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RUSSIA'S WORKERS IN THE MINING AND METALLURGICAL SECTOR: PERCEPTIONS AND ACTIVITIES ON THE EVE OF A NEW POLITICAL CYCLE*

The article examines data from a survey of mining and metallurgical workers, conducted shortly before the parliamentary election campaign in 2011. The research was carried out by the Department of Comparative Political Research of the Russian Academy of Science in cooperation with the Russian Trade Union of Mining and Metallurgy Industry. The survey only covered enterprises that contained departments of this Trade Union. The main drive of the study was to uncover employee attitudes to various forms of political, civil and trade union participation. The survey was completed by 1464 persons in 72 localities in 42 Russian regions. Contrary to widespread views of a politically loyal working class, the survey data suggests that a significant protest mood exists among the industrial workers and other categories of employees, which in turn is reflected in low support for the "party of power" and the candidacy of Vladimir Putin in the then upcoming presidential elections. Despite clearly demonstrated loyalty on the part of trade union leaders, the survey reveals a great deal of diversity in the positions of rank-and-file trade union members. Active employee participation in the local departments of trade unions has gone hand in hand with the a growth of interest in politics, increased participation in other areas of public and political life, and resulted in a more critical attitude towards the government. The main factors mobilising mining and metallurgy employees into participating in protest activity remain a thrist for social justice and a desire to resolve specific problems related to working conditions. The main conclusion of the study is that while workers in the industrial enterprises of Russia's regions are not more loyal than people living in Moscow, at the current moment they only feel strong enough to resort to protest activity to solve specific questions that are situated in local, social contexts.

Keywords: trade unions, protests, social movements, opposition, civic and political practices

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Studies of the Russian political order have shown that Russia lacks the kind of differentiated and diverse political arena typical of modern society. The political arena can be understood as a field where the interests and values of different social groups are articulated and coordinated through the mediation of parties, political movements and trade unions, all of which seek to establish appropriate political goals and bring about their achievement (Patrushev 2011). However, this political space is swallowed up by an overbearing state; the government appears as an omnipotent entity that has no time for any kind of independent action, not permitting citizens or their associations to participate in real decision-making. In modern Russia, the political posture of an individual is formulated through a process of opposition to the authorities, which can be seen as the force totally determining public life. Having attained awareness of oneself as a political actor and gained a sense of empowerment, the need for a serious reconfiguration of the political arena and the desire to achieve a better 'share of power' soon emerges within the individual. Usually, this is seen as achievable through enhancing the effectiveness of political organizations and associations that are able to perform the role of conduits for the interests of various social groups.

Political passivity and paternalism among Russian citizens have, until recently, been seen as self-evident (Kertman 2006; Baskakova 2013). However, if one takes into consideration the way political power is currently monopolised in the country, with the state operating as the exclusive determiner in designing social relations and taking key decisions, passivity can be seen as a rational model of behaviour. It is usually only in cases where citizens face imminent threat of losing certain benefits or perks that they resort to active protest activity. The main reasons of this kind of long-term protest activity with broad goals are contradictions in the moral order (Miryasova 2012).

One's attitude to authority, whether marked by loyalty or opposition to it, is the key factor determining an either one's involvement in civil actions or one's avoidance of any participation in public and political life. Even taking into consideration a low level of actual protest activity, the key indicators to the state of society remain the extent of dissatisfaction with the government, the amount of social capital present and how much willingness there is to act collectively.

The Empirical Base for the Study

Over July and August of 2011, the Department of Comparative Political Studies (OSPI) at the Institute of Sociology RAN[1], together with Mining and Metallurgical Union of Russia (GMPR), conducted one of their regular surveys within mining and metallurgical sector (GMK) enterprises containing trade union cells. The main topic of the survey was the attitude of workers to various

[1] Russian Academy of Sciences (RAN)

forms of political, civil and trade union activity, as well as evaluation of the activities of their union. A total of 1464 people were interviewed in 72 population centres in 42 regions of the Russian Federation (Patrushev et al. 2011).

An important feature of the survey was the presence of considerable bias in the composition of the respondents, who were predominantly made up of union leaders and activists from various levels. This was unavoidable as the parameters of our sampling were limited by the conditions set by the body that ordered this study, the GMPR. The researchers in this study only set quotas ensuring the number of respondents in the company is in accordance with its overall number of employees and that the sample is proportional in reflecting different regions and industries. Those union members selected to take part in the study were chosen by labour activists who would almost certainly prefer, in the first instance, to distribute the self-completed questionnaires to their closest friends. This went against the instructions they were given to distribute the questionnaires widely; not only to union activists but to more passive members, as well as those employees who are not members of the union. Unfortunately, the offer to send sociological researchers to provide direction in carrying out interviews at the enterprise was not accepted by the GMPR. This can be explained either from a desire to lower the costs of the study or from a possible fear that outsiders would gain access to "unsavoury" information that would be better kept private.

As a result, it is likely that the survey sample ended up with a disproportionately higher share of managers and trade union activists from various levels that is not a faithful representation of the actual composition of the workforce in the mining and metallurgical sector. Furthermore, statistical data on the number of managers and other categories of workers, including union members holding elected positions (henceforth referred to as "elected members") was not provided. While common sense would suggest that a quarter of the entire number of employees cannot hold elected positions at the same time, it turned out that 27% of our respondents were elected members. Despite the shortcomings of our sample, we would argue that it is possible to use the data by adopting the approach of intergroup comparisons.

In as far as this article concerns the opinion of industrial workers in the Russian regions, the following groups who, as members of the GMPR, all found themselves in the sample, were excluded: residents of Moscow (13%), retired workers (1%), students (2%) and workers from the service industry and educational institutions (2%). The remaining number of respondents amounted to 1211 and were made up of: middle and upper management (8%), lower-level supervisors (12%), skilled personnel such as engineers (32%), other staff (9%), workers (33%) and those who did not fit into any of the preceding categories (6%).

In the course of our analysis, we compared a wide variety of respondent groups. It soon became clear that one of the key parameters that differentiated respondents was their level of involvement in trade union activities. We identi-

fied three groups according to their degree of participation. The first group contains those holding elected positions in their union, including full-time union officials and those working in the union on a voluntary basis (27%). The second group is made up of the active union members that do not hold any elected positions (32%). The final group represents those employees not engaged in any serious GMPR activities, including those with and without union membership (41%). As of 2011, the degree of unionization in the mining and metals sector workforce was 72.3%, which amounts to around 877 000 people.

The first group of "elected members" was found to contain an equal number of women and men but have a significantly higher proportion of supervisors and people over 50. The overall income per family member in this group also turned out to be above average. The second "active" group is characterised by a preponderance both in the number of women and in those from the service and other staff. The third "inactive" group had a higher proportion of men, young people under 30, workers and people with secondary and lower secondary education.

It is worth asking why an analysis of this data would be of immediate interest. It just so happened, that this research, which took place just before the start of the 2011 parliamentary election campaign, involved interviews with workers from one of the most popular and economically influential industrial sectors in Russia. Over the past few years, it is precisely these workers who have been repeatedly referred to one of the main groups that are solidly behind the current government. In the minds of much of Russia's educated classes, these workers have merged into one generalised image; clone-like members of a generic "Uralvagonzavod"[1] who slavishly uphold conservative values and offer unconditional loyalty to the authorities. However the data from our surveys paints a radically different picture; while there is a significant part that is loyal to the authorities, a significant proportion of our respondents can also be categorised as being part of the opposition.

The myth of a loyal working class

Data on voting intentions in the parliamentary elections in 2011 shows a considerably lower level of support for "United Russia" party among GMK employees than the proportions shown in the leading sociological surveys of Russia.[2] As few as 21% of inactive union members and 35% of active member plan to vote for the "party of power" (Figure 1). Data on voting intentions for

[1] The Urals Railroad Cars Manufacturing Plant is the one of the largest tank manufacturers in the world and considered symbolic of "loyal" or "pro-state" Russian working class sentiment.

[2] According to the data from the 'Foundation of Public Opinion' (FOM), voting intentions among respondents in the third quarter of 2011 were as follows: United Russia (42%), the Communist Party (11%), LDPR (9%) and "A Just Russia" (5%). 16% did not intent to vote and 14% were undecided. The survey was carried out on the 20–21st of July in 204 population centres in 64 regions of Russia and involved 3000 respondents. The results are available at: http://bd.fom.ru/pdf/d29ind13.pdf (last accessed: 20.01.2014).

presidential candidate in 2012 provided a similar picture; miners and metallurgists supported the candidacy of Vladimir Putin at much lower levels than the general population with only 25% ready to vote for Putin in the upcoming presidential elections and 16% prepared to support Dmitry Medvedev. Other candidates scored unimpressive figures, such as 10% for Zyuganov, 6% for Vladimir Zhirinovsky and 4% for Sergei Mironov. As many as 18% announced their intention not to vote and 20% did not answer the question.[1] It should be noted that the survey was carried out prior to the infamous 'job-swap' between Putin and Medvedev, announced at the United Russia party congress on the 24th of September 2011. The results reveal that, prior to the onset of active campaigning, only a quarter of GMK workers intended to support the party of power and the then incumbent president, a figure significantly below official ratings.

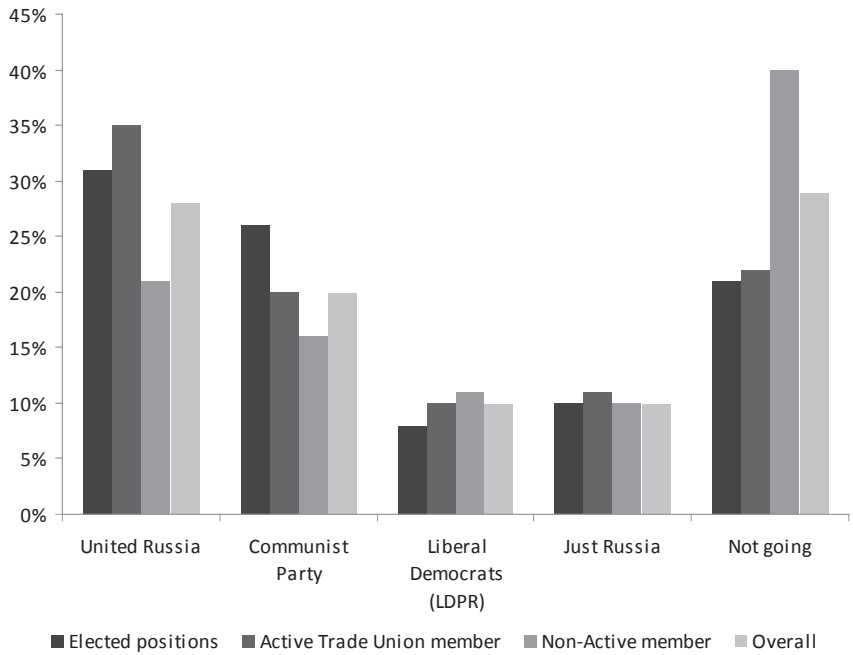

Figure 1. If you are planning to participate in the forthcoming parliamentary elections in December of this year, which party do you intend to vote for? (% of respondents)

[1] According to the data from the "Foundation of Public Opinion" (FOM), voting intentions among respondents in the third quarter of 2011 were as follows: Putin (47%), Zhirinovsky (10%), Zyuganov (10%) and Mironov (1%). 14% did not intent to vote and 13% were undecided. The survey was carried out on the 20–21st of July in 204 population centres in 64 regions of Russia and involved 3000 respondents. The results are available at: http://bd.fom.ru/pdf/d29ind13.pdf (last accessed: 20.01.2014).

The differences between groups according to one's employment category, while not hugely significant, are still worth discussing. On the eve of the election campaign in 2011, of all the groups, workers showed the lowest level of support for "United Russia" (23%), with employees, skilled workers and managers producing similar figures (28–30%). More than any other party, the Communist Party could count on the support of senior and middle managers (24%). On the other hand, the communists scored the lowest among other staff (17%). The proportion of those not intending to vote in the elections was highest among workers and other staff most of all (32–33%), while this figure was only 20% among middle and senior managers.

In evaluating the soundness of the ideas and positions of the various parties, GMK workers showed a significant degree of alienation from political life; around one in four (28%) declared themselves undecided and 31% said they would not support any party. The remaining 18% claimed to agree with the ideas of "United Russia" (18%), the Communist Party (15%), "A Just Russia" (7%) and the Liberal Democratic Party (6%). Support for "United Russia" in this area is, once again, slightly higher among union activists (25%) and lower for the more inactive group (12%) and elected union members (20%). Elected members are also more likely than other groups to give support to the Communist Party (20%), more in comparison to activists (15%) and the inactive group (12%).

An even smaller proportion of respondents show approval for All-Russia People's Front (ONF).[1] Around two-thirds of them were unable to articulate a clear position with regards to the ONF. Apart from this, 5% of the inactive group and 14% of union activists identified positively with the ONF. On the other hand, the numbers of those taking a negative of the ONF reached 22% of the inactive group and 28% of activists. If we compare the different categories of employees according to their type of employment, what emerges is that workers, other staff and skilled workers often struggle more than managers to express a coherent attitude to the ONF. Managers appear to be more informed and tend to give a more negative assessment of the ONF by 10 to 20 percentage points.

The results of previous surveys on mining and metallurgical enterprises have shown that, with regards to the activity and level of conflict between its primary and regional organizations, the GMPR is not a uniform structure (Patrushev et al. 2007). In those regions where large and economically successful enterprises are concentrated, there tend to be more cells pursuing a strategy of actively defending the rights of members. Those who are members of GMPR cells actively engaged in conflict in organizations tend to give above average estimates of the effectiveness of their Union's activities. At the same time, it should be noted that these assessments of the union and its relationship

[1] The ONF (Obshherossiiskii narodnij front) is a political coalition founded by Vladimir Putin as prime minister in 2011 that aims to unite various political groups around the United Russia platform.

with the administration depend heavily on other factors such as the degree of personal involvement in trade union activity, age, education and income. In assessing the quality of interaction between the union and the enterprise management, trade union activists and elected members always mention two clear positions. Firstly, they saw the union as an effective force, often believing that "the union forces the management to take the interests of employees into account". 21% of union activists and 27% of elected members took this position, in contrast to only 11% of the inactive group. Secondly, they chose the position that "the management takes most major decisions only after consultation the union". This was supported by 60% of activists and elected members but by only 34% of the inactive group. In all probability, these figures are due to two factors; firstly, that the union activists tend to be better informed about union activities and, secondly, that their interests are more predominantly represented in the union than those of other groups.

As we move up through the age groups, a steadily increasing willingness and assurance in negotiating solutions in consultation with the union becomes more observable; this goes from 40% in the age group of 30 years and under to 64% in the age group of 50 and above. It would seem likely that this is caused either by a higher previous level of involvement in the union in the older age group or by a recollection of the both the Soviet past and the 1990's, when the influence of the GMPR was much stronger. Younger age groups find it significantly more difficult to clearly assess the role of the union and its relationship with the management; 35% rated found the question too difficult to answer, as compared with an average of 17% in the sample as a whole. Managers and employees with higher incomes and higher education are also more likely to believe that the administration consults the union when taking decisions. This is not surprising; this group is more closely connected to the management after all. On the other hand, those union members receiving lower wages as less-skilled or un-skilled workers tend to believe that "the management takes major decisions without reference to the union." In other words, this category takes the position that the GMPR is poor at asserting its rights in relation to the management, a fact that is consistently reproduced in the third study of the union.

If we take a closer look at the group that believes the union "forces the management to take the interests of employees into account" (20%), then we will find that this judgement is based on viewing the union as an active subject; on the one hand, the union must interact with a management that has little interest in cooperation, on the other hand, the union was able to overcome this lack of interest on the part of management and find a resolution. This group is politically active and operates outside of the union. Within this section the proportion of people ready to take part in protests defending economic or social rights and retain democratic freedoms is 15 percentage points higher. Those people, who hold positive assessments of the work of the trade union, participate in elections more actively and tend to vote for the opposition. They are often willing to demonstrate their soli-

darity with the striking workers of other enterprises, even at the cost of material losses to themselves. They score by 20 percentage points higher in the number claiming they can "rely on the support of the trade union" and more often evaluate it as a successful organization. They are also 10 percentage points more likely to recognize the need to band together with others in order to protect common interests. Workers from this group have a more negative view of the ONF and show 9 percentage points less support for the admission of the Federation of Independent Russian Trade Unions (FNPR) into this organization. As such, agreement with the statement "the union forces the management to take the interests of employees into account" can be linked to the oppositionist positions held by employees in the mining and metallurgical sector.

The vast majority of respondents prefer to have their labour rights asserted through means of negotiations with the management; among elected members this figure is as high as 90%, with 66% of the inactive group holding this view. This is hardly surprising; this method does, after all, remain the most cost-effective and obvious form of conflict resolution. Moreover, negotiations are an integral part in any process where differences must be settled and go alongside other forms of protest. Going to court takes second place in conflict resolution for all groups (30% to 37%), while participating in rallies and pickets only comes in at third place; 29% among whom elected members and 28% for active members, as compared to only 18% in the inactive group. In fourth place for all groups is appeals to the press (18–25%). Next in order of popularity in the list is going on strike and, in last place, halting work completely. The last two forms of collective action are actually more attractive for the inactive group, scoring 18% and 15%, respectively, than for union activists, who scored 13–14% and 11% respectively. In other words, despite the fact that the most active union members are prepared to negotiate with the management, a third of them can rapidly change their position and turn to the organization of public protests. Among those who do not believe in the work of the union and are not involved in its activities, there is more of an inclination towards a confrontational strategy of civil disobedience.

The mood of protest among employees in the Mining and Metallurgical Sector

Working on the basis of the six survey questions, which in different forms revealed the attitudes of union members to protest activity, we developed a "protest index" that measures, on a scale from 0 to 5, the level of one's involvement in and attitude toward protest activity. Among those employed in the mining and metallurgicalc sector, the groups with the highest readiness to resort protest and the most active in protest events were men over 50, union activists, elected members, supporters of the Communist Party, the Liberal Democratic Party or "A Just Russia" and those who feel that their union should

support those forces favouring an alternative to the current socio-economic policies of the government.

Those who are willing to become involved in protest differ significantly from the more passive members of the union. Those who are in the union due to a sense of belonging, out of habit or because of the perks and financial assistance that go along with it, are never significantly greater in number than those willing to engage in protest, whose motives include defending workers from the arbitrary action of the management, maintenance of wage levels and protection from unfair dismissal. Obviously, in the first case the "Soviet model of the trade union" is being reproduced, a form in which the union was a familiar feature in the life of every person and carried out functions similar to a social security department. In the reality of new market conditions, when more pressure from the side of management has emerged, low wages and layoffs have become the most serious bones of contention. The resolution of problems such as these would appear to demand the application of protest and conflict methods against the employer. One of the most widespread drivers in all the union groups, regardless of activity level, was "a feeling of belonging to the organization". On the other hand, motivating drivers such as ensuring protection from unfair dismissals and the arbitrariness of the management and maintaining wages were more important for active union members. The inactive group tended to choose perks and economic assistance as their drivers, or simply remain in the union by default, as if by inertia.

The protest index can be connected directly to a respondent's level of expectations as to whether there will be positive changes in their economic status over the next year or two. Those who have strong belief their prospects are improving have a protest index that is close to zero. In contrast, those who have little faith in any improvement to their economic status tend to be more inclined to undertake protest activity. In other words, it is not, strictly speaking, a negative assessment of one's economic status but more social pessimism and a feeling of limited prospects for one's near future that forms the basis for discontent. In as far as young people tend to be more optimistic, this reason is usually less relevant in pushing them towards protest activity.

Among the key arguments for participating in protest activity, the most commonly chosen by respondents were "social justice" (61%) and "in order to resolve specific problems in life" (54%). In third place came "to help people" (43%), while fourth place was taken by "a desire to have an influence on the course of events in the country" (40%). Other reasons, such as "for the good of society", "the sense of doing something important", "to bring about a change in management", "it is the duty of every citizen", "upholding the Constitution" and "democracy" all followed in descending order. Young people paid considerably more attention to abstract concepts such as "for the good of society", while older respondents (over 50) focused on "social justice" and "it is the duty of every citizen". Middle-aged people (30 to 50 years old) usually chose "in or-

der to resolve specific problems in life". The justifications given for participating in protest activity did not turn out to be dependent on income, level of trade union activity, education or type of employment. More well-off employees, however, were somewhat more willing to participate in protest activities in order to "fulfil their duty of a citizen". Among other staff the most important reasons were "for the good of society" and "a sense of self-worth".

Among the primary reasons for avoiding participation in protest activity were its poor organization, concern over the legality of such actions and the doubt that it will bring to any real results. These obstacles to the attendance of protest activities occupy first place for all groups, regardless of age, type of employment and their level of activity in the union.

Workers in the mining and metallurgical sector look more favourably on protests aimed at the protection of economic and social rights than those that look to defend democratic freedoms. They also claim to be willing to go out on the street themselves for the former rather than the latter reason. As such, the key factors that would draw them into open protest activity were either more pragmatic reasons such as the desire to change things "here and now" or supporting calls for a restoration of social justice. "Democratic" values, such as upholding the Constitution or fulfilling one's duty as a citizen and democracy, were almost at the end of the list, while, on the other hand, a desire to influence the government was quite widespread (40 % of respondents).

The union as an agency representing interests of employees

An analysis of our data reveals that, among those employed in the mining and metallurgical sector, it is workers (especially those more underpaid and poorly educated) and young people most of all who feel their interests are not being looked after by the union. They also have the most critical views of their union leaders. This group is the most likely to take part in the most extreme forms of protest such as strikes and halting work. They are, in contrast, far less interested in more institutional forms of protest. In other words, the union cannot cope with the task of representing the interests of the poorer groups and this, in turn, contributes to the radicalization of this group. At the same time, these categories tend to be less capable of achieving collective action and possess a low level of social capital in comparison to those groups that are more widely represented among union activists.

While young people play a significant role among union activists, they have a limited presence among elected members; more than half of the employees under 30 years in the mining and metallurgical sector are not involved in any trade union activities. Young people tend to resort to individual coping strategies; they rarely accept the need to band together in order to preserve the common interests. In contrast, they feel that one's wellbeing is largely dependent on oneself, than how fairly society is set up. Young people rely more on help from

friends, relatives and other "useful contacts" and are less inclined to look for assistance from less the trade union or any labour dispute committees than the other age groups. Young people, especially in comparison to their older colleagues, are more inclined to see their earnings as being depend on their supervisor and the quality of their work. It should be noted, however, that all age groups put "the overall work of the factory" in the first place of causes for one's wellbeing. Of course, there are a number of objective circumstances that lie behind these positions. It is, as a rule, easier for a young person to find a new job or move to a new city and learn a new professional specialisation. If they have no dependents, they are often more able to spend time looking for a better place of work. At the same time, there is a clear lack of solidarity among young people. Protest activity is somewhat more supported by those young people who are still not afraid of the potential negative consequences of participation in protests.

According to data from Svetlana Klimova, among all the categories of employees in Russia, it was industrial workers who were most affected by the economic crisis of 2008–2009. They are often faced dismissal, being relegated to part-time employment or cancellation of previously agreed perks and bonuses (Klimova 2009: 202). At the same time, highly skilled workers were even more willing to join in any protest activity occurring at their enterprise (Klimova 2009: 215). It would seem that, on the one hand, skilled workers are more concerned with keeping their current position at the workplace, as it is precisely the holding of high qualifications with a specific specialisation that opens up the opportunity of good earnings. On the other hand, it is in this environment that they will come into contact with workers with more experience, who are familiar with trade union practices and have a more developed understanding of the interests of the group.

GMPR remains one of the largest and strongest unions in modern Russia. It is undoubtedly one of the key actors in social and political life, both at the federal level, where political representation is achieved through the work of the Central Committee and the nomination of representatives to participate in parliamentary elections, and at the regional level, where there are strong local and grassroots organizations. The position of the union's governing bodies, however, depends to a large extent on the changing political situation and informal agreements made with government officials. Take for example, GMPR Union Chairman Mikhail Tarasenko, who, from 2008 to 2010, actively lobbied for an increase in the minimum wage to the level of a living wage. Subsequently, in 2013, while occupying the chair of deputy and operating on behalf of the State Duma Committee of Labour and Social Policy, the same person opposed the very legislative initiatives that could have brought this about (Tarasenko 2008, Gosudarstvennaja … 2013).

To kowtow or to rebel?

The 2011 Survey had shown that workers at mining and metallurgical enterprises gave significantly stronger support to the parliamentary opposition. Ratings

of their support for the party of power and the presidential candidacy of Vladimir Putin on the eve of the election campaign of 2011–2012 were considerably lower than the average across Russia. Having said that, a significant part of the workforce remained passive, politically indifferent and still opted to vote for the party of power, thus reflecting the general situation in Russian society. The desires to become involved in trade union activities, take an interest in political developments in the country, influence events and participate in elections and protest activity are all closely related to each other. Moreover, a higher degree of individual involvement in trade union activity fits in with the greater degree of oppositional sentiment found there. Which of these is a cause and which an effect, should remain the topic of a separate study.

Despite the position of the GMPR leadership in completely distancing itself from more radical forms of collective action such as strikes, regional and grassroots organizations have, in contrast, turned to their own active protest activity, if and when local conditions have forced developments in this direction. To take one example, over 2008 to 2009 workers in Pikalevo held a series of well-known mass rallies to protest the apparent closure of a facility of vital importance to the local economy (Matveev 2010a). In 2010, the employees of the Alexandrinsk mining company battled for improved wages (Matveev 2010b). The most burning issues capable of prompting a significant portion of workers toward protest activity remain the traditional ones: retaining the number of jobs at the enterprise and maintaining an acceptable wage level. The majority of union members view negotiations with the management as the most appropriate method of defending the rights of workers. However, it should be noted that, in the event that the outcome of such discussions are unfavourable, one quarter of union members will readily commit themselves to protest activity.

In conditions where the political arena is clearly dominated by the state authorities, passivity in the political sphere should be seen as a rational model of behaviour. Those citizens who break out of passivity and resort to active protest, generally only do so as a response to specific problems not requiring too much time and effort to resolve. However, the lack of support for the opposition movements springing up in Moscow does not reflect any fidelity to the current regime. In modern Russia, protests with long-term objectives tend to arise in the following conditions: 1) when anxieties over certain social phenomenon blooms into a sense of serious injustice, resulting in discontent over the contempt shown by the authorities to the people's wishes and people's own inability to participate in key decision-making; 2) the discontented mass has enough knowledge of the possible methods used to restore social justice; 3) the people's own evaluation of their resources and capabilities fills them with hope of a successful conclusion to their protest activity (Clement et al. 2010; Clement 2013).

It is not surprising to find that the majority of the Russian population perceived the mass opposition protests that occurred in major cities from late 2011 to the middle of 2012 as incomprehensible and alien. After all, they failed to

solve any specific problems and did not raise any clear calls for social justice. Even if some of the activists in the Moscow demonstrations did try to bring the social problems to the protest's agenda, this was not widely covered in the mass media, who preferred to focus their attention on the "VIPs" or celebrities involved and discuss the more sensationalist aspects of the protests. Also, many of the homemade signs brought by "rank-and-file" protesters to the capital tended to reflect the political, rather than the social, nature of the protest. The special position of Moscow, with its high concentration of educated and affluent citizens, created the necessary preconditions for the emergence of a feeling of empowerment among protesters, a sense that they were justified in invading the political arena to challenge the right of the authorities in determining the changing situation. Employees of industrial enterprises in the Russian regions cannot be seen as more loyal citizens than those of the capital; it is just that they only feel comfortable making demands to the authorities on very specific issues located within a local, mainly social, agenda.

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