the state collects data about labor conflicts. According to Rosstat reports, in 2008 there were only 4 strikes, just one in 2009 and none in 2010! Rosstat came up with such low figures because it counts only legal strikes, namely those that take place as part of collective labor

disagreements as defined by Russian legislation. Holding a legal strike requires an extremely complicated procedure, requiring a considerable amount of time, the completion of a large number of documents, and carrying out complex warning measures. Almost no one can meet the requirements of the law, so the majority of strikes are spontaneous and therefore not recorded by the official statistical office.

In fact hundreds of protest actions and strikes are taking place. A stable practice of conducting strikes has developed in Russia that advises participants how to avoid repressive measures and minimize instances of law-breaking. However, these practices have not entered into the public discussion and their influence on the devel-

opment and formation of labor relations is not widely understood. Worker protest actions could become the trigger for significant social-economic and even political turmoil. Such was the case in Poland, where in the beginning of the 1980s the Solidarity trade union's actions led to the beginning of the downfall of the socialist regime first in Poland and then in the rest of Eastern Europe. Similarly in the Soviet Union, the miners' strikes in 1989 pushed the process of further democratization and then the collapse of the USSR. Among more recent events, the most important are the spontaneous worker actions in the cities of Pikalevo (May 2009) and Mezhdurechensk (May 2010), which required the country's political leadership to intervene in order to stabilize the situation and therefore to violate its general rule of not giving into demands and pressures from below.

Since official statistics do not provide the data necessary to analyze the real scale and dynamics of labor protests, the Center for Social-Labor Rights (TsSTP, <http://www.trudprava.ru>) developed a special methodology to monitor protest actions, which it has implemented since 2008. We¹ define "labor protest" as an "open form of labor conflict, in which workers at an enterprise (organization, corporation) or a labor group take actions directed at standing up for their social-labor position by influencing their employer or other subjects serving as employers, with the goal of making changes". Our main source of information are reports about protest actions published on news web sites, in internet newspapers, and information portals devoted to social-economic themes. These reports are extremely timely and usually appear on-line the same day as the strike.

Of course, journalists who cover labor conflicts do not always provide all the information necessary for a full and balanced analysis. Nevertheless, they describe the majority of conflicts in a comprehensive manner. On the basis of our daily monitoring, we separate out the announcements about labor and related protests and conflicts and chose those that fit our definition of a labor protest. Most information comes from specialized internet portals that focus on labor issues and from federal and regional news agencies. The most useful sites are: The Institute of Collective Action (<http://www.ikd.ru/>), LabourStart (<http://www.labourstart.org/ru>) and Rabochaia bor'ba (<http://www.rborba.ru>). Usually, articles provide information about the place where the strike took place (federal district, region, city); the date that it started and finished; the industry of the enterprise or workers; the reasons for the protest; the forms of the protest; and the results achieved. It is also important to

know whether this is the first time that a conflict arose or if it has been repeating over time. Also we record the role played by trade unions and other organizations in labor conflicts. All the data is gathered in a database and then used for analysis.

The Scale and Dynamics of Labor Protests

Over the last 45 months, we have included information about 767 labor protests in the database. The peak of the protests during our observation period came in 2009 (272 protest actions) and this is not by chance: the first part of 2009 witnessed the most difficult consequences of the economic crisis, namely the growth in the number of unemployed, as well as only partially employed, and the greatest extent of wage arrears. In 2010, the number of protests shrank to 205, but this number is much higher than the number for the pre-crisis year of 2008, during which there were only 96. Even in 2011, when, according to official announcements, the consequences of the crisis had been overcome, the level of protests remained relatively high in comparison with the pre-crisis level, with 194 protest acts. The 2011 figure is 9% less than the crisis year of 2009, but 23% more than in 2010.

The intensity of the protests (the monthly average of protests in a given period) reached a maximum in 2009 (22.7). The figure for the first three quarters of 2011 is very close to this level (21.6). This data suggests that even two years after the crisis, the situation in the sphere of labor relations has not stabilized.

The number of stop-actions (protests in which workers shut down their enterprises) for the first nine months was almost the same as during the first six months of 2010—67 in 2011 versus 69 in 2010. Moreover, just as the number of stop-actions decreased in 2011, the indicator measuring the level of intensity in the protests (measured as the share of stop-actions as a proportion of the overall number of protest actions for the period) also fell. In 2011 it is noticeably low—34.5, the lowest level of tension for the period we have been observing strikes. Only a third of the protest actions result in work stoppages; in two-thirds of the cases, the workers use different methods of influencing employers.

The level of geographic dispersion for the protests is calculated as a proportion of the number of regions where protests occurred in relation to the overall number of regions in Russia. Over the three years from 2008 to 2011, the index of dispersion has constantly increased. In 2008, it was 0.48. During the crisis year 2009, it grew to 0.67, and after the crisis, it increased to 0.72. This means that the number of regions where labor protests took place over the past three years grew from one-half to three-fourths—protests are spreading across the country.

1 The author works for the Center for Social-Labor Rights.

Looking at the protests by economic sector, 50% of protests take place in industrial enterprises. Among the industrial branches, the undisputed leader is machine-building. But in 2011, there was a sharp increase in the number of strikes in the transportation sector. During the first half of the year, the share of transportation strikes reached 27%.

The Reasons for Labor Protests

Over the three and a half years that we have been monitoring labor protests, the main cause has been the non-payment of salaries or delays in these payments. Other reasons much less frequently provoke protests. The exception was down-sizing and firings during the 2009 crisis year. Then protests against such lay-offs accounted for up to 21% of all protest actions, while in other periods they were not more than 10%. Nonetheless, the vast majority of actions result from non-payment of salaries or delays. If other reasons connected to salaries are added (low salaries, disagreements over changes in the way salaries are calculated) it becomes even clearer that salaries are the main reason for labor protests. The share of protest causes connected to salaries varied from 83% in 2008, to 75% in 2009, and 76% in 2010.

However, in 2011, the share of salary-related reasons significantly changed. While during the previous three years, half of the cases of protests grew out of wage arrears (from 52% in 2008 to 57% in 2010), in 2011 only one third of the cases (35%) resulted from salary delays as the main cause. Instead the number of protests against low salaries grew to 29%, advancing over the previous year when low salaries only caused 19% of the disputes. Also, in contrast to last year, there was a higher proportion of protests against changes in the system of calculating wages. These changes in the causes of the conflicts reflect the changing system for calculating wages adopted during the 2008–9 crisis. Workers began to strike and protest not only because their salaries were not being paid, but because their pay was too small. This situation, of course, reflects normal economic conditions, in which workers seek higher salaries than they received during the crisis, when they protested against being forced to work without pay. However, as in the past, wage arrears remains the most common reason for protests.

The shift in the focus of the economic battle is also apparent in the increasing number of protests because of such reasons as “the policy of management, reorganization, and the closing of enterprises”. Every third protest (34%) in the first half of 2011 took place, at least in part, because of this reason, whereas in 2010, it was only one out of five (22%). Against this background, in 2011

the number of protests involving firings and downsizing (16%) grew almost to the level of 2009 (21%), which appears strange, because in 2010 the share of such protests was only 7%. The explanation seems to be that reorganizations, because of which there are also more protests, is often accompanied by firings.

Overall, in the first half of 2011, there is a change in the structure of reasons for protests. The context of protests in Russia has begun to resemble those associated with a transforming economy to a greater extent than was the case two or even one year ago.

The Form of Labor Protests

Russian legislation limits the number of ways that workers can realize their rights. Work stoppages can take place if salaries are withheld for more than two weeks, work conditions threaten life or health, or as part of a strike organized during a collective labor dispute. Additionally, workers in many sectors (transportation, health care, etc.) are deprived of the right to strike and cannot use any other methods which would lead to a work stoppage, such as hunger strikes.

However, in practice the forms of protest that workers use is much wider, mainly including the use of illegitimate forms of protest. Legitimate forms of protest made up only 11% of protests in 2008, the same in 2009, and 9% in 2010. In other words, 9 out of 10 protest actions took place in forms not allowed by labor legislation. In the first half of 2011, the share of legitimate actions practically dropped to none—just 4%.

Extreme forms of protest deserve special attention, particularly hunger strikes, enterprise take-overs, and shutting major roads. In 2008, 17% of protests were of this extreme variety, in 2009, 18%, and in 2010, again 17%. In 2011, the share of such actions dropped to 7%. If you suppose that radical protest actions are a reaction to crude violations of labor rights by employers, then the reduction in the share of radical actions in 2011 possibly provides evidence that there are fewer such violations.

A single protest action can include a simultaneous or consecutive use of various forms of protest. Thus, for example, an action might start as a public declaration of demands and then turn into a strike, a hunger strike or something else. In 2008, 78% of all actions used only one kind of protest, while in 2010, this number dropped to 50% and for the first half of 2011 only 43%. In the remaining cases, the actions were more complicated. Most frequently the reason that an action took on a more serious form was the lack of any kind of response from the employer. The use of more complex forms of protest suggests that the workers have to resort to ever greater force to start a dialogue with employers.

Another important characteristic of labor protests is the relationship between stop-actions (bringing work to a halt) and other forms of protest, such as rallies and public declarations to the authorities. Paradoxically, in 2009 the number of stop-actions was relatively small and the number of “street” actions and declarations to the authorities and society grew. A detailed study of various actions showed that the workers rejected classical strikes aimed at shutting down an enterprise because it was senseless. What is the point of stopping the work of an enterprise which is not working in any case because of the crisis?

The decision to favor street protests over strikes reflects the fact that workers lack levers within the enterprise to influence relations with their employer. If the employer rejects dialogue and takes a maximalist position, the protest spills out onto the street and becomes visible to other actors, such as the authorities, journalists, and societal leaders. Today, when Russian employers can legally violate the procedures of collective agreements, block labor disputes, and, as a result, ignore the demands of workers, protests often spill beyond the walls of the enterprise. One result of the labor protest moving beyond the enterprise is that on city squares, the workers can join with other social protesters. The shortage of means for resolving labor relations inside enterprises channels labor protest energy into the larger community with the risk of transforming labor protest into broader social protest.

Conclusions

Experts frequently pointed out that in Russia the financial crisis did not lead to structural transformations in economic life. However, one transformation that should take place is in the role of hired laborers, who, after the adoption of the Labor Code in 2002 became voiceless, expendable material for business, deprived not only of the opportunity to resist unfavorable initiatives by the employer but even to discuss the situation in which they

are located. Workers cannot influence the size of their salary, work conditions, or hours—they can only agree and from a position of weakness request some concessions. This is not normal for a liberal market economy. With no ability to influence the situation, workers make peace with their conditions until they are no longer tolerable and then begin to protest and seek out those forms of protest which will allow them to be heard. During the crisis, they had to do this more often because of the worsening conditions. But, even though the crisis ended for the enterprises, it has not ended for workers. They still face the majority of the earlier threats: wage arrears, firings, management reorganization games, which lead to worsening conditions. Therefore the level of conflict, and as a result, the number of protests has remained relatively constant.

Stabilizing the situation requires changing the labor legislation. However, such amendments cannot be made in the way that business representatives suggest since their proposed changes would lead to the further elimination of worker and union rights and their increased dependence on the employers. Workers need legislative opportunities to influence labor relations within the enterprises and, above all, to change the legislation about strikes. It is necessary to eliminate the disbalance in rights, which today is expressed in the spontaneous public actions of the workers. Upon their exit from the factory gates, labor protests are fed by other protests and feed them as well. When mass and radical protests can arise for any reason, various social tensions can merge into one larger protest movement. To prevent this exacerbation of social tensions, it is necessary to give the workers the means to resolve problems inside the enterprise. Such change cannot take place by turning the workers into an uncomplaining business resource, but by giving them rights and allowing them to conduct responsible and effective dialogue with employers, including in conflict situations.

About the Author

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Table 1: Annual (and 9 Month) Number of Labor Protests, 2008–2011

	Annual number of actions (9 months)	Monthly number of actions (first 9 months)	Annual number of stop-actions (9 months)	Monthly number of stop-actions (first 9 months)	Share of stop-actions, %, (first 9 months)
2008	96 (69)	8,0 (7,7)	60 (40)	5,0 (4,4)	62,5 (60,0)
2009	272 (213)	22,7(23,7)	106 (89)	8,8 (9,9)	38,9 (41,8)
2010	205 (158)	17,1 (17,6)	88 (69)	7,3 (7,7)	42,9 (43,7)
2011*	194	21,6	67	7,4	34,5

*Note: Data for 9 months