

Kazakhstan oil strike: solidarity urgent

'We are not begging - we are demanding our rights!'

An oil workers' strike in Mangistau Oblast, west Kazakhstan - one of the most important disputes that has engulfed the ex-Soviet Union countries since the collapse of Stalinism two decades ago - has now entered its third month.

Paul Murphy, Socialist Party (Ireland) Member of the European Parliament (MEP) and Tanja Niemeier, staff member of the European United Left/Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL) group, report on their July visit to the country.

The Mangistau Oblast, by the Caspian Sea, is Kazakhstan's main oil and gas reserve, with a large part of the country's GDP generated in this region.

The working conditions are hard to imagine for anyone coming from Western Europe. Summer sees temperatures of up to 50° centigrade, while winter temperatures go below -25°. Camels and wild horses were crossing our path from the main regional city Aktau to the centre of the KazMunaiGaz oil workers' strike in Zhanaozen. Never-ending trails of oil barrels on tracks, ready to be transported out of the region, were lined up next to the sandy road through the desert.

Muktar, one of the strike leaders, explained Mangistau region's history to us. Not only does the region comprise the tribal traditions of the Adai people, it was also engaged in resistance against the forced collectivisation of land in the Stalinist era.

Many opponents of the Stalinist regime were imprisoned in the Gulags in the region, forced to build the tracks that transport the oil to its international destinations. The genuine socialist anti-Stalinist sentiments of the prisoners of the Gulags still have left a mark on the consciousness of the local population.

A welcoming committee of 30 striking workers escorted us to the square of Zhanaozen, where striking workers hold their daily meetings. No official representative of the Kazakhstan government had shown up and listened to the demands of the striking workers.

Strike solid

Up to 16,000 workers from several companies were involved in strike actions at one point. Fighter jets have been used to fly over the square and scare people, people have been threatened by the company and a news blockade successfully implemented. The trade union lawyers have been imprisoned and the strike declared illegal. The riot police were used to clear the square.

Despite all this, the strike was solid and workers were determined to continue their actions until their main demands are met:

- The release of Natalia Sokolova and Akshmiat Aminov, the trade union lawyers.
- A commitment from the company that all strikers, including those who have been fired, can return to work without victimisation.
- The right of the workers to determine their trade union leadership and to form independent trade unions.
- Negotiations between the company and the representatives of the strikers to discuss the implemen-



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tation of the wage agreement that was signed two years ago.

News blockade

Our visit assisted in breaking the news blockade and re-enforcing the confidence of the striking workers. The setting up of an international solidarity campaign and a support fund for the oil workers' families is now crucial in keeping up the morale of the workers.

The regime and KazMunaiGaz management are nervous. Despite all attempts to minimise and deny the importance of the strike, it is clear that it has sent shock waves through the political and economic elite of the country.

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Management stressed the fact that the strike is affecting output and profits of the company and that it is their obligation to satisfy KazMunaiGas shareholders. They insisted that the strike was illegal, according to the Kazakh Labour Code, a code that is particularly restrictive when it comes to the extractive industry and other sectors vital for the state. This has been criticised by the International Labour Organisation (ILO).

But it is also the potentially wider impact of the strike that scares the establishment. The events in North

Africa and the Middle East have acted as a warning to all authoritarian regimes and dictatorships across the world. When Paul visited Tunisia, people there made the point that the miners' strikes in 2008 were the precursor of the revolution, even though they weren't successful.

The events have shown that working class people and the oppressed will not accept oppression and humiliation forever. A victory for the oil workers can spark off wider resistance in Kazakh society and can mark the beginning of the downfall of the authoritarian Nazarbayev regime.

Since our visit, 5,000 workers from another company went on a two-hour warning strike in response to the threat to lay off the striking workers. As a result sackings were delayed, but we have since heard that people have been laid off. We hope that now the strike spreads.

Two CWI members, Ainur and Yesenbeck, and a prison rights campaigner, who are supporting the strike have now received letters and been asked in for questioning with the possibility of criminal charges. Ainur and others have been in prison before but on administrative charges. Criminal charges could mean long prison sentences.

This shows that the strike is not just to defend workers' rights and for higher wages. It touches on all that's fundamentally wrong with the regime, which pretends to be moving in the direction of human rights and democracy.

Independent unions needed

There is also a lack of genuine trade union representation in the mining industry. Like in many former countries of the Soviet Union, the trade unions are a remnant of the Stalinist past. Rather than representing the interests of the workers, those 'yellow' trade unions collaborate with the employers and are doing their utmost to prevent independent working class representation.

We had several meetings with senior management of the KazMunaiGas company and government officials, including the governor of the region, they clearly expected diplomatic niceties and a 'neutral' position from our delegation. They were surprised to find that we clearly rep-

State press lies

Paul Murphy's visit and his unconditional support for the striking oil workers has been widely reported in the Kazakh media, including media that is not necessarily closely linked to political opposition.

That is why the Kazakhstan government, with probable support from the Kazakh Embassy in Belgium, tried to portray the visit in the media as an entirely private affair. The Kazakh national press agency, KazTAG, released a statement, in an attempt to undermine the visit, falsely claiming that Paul was in Kazakhstan in a personal capacity.

The KazTAG statement included a supposed statement from Paolo Bartolozzi MEP, the Chair of the Central Asia European Parliamentary Delegation.

In response the GUE/NGL group released a press statement confirming that Paul was "on an official group delegation to Kazakhstan".

Paolo Bartolozzi also released a statement stating that "he has never released statements or interviews to the press on this matter and, in particular, he has made no statement whatsoever concerning other missions organised by political groups".

resented the interests of the workers and challenged the arguments that they made.

International solidarity holds particular importance in the case of Kazakhstan where major multinational, including European, corporations are complicit in exploiting the natural resources of Kazakhstan and by doing so, providing a lifeline for the authoritarian, dictatorial regime of president Nazarbayev.

See paulmurphymep.eu for a model protest letter to support the strike action, for more information on the Kazakhstan visit and updates on the dispute. Please make donations to: Workers Solidarity Fund IBAN BE29 7340 3242 2964 BIC KREDBEBB

The Committee for a Workers' International

The Committee for a Workers' International (CWI) is the socialist international organisation to which the Socialist Party is affiliated.

The CWI is organised in 45 countries and works to unite the working class and oppressed peoples against global capitalism and to fight for a socialist world.

For more details including CWI publications write to: CWI, PO Box 3688, London E11 1YE. email cwi@worldsoc.co.uk

CWI summer school

From 24 to 29 July Socialist Party members and members of other parties and groups which are affiliated to, or support, the CWI met in Belgium for the annual CWI summer school. Around 400 people from 33 countries across Latin America, North America, Africa, Asia and Europe participated. Over €25,000 was pledged in the school's financial appeal - more than double the amount raised last year - essential for funding the work of socialist fighters across the globe.

The CWI website, socialistworld.net, carries reports of many of the discussions, including:



Economic, social and political crisis in Europe

Kevin Parslow



Turmoil in Greece

Sinead Daly, Socialist Party Scotland



Revolution and counter revolution in the Middle East

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