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Politics, justice and the new Russian strike

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Abstract

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

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

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

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

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

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

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