

“Decent Work” and the Valentin Urusov Case: A Test of Sincerity

by Anna Wolańska

Like Russian politics, labour relations in Russia are rife with contradictions.

On the one hand, Vladimir Putin addressed the International Labour Conference in 2011 and marched with the trade unions in a 2012 May Day demonstration, portraying himself as a supporter of progressive labour legislation and the notion of social partnership. Russia has an established system of tripartism: no social issue can be decided on without being discussed by the country’s permanent tripartite commission.

To discuss the further development of tripartism and socially-responsible responses to the global crisis, the Russian government will host a major international conference on decent work in Moscow on 11–12 December 2012. Around 800 delegates are expected to attend, including prime ministers, government officials, trade unionists and representatives of employers’ associations from 80 countries.

Speaking in Geneva at a joint briefing with the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Director-General Guy Ryder during the last session of the ILO Governing Body, Russian Federation Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Protection Lyubov Yeltsova invited all ILO member states to take part in the conference. She emphasised the importance Russia attaches to cooperation in furthering international labour and social standards, the protection of individual and collective rights, and the interests of workers. As she put it, “the concept of decent work makes it possible to seek solutions to key challenges facing the international community, such as job creation, poverty reduction, social stability and globalization, **on a just basis.**”

On the other hand, on the same day that the Deputy Minister declared her commitment to the principles and ideals of social justice, the ILO’s Committee on Freedom of Association issued its report on a complaint from Russian and international trade unions. The complaint, filed with the ILO in 2011, is brimming with facts that paint a picture at odds with the official one: constantly increasing pressure on trade union activists, harassment and persecution, threats of physical violence, repressive rulings against trade union organisers by local courts, and a ban on distributing trade union leaflets and educational materials for workers. This is all happening in parallel with the destruction of the social welfare system in a country where wages are shamefully low for a developed European nation.

The complaint submitted to the ILO describes, among other cases, the story of independent trade union activist Valentin Urusov (born 1974). Trade unionists in Russia and around the world have been campaigning for his release for several years. His story is not only an example of determination and sacrifice, but also a vivid illustration of the true relations between capital and labour in today’s Russia, where the largest employers are colluding with corrupt government officials to purposefully and methodically destroy the seeds of the new trade union movement, while Kremlin officials speak about social partnership.



Urusov worked as an electrical fitter at an ore-processing mill owned by the diamond mining company Alrosa in the town of Udachny (Sakha Republic). An intelligent, persuasive leader, Urusov chaired the Profsvoboda trade union that was founded there and led the protest actions organised by workers.

Profsvoboda was founded in Udachny in June 2008. In mid-August of the same year, dissatisfied with low pay and working conditions, workers in the repair shops at one division of Alrosa announced a hunger strike, formal notice of which was received and registered by management.

The company’s director signed an order establishing a reconciliation commission to resolve the issue of workers’ pay. Profsvoboda was supposed to represent workers on this commission, and the following day it suspended strike actions. Despite its promises, however, Alrosa made no effort to conduct real negotiations, unleashing instead a crackdown against trade union activists. In response, workers began preparations for a large-scale protest rally.

On 3 September 2008, Urusov was detained on suspicion of narcotics possession. However, his arrest suspiciously coincided with preparations for the protest rally by Alrosa workers, a rally he himself was involved in organising. Equally “coincidentally,” the company’s deputy director of economic security was present as an official witness (such witnesses are a formality required under Russian law during police searches) when the drugs were allegedly found on Urusov’s person.

In a statement submitted by his lawyer, Urusov describes his arrest as a kidnapping accompanied by beatings and threats. According to him, the men who arrested him forced him to write a statement, confessing that the packet of drugs they themselves had planted on him actually belonged to him; they threatened to kill Urusov if he refused. Moreover, they demanded that Urusov confess that his deputy in the trade union had given the packet to him. A plan had been sprung to completely eviscerate the union’s leadership. Urusov, however, refused to give false testimony against his comrade.

“The charges against Urusov are based on the testimony of law enforcement officers and biased witnesses,” Urusov’s lawyer recounted. “The signature on the protocol documenting the confiscation of the packet of narcotics was obtained through humiliation and threats. Urusov was taken to the woods, where shots were fired near his head, and he was beaten with batons and told he should get ready to die.”

On 26 December 2008, the Mirninsky District Court (city of Udachny) sentenced Urusov to six years’ imprisonment. On 12 May 2009, however, the Sakha Republic Supreme Court overturned the conviction. Urusov was freed in the courtroom. Ludmilla Alexeyeva and Lev Ponomarev, well-known human rights activists from the Moscow Helsinki Group, stood as surety for Urusov.

However, after a retrial on 26 June 2009, the Mirninsky District Court again sentenced Urusov to imprisonment, reducing the sentence only by a year.

In May 2010, the police officer in charge of Urusov’s arrest, Lieutenant Colonel Sergei Rudov, was himself arrested and convicted of fraud and abuse of power. He was charged with receiving 2.5 million rubles (US\$80 000) from Alrosa. This money was disbursed to Rudov shortly after he arrested Urusov.

All these circumstances have convinced Russian and foreign human rights groups that his employer, Alrosa, had fabricated the case against Urusov. Trade unions launched a campaign of solidarity with Urusov. Public protests and other actions have been mounted on his behalf, not only in Russia, but also internationally. An appeal in support of Urusov’s release was signed by dozens of European intellectuals,

public figures, and the International Trade Union Confederation while the website LabourStart conducted an email campaign.

The report of the ILO’s Committee on Freedom of Association also questions Urusov’s sentence. The Committee asks the Russian government to indicate whether, during the investigation and trial, evidence relating to the persecution of Urusov for trade union activities was examined and analysed. It requests that the government launch a new investigation and take steps to ensure the trade union leader’s early release.

In addition, in its final conclusions the Committee mentions the inclusion of trade union leaflets in the Russian federal list of “extremist” materials. The Committee believes that the inclusion of publications with union slogans in the list of extremist materials significantly impedes the right of unions to express their views. As emphasised in the Committee’s conclusions, this is an unacceptable restriction on trade union activities and a flagrant violation of the right to freedom of association. The Committee recalls that the right to express one’s opinion, including criticism of the government’s economic and social policy, is a key element of trade union rights.

In fact, the leaflets in question contained only the most basic information about the opportunities available for workers when they form trade unions and touched on the threats posed by the spread of agency labour and other forms of precarious employment. The declaration of such texts as “extremist” is a clear attempt to render illegal all forms of trade union organising. The ILO’s Committee on Freedom of Association recommends that the Russian government take all necessary measures to remove trade union leaflets from the list of extremist materials as soon as possible. The government should also provide assurance that this situation will not happen again.

Despite the fact that the opinions rendered by the ILO’s Committee on Freedom of Association are only recommendations, the Russian government should pay heed to them. First, the body has repeatedly proved its impartiality when dealing with issues relating to freedom of association. Secondly, Urusov’s release and the implementation of the ILO’s other recommendations would serve as convincing proof that the concept of decent work really is part of the Russian government’s priorities. Such actions would be evidence that the eloquent declarations of its commitment to social partnership are not just a smokescreen concealing contempt for the principles of freedom of association and trade union organising, principles that form the basis of the ILO.

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