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# “Bureaucrats Are the New Kings.”

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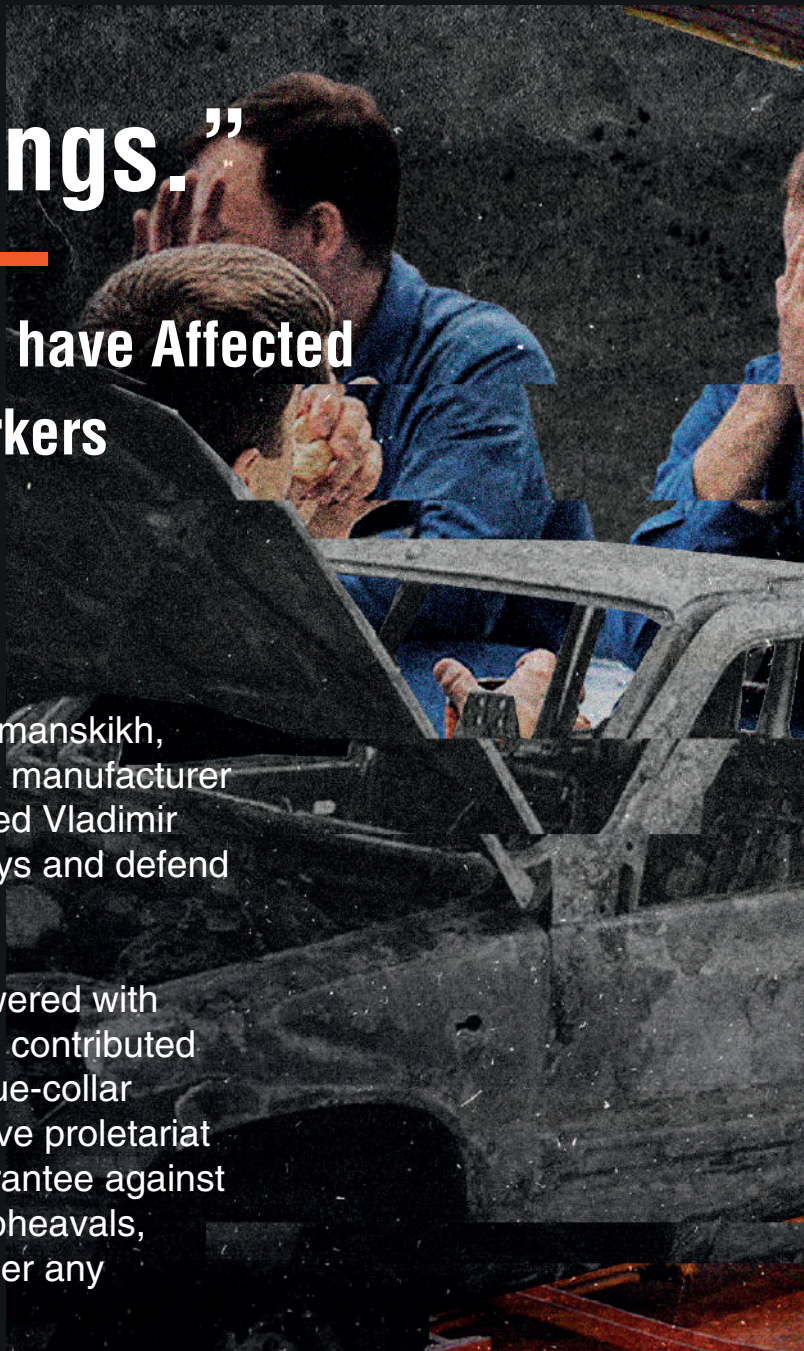
## How War and Mobilization have Affected the Lives of Industrial Workers

**Azamat Ismailov**

Ten years ago, Igor Kholmanskikh, shop foreman at the tank manufacturer Uralvagonzavod, promised Vladimir Putin to “bring out my guys and defend stability.”

The sycophant was showered with honors, while the speech contributed to a popular myth that blue-collar workers are a conservative proletariat that sees Putin as a guarantee against economic and political upheavals, ready to support him under any circumstances.

In October 2022, a call to “defend stability” could be considered fanaticism. The ordinary life of the working class is collapsing by the minute. The people to blame are not the “loudmouthed protesters”, but the government which unleashed an aggressive war.



# How War Affected Enterprises

Before the war, large-scale industry provided salaries that while not lavish were “white” (legal) and regularly paid, which allowed workers to lead generally tolerable lives.

Sanctions, the disruption of logistics chains and other economic consequences of the war hit the industrial complex hard. However, different industries suffered to varying degrees, while a few of them even experienced something akin to boom.

Among those that took the biggest blow is the automotive industry. Its critical dependence on foreign (mainly Western) capital, technologies and components caused a deep crisis in the very first months of the “special military operation.”

According to Rosstat’s August data, the annual production of passenger cars fell by 70%, while the number of vacancies in the automotive industry (according to the interactive map provided by the recruiting portal HeadHunter) decreased by 49%.

Car plants owned by transnationals have closed or suspended production indefinitely, sending workers into endless and only partially paid downtime.

As a result, thousands of carworkers, until recently considered a relatively prosperous part of the working class, are forced to tighten their belts.

“Saint Petersburg suffered a lot after February 24. The local car industry [note: consisting mainly of foreign companies] is almost destroyed. Toyota has closed, Nissan and Hyundai are still idle. The workers have been getting only two-thirds [of their wages of about 50-60 thousand rubles a month] since February. Everyone we’ve talked to complains about prices; everyone is under pressure from loans. People don’t travel and spend their vacations either in the countryside or at home. Almost no one visited Sochi, Turkey or Crimea, as with all the travel expenses they would not be able to pay the mortgage,” says Mikhail (name changed at the request of the interviewee), coordinator of an interregional activist network that organises trade unions.

We are essentially talking about hidden unemployment, which may soon become visible. There are no circumstances in which foreign concerns could resume car production against the background of an increasingly bloody and protracted war. The Russian assets are unlikely to be bought by other owners.

The workers at the Togliatti-based AvtoVAZ, which belonged to Renault before the war and was nationalised in May, found themselves in a slightly better position.

Downtime at the largest Russian automobile plant that employs more than 30 thousand people began before the war (due to a global shortage of chips) and continued until summer, because of sanctions and boycotts by foreign suppliers.



VAZ employees lost part of their already small earnings (40-50 thousand rubles a month on average). To survive, many of them worked on community projects organized by local authorities: they trimmed grass, painted curbs, cut down dry branches. Others became couriers, and some thought about enlisting in the army.

The Izhevsk branch of AvtoVAZ has laid off 60% of its staff, about two thousand people. However, massive cuts at the parent company were avoided.

Over the summer, the concern established new supply chains (the management did not disclose details of the deals), resumed car production in Togliatti and even announced the recruitment of four thousand new employees. So, the Togliatti-based VAZ employees are recovering from the shock of the first war months, at least financially.

“Our [press] production has enough work, even though AvtoVAZ currently cannot produce many of its models. We work on a three-shift schedule, as before. Some are put on enforced leave while retaining two-thirds of their average salary. Community service is still available. It is paid for from the municipal budget. In principle, I am satisfied with the salary. It is tolerable,” says Alexey, a VAZ employee (name changed).

The situation is similar for other large concerns that depend on imported components, for example, shipbuilding.

“[At Saint Petersburg shipyards] in the first three months after February the management started job cuts, although on a small scale. Some international projects, such as the production of fishing vessels for the Norwegians at the Admiralty Shipyards, have been closed. It turned out that many components and much of the equipment used to be imported: welding machines, cable ducts, cable bundles. They are not easy to replace,” explains Mikhail.

Hasty import substitution affected shipbuilders’ salaries (which often hinge on bonuses and performance), and made their work more dangerous.

“We used to have an [imported] welding machine that worked with absolute precision, and now we use a machine from Urals which produces a lot of defects... In some jobs, people can’t deliver on time. Their performance drops and they get less money...

**We are essentially talking about hidden unemployment, which may soon become visible. There are no circumstances in which foreign concerns could resume car production against the background of an increasingly bloody and protracted war. The Russian assets are unlikely to be bought by other owners.**



“At the Admiralty Shipyards a ship caught fire recently [note: the Mechanic Maslak trawler, with no casualties]. According to our sources, the accident happened because of combustible glue. Previously they used imported glue which was not flammable,” says a trade union organizer.

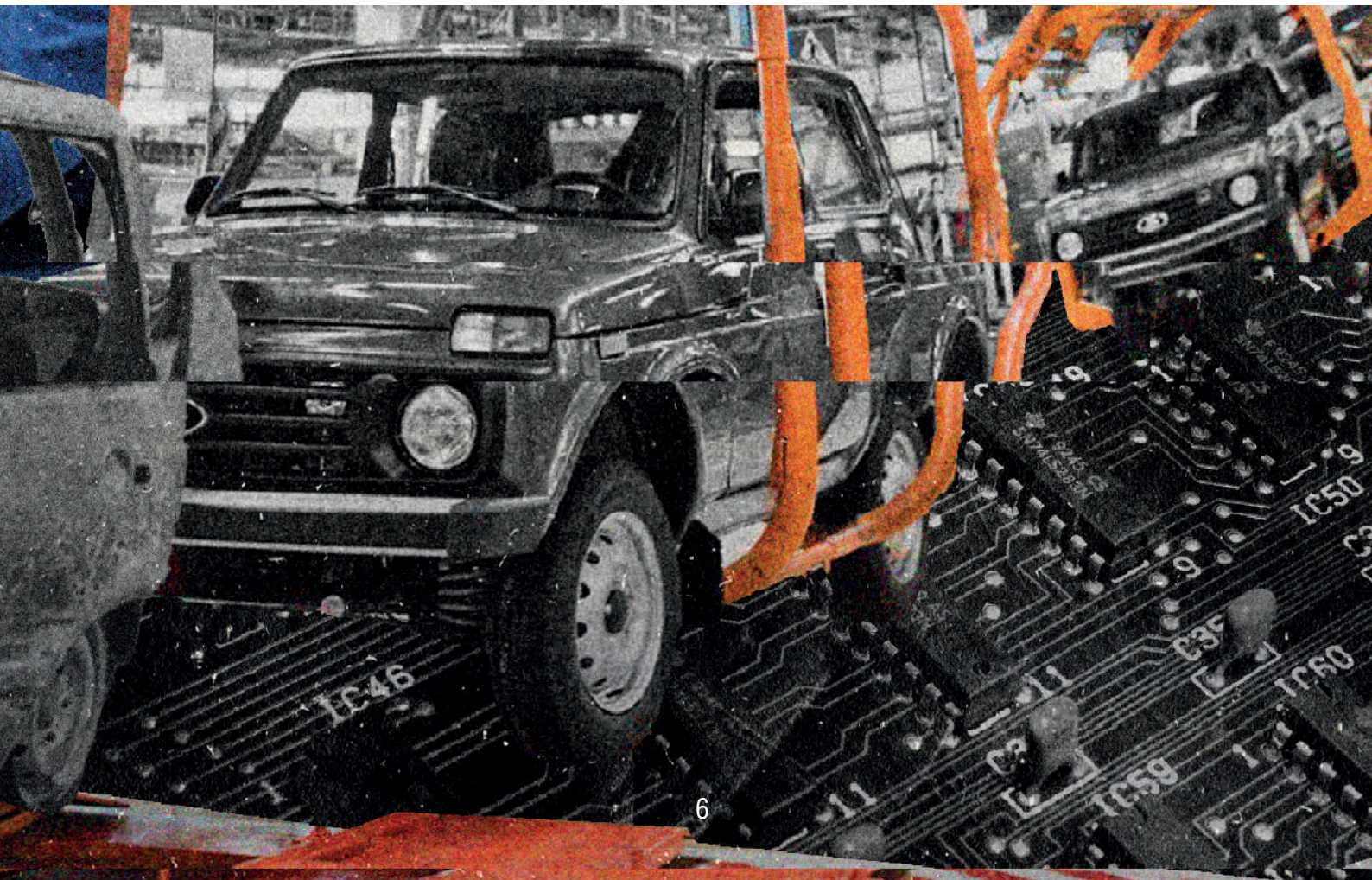
As a result, the shipyards even began to withhold the contractors’ wages, a sure symptom of economic distress and the most common cause of labor protests.

However, government contracts, including military ones, keep Saint Petersburg shipbuilding afloat. “There are several large orders, for example, the [nuclear] icebreaker Yakutia at the Baltic [plant], the repair of military vessels and a few fishing trawlers at the Admiral [JSC Admiralty

Shipyards] ... We have work, but not a lot of prospects. No new orders are being placed, and no one knows what to do,” says Mikhail describing the workers’ mood.

The shipbuilders’ anxiety is shared by the rail maintenance workers. In their industry, like in aviation, the limited supply of imported spare parts has led to dire consequences, the so-called technological cannibalism.

“Our Donchak diesel locomotives have Western electronics. From the very beginning of the special operation, the depot where they are serviced sounded the alarm: ‘We have spare parts for only two or three months!’ . Some of the locomotives are disassembled, and we assemble a functional one out of two,” says railway employee Denis (name changed) from





Volkhov, a single-industry town in the Leningrad Region.

Denis and his colleagues are afraid that redirecting rail transport from west to east will affect their already meager earnings of 20-25 thousand rubles a month.

“Since the West has turned its back on us, money will flow to the BAM and the Trans-Siberian. This will mean poverty for us,” says one of the Posle interviewees, sharing his fears.

The workers in military factories feel differently, as for obvious reasons these facilities have increased production.

“The situation in Omsk is noteworthy. Omsktransmash announced as many as six thousand new jobs, although before February the plant was not in the best shape. One or two thousand jobs are open at the tyre factory. It caused a stir in the city. All the entrances to the apartment blocks were covered with job advertisements,” Mikhail remembers.

Most likely, the boom is explained by the fact that Omsk hosts many military-industrial enterprises.

The same is happening in other regions. In Tatarstan, defense facilities hire workers and engineers on high salaries (80-120 thousand rubles a month), plus all kinds of benefits and deferrals from the army, according to the Real Time newspaper.

Besides carrots, military-industrial

complex workers are subjected to sticks: according to a government decree, they can be forced to work overtime for four hours a day, and are not allowed to take a vacation if the company does not fulfill the state defense order.

## Workers and War

Most of the workers whom the Posle informants talked to trust state propaganda. At least, this was before the mobilization was announced.

“We are waging a just war”, “NATO is attacking us, what can we do?”, “Yes, I feel sorry for the Ukrainians. No, we don’t want to kill them. We are not fascists. Why do they blame us? We love them (Ukrainians). They should move here. But we need to destroy the fascists,” this is how Mikhail, a trade unionist, summarizes the shipbuilders’ opinions at the beginning of the “special operation.”

“When the special military operation started, people [in our team] were split down the middle. The younger ones, including myself, are mostly against the war (of course, except for those who are involved with the local administration and the United Russia party). However, they are afraid to go to rallies because it is dangerous. The older ones either passively support the war or stick with a neutral position: ‘I don’t get into politics’, ‘It is not my business’, ‘I don’t care.’

“Oddly enough, many began to support the special operation after



talking to their Ukrainian relatives. When peaceful cities were first shelled, people said they were against [the war]. But then [Ukrainian] relatives started to call them screaming: ‘You are murderers, rapists!’, ‘You are all to blame!’, ‘Go and overthrow your government!’. Family relations are transferred to politics. People are starting to distrust Ukrainians,” says Denis, a railway employee.

According to Alexey from AvtoVAZ, from the very beginning of the war, many of his colleagues received news of the deaths or injuries of acquaintances fighting in Ukraine (many of them come from the same depressed towns and villages as the majority of the contract soldiers).

“We talk about the ‘non-war’ all the time. Most regurgitate official propaganda, seasoning it with stories about relatives and friends involved in the conflict. They also speak about the dead. These losses have only increased hatred towards Ukrainians,” a VAZ employee shares.

Alexey himself, from the first days of the invasion, agitated against the war, but was disappointed.

“I try to remain silent now. I don’t argue anymore. I sometimes leave the recreation area when comrades heatedly start to discuss the latest news from the front line... I’m not looking for support. I’m burnt out. My inability to change anything feels depressing,” he explains.

So far, most workers (as well as the population as a whole) have supported the war passively if at all. The authorities’ attempts to recruit volunteers among workers brought a modest catch.

“Before the mobilization, they went around the workshops [of Volkhov enterprises] and appealed for volunteers for the special military operation. The incentive was: if you volunteer, your job will be kept until you return. Some fell for it, but very few did. For the most part, volunteers are fanatics who really believe in all this [the official propaganda]. Others answer: ‘Bugger this’ or ‘If they call us up officially, we’ll go,’” says Denis.

## How Workers React to Mobilization

Since Putin announced “partial” mobilization, support for the prevailing rhetoric or the “none of my business” position is hardly possible among workers, whose average age is around forty.

Unlike the middle class, many of whom left the country at the first sounds of the battle trumpet, the working class have scarcer opportunities, and their chances of getting to the front are significantly greater. The success of the entire campaign largely depends on their reaction.

It is too early to talk about the scale of discontent with the mobilization and the war, but it is undoubtedly growing.

“When the mobilisation began, the rhetoric [in the team] changed completely: ‘Fuck it, we don’t need it. We don’t want to!’... My friend supported [the war] at first, saying: ‘We will beat the Ukes!’, but as the mobilization began, he went to the administration worrying about his chances of being called up,” says Denis.

The telegram channel Sisyphian Labor that publishes interviews with workers shares numerous eloquent sketches about the attitude to mobilization in the workplaces:

“Factory workers are not in the mood to fight. They gradually learn news from the front about the lack of anything one might need there, they realize that they need to buy all the equipment themselves, that the draftees are not trained properly. None of them left the country. They say, ‘Where will we go? Nobody gives a fuck about people like us,’ (says a defence plant engineer).

“Our polisher said: ‘The enlistment office treats us as animals, calls us disposables, recruits everyone indiscriminately. It’s like they’re prepping us for slaughter.’ He blurted out that he would return armed and talk differently... people are worked up, like stretched springs. In the face of death, nobody is afraid of persecution,” (says a CNC machine operator at a St. Petersburg factory).

However, many accept everything with fatalism and do not seem to fully realize the degree of danger.

“Almost everyone we’ve talked to says, ‘If there’s no other option, I’ll go.’ When you explain that there are other options [to leave or to hide – ed.], very few are ready for it... People do not see the risk of death (they do not believe it because of propaganda). Most of them have served in the army. Many have pleasant memories from then. Some want to leave their wives. Surprisingly, most of them are not afraid to die, they are afraid of losing their qualifications, jobs, and money,” Mikhail sums up the shipbuilders’ mood.

## Struggle for Exemption

Competition for exemption from military service developed between enterprises and industries, and literally in every workshop. The accompanying nepotism and corruption inflame passions just as much as the arbitrariness of enlistment offices and bureaucratic confusion.

“Only a handful [of the Baltic Plant workers] say: ‘Yes, I am ready and I will go to war.’ Everyone else hopes for exemption and fears that they will not get it ... At the same time, people see that the exemption goes not to those who deserve it, but to [the bosses’] brothers, sons, cronies. People start to wonder why they should fight in place of somebody who is hiding here in the rear, just because he’s the foreman’s brother,” a trade union organizer explains.

But even exemption from active duty is not a reliable defense against the chaos of mobilization.



“They first said that railway employees would not be called up, or rather only through a special decree or if the fighting approaches the region where we work. Still, some engineers were called up. I don’t know if they were returned home or sent to the special military operation,” says Denis.

“After the mobilization began, the factories’ managers said that we would all be exempt. Despite this, people are taken away (we know of cases at Omsktransmash and the Baltic Plant). People receive the summons at home. They go to the factory and say, ‘I’ve got the summons.’ They are told, ‘Don’t be afraid of anything. Go to the enlistment office, talk to them.’ They go and are immediately taken away. About thirty people were called from the Baltic plant and they have not returned,” Mikhail explains.

No one seems to know who is entitled to avoid the draft and who is not. “Nobody knows who is legally exempt; they keep it a secret. We know only that exemptions do not cover all our jobs and professions,” complains a military factory worker in the telegram channel Sisyphian Labor.

In these conditions, exemption becomes a powerful tool for encouraging the loyal and punishing those seen as dissident, as well as for enslaving workers in general.

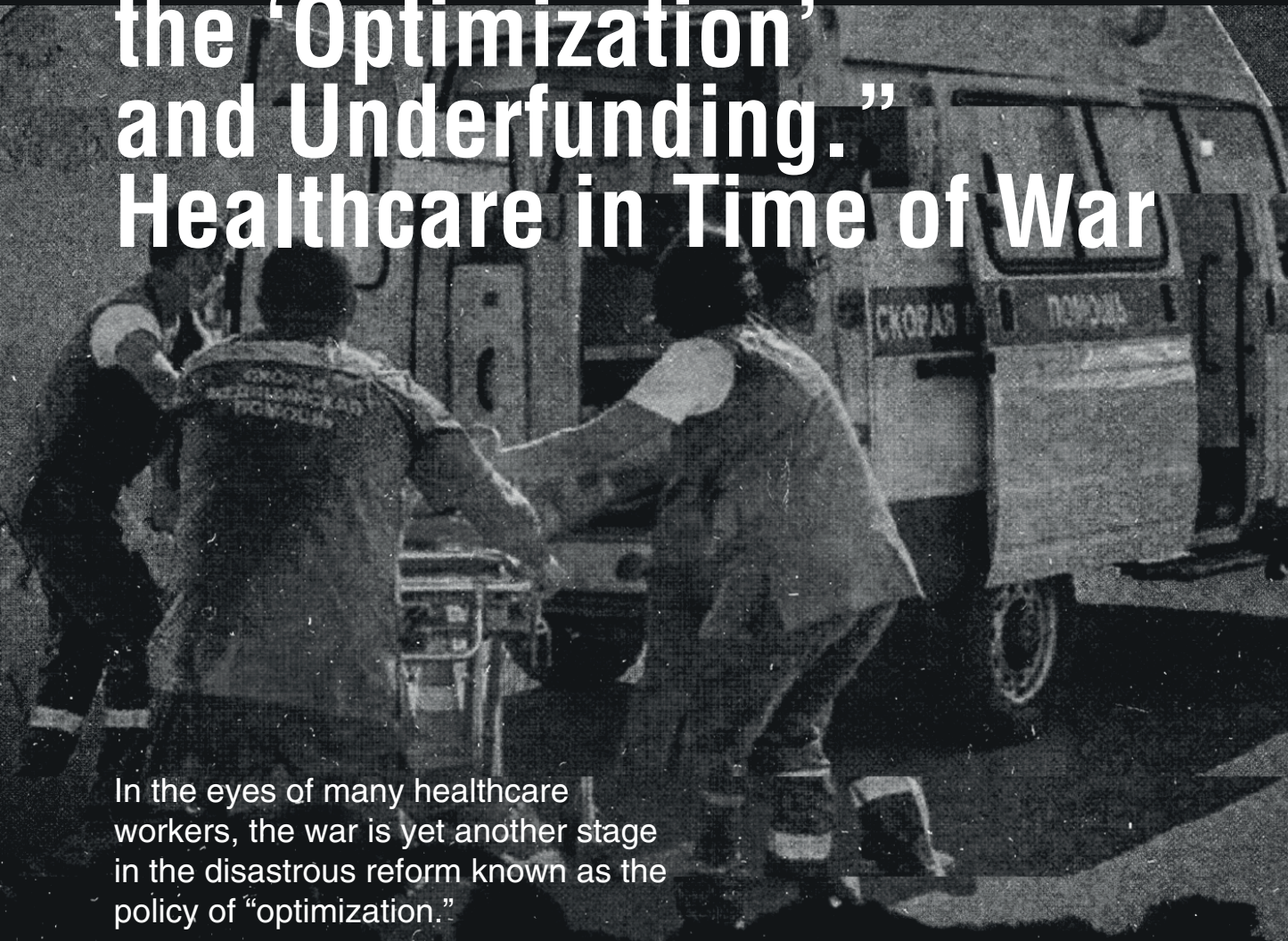
According to a government decree, the lists of employees eligible for exemption should be compiled by the companies’ management based on “the extent of their role in fulfilling the state defence order” (which the bosses assess arbitrarily).

Thus, any disagreement with working conditions, not to mention an intention to create a trade union, may be met with not just dismissal, but with military conscription.

“Bureaucrats are the new kings. They issue death sentences to those they don’t like. A feast of cannibals. A signature that keeps you at the factory has an unprecedented price now... We have become serfs,” comments an employee in a defense enterprise.

**Azamat Ismailov**

# “The Damage of Mobilization Hasn’t So Far Outdone the ‘Optimization’ and Underfunding.” Healthcare in Time of War



In the eyes of many healthcare workers, the war is yet another stage in the disastrous reform known as the policy of “optimization.”

Mobilization and a new wave of austerity might provoke the mass exodus of healthcare professionals from medicine and from Russia altogether.



# System Bled Dry

By the early twenties, Russian medicine was facing an acute shortage of personnel, clinics, and equipment due to the neoliberal reform known as the policy of “optimization.”

For a decade, the authorities have consistently closed “inefficient” (that is, too costly) health care facilities, mostly related to primary health care: outpatient clinics and day-care facilities, local medical stations, and so on. The countryside was particularly hard hit, as, unlike in urban areas, protests by local residents were not widespread and were barely covered by the federal media.

As a consequence, during the 2010s, about a thousand hospitals were shut down in Russia, and their total number was equal to that of 1932. In 2017, there were half as many hospital beds in the country as in 1990.

In exchange, the authorities promised to increase funding for large modernized clinics and end the deplorable financial situation of medical workers.

In 2012, Vladimir Putin’s infamous May Decrees guaranteed to increase the regional average of doctor’s salaries by a factor of three, while doubling the salaries of nurses, paramedics, and others.

However, social populism turned into the usual bureaucratic eyewash. Since medical institutions received no money to carry out the decrees, the pursuit





of an “on-the-books” salary increase resulted in creeping layoffs and the overexploitation of medical workers.

In order to receive the “Putin salary,” the majority of doctors were forced to take on one-and-a-half or two shifts, which led to exhausting overtime.

The situation of middle and junior medical personnel — nurses, paramedics, hospital attendants, and others — was even worse. In some places they were simply “eliminated as a class.”

“The May Decrees staged a ‘genocide’ of middle and junior medical staff [Note. Between 2013 and 2019, the number of middle staff fell by 128,000 people, from 1.44 to 1.31 million, and of the junior staff — by 421,000, from 687 to 266 thousand]. In some hospitals there are no nurses at all, and nurses are listed as cleaners,” said Dmitry (name changed), a trade union activist in the healthcare system who asked to remain anonymous.

The number of doctors was also in decline, although at a slower pace. In 2013, the country had 579,000 doctors (41 per 10,000 population), while in 2019 their number is estimated to have fallen to 565,000 (38.5 per 10,000). For this reason, at the early stages of the implementation of the optimization policy, experts sounded the alarm about the lack of specialists, which in some regions reached up to 50%.

Ten years after the May Decrees, healthcare is suffering from the same

diseases as before the decrees, often in an even more severe form.

In 2021, 90% of doctors surveyed by the professional network Vrachi.rf (Doctors.rf) complained about staff shortages, and almost half attributed the shortages to low salaries.

Contrary to official statistics reporting an average medical doctor’s salary to be one hundred thousand rubles a month (and this is a case in point), the actual income of doctors is usually several times lower.

Almost 40% of doctors earn no more than 40,000 rubles a month (a negligible amount, equivalent to the salary of a cashier), while the average monthly wage is 30,000 rubles, and the value of the salary (constant part of the salary, minus bonuses, etc.) — 20,000, according to the estimation of the All-Russian Union of patients based on a survey of 1,500 surgeons and physicians in 58 regions.

It comes as no surprise then that at the turn of the decade healthcare workers have become one of the most combative professional communities. In 2019 and especially in 2020, healthcare has far surpassed other sectors of the economy in the number of labor conflicts.

Since medical workers are forbidden to strike, they often resorted to work-to-rule job actions (when pedantic compliance with instructions stalls work) and joined free unions that are not part of the official trade union center of the FNPR (Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia): the Action (Deystviye) and the Alliance of Doctors (Alyans Vrachey).



## Putin Promises Equality

Faced with growing discontent, the authorities, through Vladimir Putin, acknowledged the “excesses” committed in the course of optimization and implementation of the May Decrees. Shortly before the pandemic, healthcare workers were promised the restoration of primary healthcare in the provinces and the development of “fair and understandable” rules of remuneration.

The Industry System of Labor compensation (OSOT), drafted by the Cabinet on Putin’s instructions, provided all medical personnel with a unified list of allowances, bonuses, and compensation (which often account for the major share of their income) and a fixed proportion of these payments to their salaries.

The reform was expected to be tested in several pilot regions in the summer of 2021, and by the end of this year it was supposed to be implemented throughout the whole country.

The unions saw the initiative as a victory, because the authorities seemed to be meeting their demands, promising to reduce the wage disparity between physicians with the same qualifications working in different hospitals and regions, and thus to saturate understaffed medical institutions with personnel.

However, the Covid pandemic and then the war put an end to these hopes.

## The Corona crisis as a Moment of Truth

The pandemic clearly demonstrated the pernicious effects of years of healthcare austerity policies. “The crisis undermines what has been undermined and exacerbates what has been exacerbated already.

The Corona crisis revealed huge problems within the healthcare system that have not been solved previously and are not being solved now: the shortage of personnel, their low level of organization and qualifications, the absolute incompetence of management,” says Nikolay (name changed), an anesthesiologist at a St. Petersburg hospital.

According to the medical doctor, by the beginning of the pandemic, few hospitals had normal zoning (dividing the facilities into “clean” and potentially infected areas). Medical workers were desperately short of special suits and other means of protection. This resulted in a high mortality rate among doctors and nurses, which according to an unofficial accounting exceeded fifteen hundred.

The staff shortage, intensified by the optimization, had ominous consequences for patients. According to some testimonies, at the peak of morbidity doctors were forced to resort to so-called medical triage, that is, to decide which of the patients to assist (with the greatest chance of success), and which to condemn to death.



In addition, the mobilization of scarce healthcare resources to combat Covid, to the detriment of other areas of care, spurred deaths from other diseases, such as diabetes.

The government restrained the outflow of medical personnel from the industry using special social payments to physicians working with Covid patients.

In 2020, doctors were entitled to a monthly allowance of 80,000 rubles, and nurses, paramedics, and ambulance staff — 25,000-50,000 (later payments were calculated based on the number of shifts). In the event of infection or death of a person, the patient or their relatives were paid insurance from 69,000 to 3,000,000 rubles.

The relative “generosity” of the state during the pandemic bore fruit. Although the distribution of “covid”

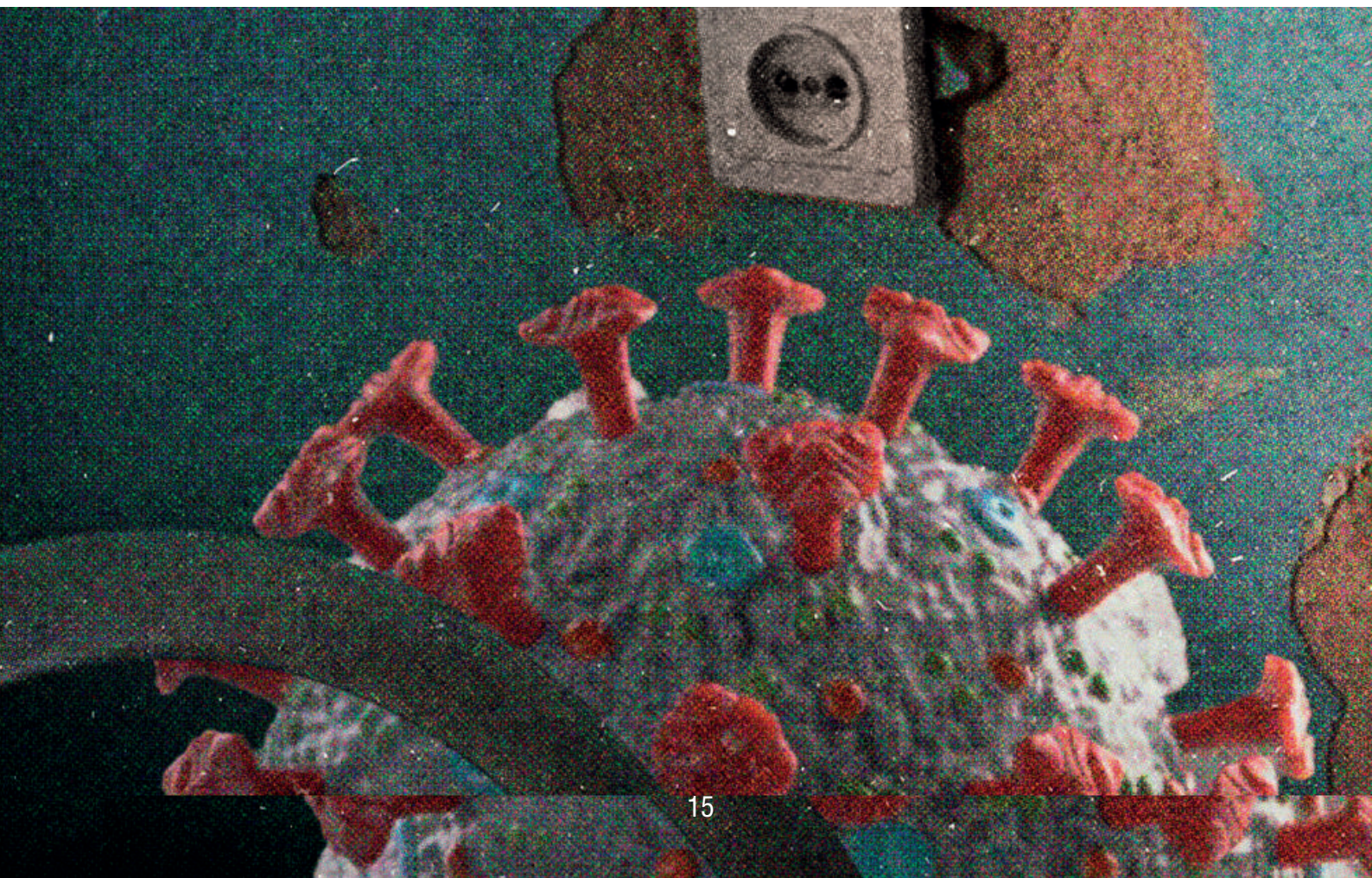
payments was accompanied by numerous abuses, the decline in the number of doctors stopped.

“At least we didn’t have to work two jobs to have anything more than food for thought,” explains trade union activist Dmitriy.

## Optimization Continues with Different Means

The invasion of Ukraine, which coincided with a drop in coronavirus deaths, put an end to the “covid” payments and the hope that the situation in healthcare would change for the better.

The first signs of a new wave of austerity were evident as early





as last fall. “We began to get signals that the regions were tightening the requirements for Covid payments. Many of them started paying only for a confirmed diagnosis (COVID-19), not for a shift.... [Doctors] were threatened that an inspection from the FSS (Social Security Fund) would be conducted and they would have to pay back the money from the hospitals’ funds. As a result, in the first half of 2022 the outflow of personnel from healthcare resumed,” says Dmitry.

In June, the government canceled all Covid support measures for medical workers ahead of schedule. They were replaced with a 25% increase in salary for hazardous working conditions.

Since salaries in healthcare are often below the minimum wage rate, this “substitution” simply means the abolition of guarantees, while the situation with Covid, according to official statements, “remains tense.”

Some groups of physicians received nothing at all.

“For some unknown reason, the paramedic teams in the front line of the fight against Covid were not compensated. It feels like [the authorities] are making people angry on purpose, [provoking labor protests]. After all, paramedics are the most organized part of the medical worker community, accounting for 80% of the union,” says Dmitriy.

Withdrawal of “Covid payments” hit the income of the vast majority of doctors — 70% of doctors surveyed

by the journal Medical Herald (Meditinsky Vestnik), expected a decrease in their salaries by 20-30%, and another 8% — by 50-60%.

Then the OSOT project went into oblivion, taking away the last hopes for a review of the results of optimization.

“The effect of the decree [on the implementation of the pilot project] was suspended until January 1, 2025. In fact, this is the abolition [of the reform]. There is an order from the President, but they are not going to carry it out, obviously hoping that things might change and they won’t need to do anything,” said the trade union activist, sharing his disappointment.

The fact that the war rendered obsolete the results of medical workers’ long struggle for their rights is underscored by the repression of medical unions, which practically deprived them of the opportunity to take collective action.

Last year the authorities designated the Alliance of Doctors as a foreign agent. Its head, Anastasia Vasilyeva, was placed under house arrest in connection with protests in defense of Navalny. Some activists from the Alliance have emigrated.

One of the regional coordinators of Action was jailed for six and a half years on charges of fraud. It is not clear whether the sentence is related to his human rights work or previous commercial activities, but such criminal charges are often a cover for political persecution.

The authorities are cutting not only the salaries of medical personnel, but also the financing of the system as a whole. The 2023-2025 federal budget proposes that the health care system be cut from 372 billion rubles this year to 310 billion next year.

At risk are expensive treatments, including so-called quota surgeries — complex, high-tech procedures such as organ transplants or prosthetic joints, says anesthesiologist Nikolay.

“They started cutting quotas, lowering rates, for example, for aortic valve replacement, femoral neck replacement, arthroscopy.... Because all the money goes to the front, and war is a costly affair,” the doctor believes.

The media reported other similar cases, in particular the attempt to cut funding for chemotherapy at the Pirogov Clinic in St. Petersburg.

Nikolay “dreads” the new year, when the Ministry of Health will distribute quotas to clinics. The salaries of specialists, among other things, depend on them.

“Recently funding has been decreasing constantly. Most [surgeries] were already at the limit of their budget, and now, by all appearances, they will go beyond that. We don’t know how to survive in these conditions,” the doctor fears.

The growing international demand for medical professionals, coupled with Putin’s announced “partial” mobilization, suggests a way out for healthcare workers.

## Medical Workers and Mobilization

At first the war hardly affected the medical workforce. Civilian hospitals did not treat the wounded, and disruptions in the supply of imported medicines or medical equipment were no more serious than usual.

February 24 divided healthcare workers, like the rest of Russian society, into a majority that passively approved of the “special operation” and a minority of “super-patriots” and opponents of the war.

“Some people, of course, speak out in favor of the war, especially when they are in no danger. There are a certain number of those who speak out against [the war], but they tend to do so quietly, because they understand how the wind blows. Here, the main employer is the state. Over decades of working in the system, people have realized that they are slaves here,” says the anesthesiologist.

However, according to the doctor, since summer 2022 there have been fewer hurrah-patriotic statements in his circles.

“People can see that something has gone wrong.... No one personally gives a damn about this war. I do not know a single doctor or nurse who would go to the front voluntarily,” says Nikolay, conveying the sentiments of his colleagues.



Rumors coming from military hospitals do not contribute to pro-war sentiments. According to some testimonies, the war mirrors the Corona crisis: the system, weakened by optimizations, proved unprepared for disaster.

“War, just as a trauma epidemic, requires expensive and specialized care. Let’s say a leg injury. A qualified [surgical] team can fight for the leg, but an unqualified surgeon, lacking the necessary equipment, will simply amputate it and leave a person disabled for life.

But the number of highly qualified specialists is limited. Plus, the surgery has to be done quickly, with the right equipment and medications. We lack everything at all stages.... Patients are brought in late, with poorly provided [primary] medical care,” testifies Nikolai.

Mobilization is less frightening for healthcare professionals than, for example, for factory workers who risk going to the trenches straight from the workshop. Despite excesses, such as the cases mentioned by Putin in which mobilized doctors were enlisted in the army as motorized riflemen, normally they end up in base hospitals.

On the other hand, says Nikolay, some people still remember the first Chechen war, when doctors were sent to the front lines. In the chaos of the mobilization, no one can guarantee that it will not happen this time.

The threat hangs over not only men, but also women, who make up 70% of medical staff.

**“No one personally gives a damn about this war. I do not know a single doctor or nurse who would go to the front voluntarily”**

“Women with high-demand skills receive call-up papers, but so far they are just registered in the reserve,” says Nikolay.

“Women with military backgrounds, especially those who have children, are noticeably nervous. No normative documents [on the order of their mobilization] have been published. Nothing except verbal statements that women will be mobilized in the third wave,” says Dmitry, trade unionist, adding that so far he is not aware of any cases of female medical workers being drafted.

According to the trade union leader, sending medical workers to war has not yet become a mass phenomenon. “The damage [to healthcare] of mobilization has’t so far outdone the one caused by optimization and underfunding,” he believes.

Still, tensions mount. In some places, medical workers are forbidden to take vacations or travel abroad. For example, the St. Petersburg Public Health Department ordered chief physicians to keep their subordinates from traveling abroad. In Tver, doctors were prohibited from taking vacations and declared unable to travel beyond the borders of the region. Against the background of the “partial” martial law declared in Russia on October 20,

this may be the first sign of the militarization of the healthcare system.

Few people are impressed by such a prospect. That's why doctors, like other workers, frantically cling to their exemptions and find other ways not to go into the army.

"We, doctors, are hard to mobilize, because we still have some power to make decisions in this system. For example, to contrive a diagnosis which will prevent us from being conscripted. The only thing that saves someone from mobilization now is category D [which means serious diseases, like tuberculosis, HIV, or schizophrenia]. People obtain this category for themselves, they resort to corruption, nepotism, and connections," says Nikolay.

Others pack their suitcases and leave the country.

"Many of those I know think about leaving and are taking steps toward emigration. But it's not an easy thing to do, because the departure of a medical doctor, like any highly qualified person, means having your qualifications recognized and valid. There are countries that recognize our documents — you can go there in no time. Some are in the process of confirming their papers and are about to leave. Others freaked out and left without any preparations to wait out," says the doctor.

Those who don't have the means to leave or hide, hope for a deferment. But in healthcare, as in other sectors, distribution of deferments is

nontransparent and depends on the arbitrary decisions of the authorities.

Some hospital managers are fighting for every employee, realizing that the loss of even one specialist can be fatal. "If a city hospital has ten district therapists, and one of them is taken away by the special military operation, it will affect the people they treat, because the staff shortage is acute," Dmitry explains.

Others let things slide, while others again use the exemption to encourage sycophants and to get rid of unwanted people.

"Through the mobilization superiors exercise enormous power. I know people who have been told that they will have deferrals, but they don't actually know whether it's true or not. Everything depends on the management; they have been treating employees as slaves before this too. Now it's a job with a death-sentence ending, because being fired would mean being sent to the front. That's why they offer petty salaries. No one would dare to say a word," assures Nikolay.

According to Nikolay, Russian doctors will adapt to the war, just as they have adapted to other crises. But the inevitable deterioration of working conditions and reduced funding will force many of them to leave the profession sooner or later or to emigrate. "No one wants to waste time and money on all this crap," concludes the doctor.









**Konstantin Kharitonov**

# “We Have Already Had Hard Times.”

## How War and Mobilization Have Affected the Lives of Retail Sales Workers

### The current situation

Commerce occupies a very important place within the Russian economy, accounting for 15 percent of GDP and 10 percent of tax revenues in the treasury and with about 13 million people employed in the trade sector. From large shopping malls to small outlets, specialized shops to ordinary convenience stores, trade workers are ubiquitous in Russia with up to 25 percent of jobs across Russian regions being in commerce.

That being said, there is not much prestige in this kind of work, save for managerial positions. According to Artyom Kumpel, the executive director of Avito Jobs, the median salary of a shop clerk in Russia is as low as 30,000 rubles (less than 500€).

Whereas a salesperson in Moscow might earn 45,000 or more, in some regions a meager 15,000 is considered a normal income.

With the onset of a full-scale Russo-Ukrainian war on February 24, Western countries swiftly adopted sanctions that aimed, among other things, to restrict commerce in the aggressor state. Major brands and companies announced they were leaving Russia and closing down their stores, while external and internal trade operations were expected to dwindle due to logistical problems. A host of western companies, many of which are involved in trade, have left Russia, curtailed their business in the country, or, at least, have announced they are



going to leave. Among these are, to name but a few, H&M (which had over 150 stores in Russia), IKEA, Inditex (which owns Zara, Bershka, Massimo Dutti, and other brands), Adidas, Decathlon, Puma, Rolex, Swarovski; car manufacturers also shut down their dealerships. Many tech brand stores closed down after manufacturers withdrew from the market (although sales have partially recovered thanks to so-called parallel importing). Numerous experts have predicted a rise in unemployment across different sectors, including commerce. All of these measures, among others, were designed to cut off revenue for the Russian regime that would be used to continue the war, while also sending a message to the population about the detrimental consequences of such reckless military gambles.

In an interview with Interfax, the chairman of the Russian Retail Companies Association Igor Karataev complained about structural problems, saying that “difficulties faced by the commercial sector this year are unheard of. Destruction of logistics chains, the necessity to quickly find new suppliers, inflationary pressure, decreasing effective demand: this is the first time the sector is experiencing all of these factors simultaneously.”

It was not a sharp drop, but, by August, retail turnover had already decreased 8.8 percent at an annual rate. Decline began in April and has been accelerating each month, sometimes ahead of the government’s overly

optimistic predictions. Unsurprisingly, non-food items dominate the process, as those expenses are easier to cut down on.

## **We got off cheap**

Notwithstanding the dim prospects and the alarming statistics, most sales professionals are not yet speaking of any significant changes to their own situation or their working conditions since the beginning of the war, all the while noting dwindling profits of business owners.

“No, the war didn’t affect the business, it is just what it used to be,” said Ilona, who works at a market stall in a North Caucasian region (all names in this story have been changed). Rosa, a clerk at a grocery store in Moscow said that “yield has dropped, there aren’t many customers. Men have disappeared, women are stretching their money. My employer is losing money, he doesn’t have the kind of revenue he had before, but I wasn’t affected personally.” Vladislav, who works at a Moscow bookstore, reported that “one of the shop’s founders left Russia, otherwise things haven’t changed much. It doesn’t even seem like there’s fewer customers.” Evgeniya, an employee of an online technology store, confirmed that there haven’t been any dramatic changes: “during the first few weeks I thought I’d be out of job and contracts would be canceled, but then I calmed down. But I wish it ended

as soon as possible, I feel very sorry for people on both sides.”

This observation of little change in labor compensation and work conditions is also relevant for layoffs. Everyone says that there has not been much downsizing, if any, while some businesses have even hired new staff. Alexey, a technical professional in a Stavropol Krai company that deals in wholesale and retail distribution of sound equipment said: “no, there’s no change.

There was a planned recruitment campaign, although no hires beyond what was planned. Employees haven’t been affected.” Experts confirm that employers have stopped hiring but are not making staff cuts: “A typical reaction for periods of uncertainty is pausing recruitment. This was especially evident between March and May when demand dropped 8 percent from the previous year across the country.”

However, the Macroeconomic Analysis and Market Environment Trends Center predicts that, by 2030, about 3 million people working in retail and wholesale operations could have lost their jobs due to the developing “new reality”; they note that the current low unemployment rate is a temporary, short-term phenomenon. Layoffs were beginning already in May, when the Russian branch of AliExpress terminated about 40 percent of its employees and OZON let 20 percent of their workers go.

**“difficulties faced by the commercial sector this year are unheard of. Destruction of logistics chains, the necessity to quickly find new suppliers, inflationary pressure, decreasing effective demand: this is the first time the sector is experiencing all of these factors simultaneously.”**

Significantly, a large majority of respondents noted that all such changes had already happened during the COVID-19 pandemic, after which there was not much to cut down on: “My wages were cut earlier on the account of the covid crisis, so the war didn’t affect it, covid did,” said Andrei, who works in a wholesale company in Moscow. He added, however, that logistical problems have greatly complicated his work: “Large German companies stopped importing raw materials. Some companies shut down their business in Russia, laying off the staff.

That has made work more difficult, as we have to look for alternatives.” Vasily, who deals in online tire sales, reported similar difficulties causing “dramatic changes” in his work. It could take



weeks to receive goods due to logistical problems. Larisa Sergeevna, director of a retail chain specializing in bags and suitcases, confirmed that although there have been no layoffs, there was no potential for downsizing after earlier economic hardships: “We have already had hard times: during Covid and even before that, because it was never easy here in Russia. We had already reduced our staff as much as was possible to do without firing people: if someone left, we wouldn’t hire a replacement.”

Anastasia, who works in a Saint Petersburg bookstore, also said that there has been no downsizing or cuts in wages or bonuses. The management has cut other expenses instead and has slightly increased prices. It was the price change that made an impact on the staff’s everyday operations: “It was a significant increase, several hundred items were reevaluated each day, every item represented by dozens of copies that you had to look for around the store. This was a serious change in the staff’s normal routine: a lot of multitasking. At some point, there was so much of it that we decided to stay for the night at the store in order to do at least a part of it...”

Even western companies’ shutdowns did not come as an immediate disaster for their Russian staff. According to Pyotr, who is employed at Samsung’s brand store, “some stores were closed and everyone was paid wages only.

Bonuses came back later, and incentives were optimized, but revenue dropped anyway. That’s because purchasing power decreased. Some stores were reopened. I guess we got off cheap.”

Things have been different in large chain stores, already notorious for poor working conditions and quick staff turnover. “Cashiers, loaders and everyone else had their wages cut. The cuts were substantial,” Alevtina, a cashier at a SPAR store in Moscow, said, “ten thousand roubles or so, which is about 10 percent. Three or four were laid off out of a hundred, but that’s not that many.”

Cuts in bonuses and an increased workload were also reported by Viktoria, managing doctor of a veterinarian pharmacy in Krasnodar Krai, and Daria, a clerk at an upscale fashion store in Moscow, who also noted that her bonuses were now paid under the table while penalties were introduced for failing to meet performance targets. Daria confessed overcharging one of her customers by a few thousand roubles in order to meet her targets amid dwindling sales.

Overall, commerce seems to have worked its way through the first challenges of the war, the sanctions, and the exodus of western businesses. Although demand and purchasing power have somewhat contracted, Russians have not stopped buying commodities,

especially food. Besides, Russian commerce has already experienced sanctions and restrictions, as well as a major setback during the Covid years, so workers in this sphere are already accustomed to living frugally and with low expectations.

Many of those who lost their jobs managed to find new work quite quickly, especially as mass emigration from Russia has kept the unemployment rate low so far. However, significant, albeit not critical, worsening of working conditions has to be noted, as well as increasing complexity of operations.

## **Nobody wants to live under bombs**

There is no agreement in personal opinion about the war among sales professionals, in line with Russian society in general. While many disapprove of the “special military operation” to some degree, largely out of fear for their relatives and a desire to live in a peaceful developing country. Others believe that the war is a logical development of earlier events in international politics, while still others vocally support the war. A popular attitude is a disengaged opinion that “nobody knows the whole truth, although killing people is wrong,” or that “now that we have got ourselves involved in this, we have to win.”

Aleksei from Stavropol Krai put his and his colleagues’ opinion this way: “the reaction was neutral overall. We had it coming, so here we are.” Andrei from a wholesale company in Moscow also reported neutral to positive opinions about the war among his colleagues: “Most of my colleagues are women, and their response was neutral. Most are women over 40. They basically believe that, whatever is happening, you must support your dear government. They think that we owe it to the state to do whatever it tells us to do.”

Angelina, manager of a pharmacy in Moscow Oblast, takes a more radical stance: “I am a fighter myself, and I fully understand that we must fight against Nazism. Some of my employees used to live in the Donbas. Obviously they are in full support [of the ‘special military operation’].” She explained their support by the fact that they witnessed Ukrainian shelling: “nobody wants to live under bombs.”

However, a radical position like this is rather rare. “I took it very hard, because half of my brothers were there. Two brothers came back, but I still worry about the others,” said Alevtina. Her brothers live in the North Caucasus, home to an especially high number of military servicemen who went to fight in the war as soon as it started, although many of them were not enthusiastic.

For many in this region, contract



military service is one of the few ways to earn a decent salary by local standards. Rosa, the grocery store clerk from Moscow, feels deeply anxious about her loved ones and the war: “I was shocked. I want only peace. I fear for my children. My colleagues feel the same way.” Larisa, the retail chain director, echoed this opinion: “Of course I was shocked. I am a professional historian by training, and this is too similar to disastrous events in the past. I am also a religious person. ‘You mustn’t kill anyone’ is, for me, Orthodoxy’s most important principle. I am shocked, the business owner likewise. I feel that the future is being taken away from my country, two countries have lost their future and their present. I don’t need much anymore myself, but I feel bad for the children.” However, she does admit that although many of her colleagues support her opinion, employees do hold differing opinions about the war; arguments are common, and sometimes she uses her senior position in management to push her viewpoint through. “I get very emotional.

Yesterday, I found the poem ‘Where does the Motherland begin’ left on my desk. I love my Motherland, but this is just manipulation. I love it more than anyone, it’s just that I want the people in my Motherland to be happy and smiling, not crying over coffins and blaming the neighboring state.”

## Tension

According to interviewees’ direct responses, the beginning of the war did not significantly impact commercial workers at large, except in certain, already problematic segments. However, the “partial” drafting call on September 21 must have had more ramifications. Experts of the New Retail agency predicted significant changes to the labor market, including more damage to logistics due to the massive drafting of drivers, delivery men (because they are “young and strong”) and security guards. The experts also predict an unusual shift in recruitment toward women and the over-50s who used to have a hard time finding work. Immediately after the drafting call, demand for temporary workers spiked, including shop assistants, drivers and sales managers, an increase of 52 percent in October, according to the job portal hh.ru.

Yet, surveyed sales professionals have not registered any major changes related to the draft in their companies. Most of them know someone who has received a draft notice, but said that their colleagues have not been affected yet. In many companies, however, there were men who decided to leave the country before being drafted, and so replacements had to be found.

Some of our responders also noted a high level of anxiety related to current events that is interfering with everyday work. Overall, opinions about the draft

were divided similarly to the opinions about the war itself, with some subtle differences.

“Of course it was a major news topic that everyone discussed. There was some tension, but nobody received a draft notice, so eventually everyone calmed down. My colleagues wouldn’t be thrilled to go, but, if a notice came, I don’t think anyone would hide,” said Aleksei. Vasily took a similar stance to the mobilization: “I see the military operation as necessary evil. I decided that, if I get called up, I’ll go.”

“Nothing you can do about it, you do what you have to do, but I still fear for the children. It’s our country, we live here, so what can you do?” said Rosa the shopping clerk, agreeing to some extent with Aleksei and Vasily. She went on, “but I fear that my child goes and doesn’t come back. I have a son myself; thank God, he hasn’t been drafted yet and it’s been stopped for the time.”

Although personally ready to participate in the war, Angelina Sergeevna is not happy about the draft: “In my opinion, this is something that professionals should do. If there were martial law, we’d all go. We’re all women in our team, but we’re also medical workers and subject to call-up, and I think each one of us would go if notice came.”

In some companies, the draft call has led to intensifying military registration work. Andrei, who is opposed to the war and the draft, was forced to register with the military and receive a service card, which he successfully avoided. “They were nervous, like, why don’t you have a service card, when are you going to have one, go get it, we need to have you registered.

Security personnel and the lawyers were involved.” Meanwhile, other organizations tried to protect their employees from being called up: “People from the local administration demanded a list of all male employees. Our managers told them to shove it and drafted a response together with the lawyers. If that doesn’t help, as they say, they’ll fire everyone, meaning that people will be working unofficially to minimize exposure,” said data analyst Igor, who works in online commerce.

Ilona, the market vendor from North Caucasus, does not expect any good to come out of the draft either: “Business might get even worse now than it was before, people are going to move out. The city feels paralyzed now. It isn’t like everyone only talks about that at the market. There are some supporters, for sure, and some who object, like myself. I know some people reacted in a certain way, but it’s not something you speak out about.”



Many found the news about drafting hard to take on an emotional level, all the more so as friends and colleagues were leaving the country to hide from the war, just like after February 24. “I was crushed by the news about mobilization. I got really scared,” Anastasia shared.

“A second wave of emigration happened. There were new changes at work: many guys quit and left to other countries, some switched to distance working. I had a much harder time working. Every morning I struggled to get out of bed and spend another day working, not knowing what was coming next.”

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After the war began, when the first sanctions were introduced and western companies started leaving, many expected—in hope or in panic—a dramatic drop in the Russian economy,

rapid inflation growth, commodity shortages, and a decrease in purchasing power.

In the ninth month of the war, none of this has happened on the scale that was predicted. Commercial workers, already accustomed to hardship and uncertainty, insist that the war and the draft has not make much of an impact on their situation. It is clear, however, that changes are happening, however slowly.

Everyone has to face new challenges as work is becoming more difficult, profits dwindle and business owners skimp on staff where possible. The evident rise in anxiety and depression does not foster an increase in productivity, neither does the societal split of opinions about the war. Lastly, although unemployment has been curbed so far by mass emigration and the “partial draft,” those effects can only be temporary.





David Humarian  
Andrey Shevchuk

# Wartime Gigonomics: Labor and State Capitalism in Russia

Since March 2022, international experts and economists have been trying to predict how deeply and quickly the Russian economy will collapse under the sanctions. Fortunately for people who live in Russia, these forecasts have yet to be quickly adjusted. And yet

at this point one can state that there is a noticeable decline in industrial production, exports, and consumer demand. How will the impending crisis affect the most progressive sectors of the economy, those that are deeply integrated into the new international division of labor?



Experts usually see Russia's economic model as heavily dependent on fossil fuels and highly uneven in industrial development. These are not separate issues, though. Prioritizing growth in the strategic sectors of the economy proved effective in the early stages of the formation of Russian state capitalism. The same process threw the less profitable sectors far behind in terms of technology and labor productivity. However, there have been occasional success stories in this unbalanced development model.

With its IT services and digital platforms, the Internet industry was undoubtedly one of these successes. The Russian middle class has traditionally prided itself on the quality of digital infrastructure in the service sector (banking, retail, online consumer services). Hundreds of thousands of gig workers of various skill levels work for the massive online consumption industry in wealthy metropolitan areas. Regardless of their qualifications and the services they provide, all of them are united by employment on online platforms that offer flexible working hours combined with precarious employment.

The digital platform economy in Russia (as elsewhere in the world) turned out to be quite resistant to economic shocks. The coronavirus pandemic boosted profits and the share rates of digital companies. The platforms also absorbed the workforce freed by the COVID-19 layoffs. What effect has the war, unprecedented sanctions, and international crisis had on the Russian gig economy? How have these events

affected the those working for the digital platforms? What scenarios can we expect in the future?

## **How does the platform economy function in Russia?**

Over the past decade, foreign platform companies have failed to settle into the Russian gig economy, and in 2022 they left the country entirely. The fascination of the country's political elites with the Chinese experience of the sovereign digital economy is likely to determine the development of the Russian gig economy in the coming years. The current international isolation is just one more reason to support this model.

Currently, the Russian market is unequally divided between several local companies (up to twenty). The three most prominent brands in the market are Yandex, VK, and Sber. These corporations own the most popular online services and marketplaces, as well as ride-hailing, food delivery, and grocery markets. Outside Russian Big Tech, Internet companies compete in smaller and less diversified service markets and have tiny chances of surviving the crisis independently. Even before the war, mergers, acquisitions, and the rotation of assets between Internet corporations characterized the Russian technology market. Now the process is accelerating.

In the 2010s, oligopolies were still competing for the same markets. In recent years, however, they organized

to divide spheres of influence. For example, Yandex effectively monopolized online advertising, mobility services, and restaurant food delivery, eliminating “toxic” assets like news aggregators and the blogosphere. VK solely controls social networks and information resources previously owned by Yandex. In addition to joint assets with VK, Sber holds food delivery and ready-to-eat companies. So today, quasi-monopolies seem to have replaced oligopolies. In the labor-intensive sectors (for example, in food delivery and ride-hailing), the monopoly can likely transform into a monopsony soon, having no competition with other employers within the same category of services.

## **Interests of the State vs. State Interests**

The state plays an essential role in the turnaround of digital assets and establishing digital monopolies in Russia. For example, without meeting any resistance from the Federal Antimonopoly Service, Yandex monopolized markets, explicitly detaching itself from politics. However, the officials still retained the right to “watch over” the corporation via a supervisory board. The son of Sergei Kirienko, the leading curator of the Kremlin’s domestic policy, became the CEO of VK. Russian social networks are now reliably protected from the invasion of ideas hostile to the Kremlin. As Facebook and Instagram were blocked and Twitter slowed down in Russia, VK now has no competition. After the full-scale invasion of Ukraine,

Sberbank, a company with state investment, was immediately affected by sanctions and localized all businesses inside the country. The idea of “sovereignty” dear to Russian officials in all spheres of public life, whereby the state’s political interests may intersect with the real interests of the real society, will affect platforms as well.

In our view, the trend toward building state capitalism of digital platforms in Russia after the start of the invasion has become more apparent. It must be that the state’s interests in regulating Internet companies are driven by the attempt to gain greater informational control over its citizens. But an equally important goal is the regulation of gig workers in the form of gradual legalization of the quasi-informal labor market in order to fill the budget holes created during the war. The followers of libertarianism could envy the current Russian legislation in this area.

For several years in Europe and the United States, there have been heated scholarly and socio-political discussions about the position of digital platform workers. Some proposed recognizing digital platform workers as official employees while others offered to create a special “digital platform worker” status. Courts have received numerous lawsuits against the most prominent platforms. In the West, to some extent, the state opposes digital platforms, gradually limiting their power in the labor market. In Russia, on the contrary, the state, pursuing its fiscal interests, liberally regulates the gig economy and



employment on the digital platforms. We are witnessing a formation of a strong alliance between the state, capital, and consumers against workers.

## **The Liberal Legalization of the Informal Labor Market**

According to the estimates by market analysts, 1.7 million workers in Russia have listed digital platforms as their primary job, and up to 15.5 million people have had occasional or regular part-time jobs on digital platforms by 2022.

Although one could legally register self-employment in Russia, most gig workers did not have legal status (e.g., sole proprietorship), did not sign contracts, and did not pay taxes. Thus, in the last decade, among the freelancers who took job offers for remote work, only up to 12-15 % regularly signed formal contracts.

The ride-hailing and delivery markets have developed a model of indirect hiring through middlemen: companies or individual entrepreneurs enter into a partnership agreement with the platforms and then hire workers with or without a contract. In this way, platforms avoided a significant tax burden and possible inquiries from the regulatory authorities.

In recent years, however, the state has made efforts to legalize self-employment: from 2019, workers

can register as self-employed with meager tax rates (4-6%) through a simplified application. In contrast to previous attempts, the initiative has had some success: to date, more than 5.5 million people have registered as self-employed.

The state is legalizing the informal sector by liberalizing the employment system. At the suggestion of the tax authorities, platforms have started to work directly with the self-employed, bypassing the mediators. Following its fiscal interests, the state is not much interested in labor rights and the social status of platform workers. Public and scholarly discussions of this issue barely exist, and there have been few lawsuits against platforms regarding workers' conditions and rights.

In today's Russia (as in many developing countries), platforms can become a powerful tool for legalizing the informal sector. In the first stage, the state seeks to establish accounting and taxation of the self-employed. Then the platforms start to function as tax agents, independently calculating and collecting taxes from the employee. Finally, the "whitewashing" of the sector is followed by an increase in the tax burden on workers. Forming a liberal regulatory regime of the "sovereign" gig economy is undoubtedly a pessimistic scenario, primarily for workers.

# The Working Class in the State Capitalism of the Platforms

Platforms claim their workers are individual entrepreneurs with broad professional autonomy who decide where, when, and how much they work. “You will work as a small entrepreneur, an independent business all in one person,” the statement accompanied the employment of one of our informants at a popular grocery delivery service. As one can easily guess, both the “small entrepreneur” and the “one-person independent business” have to take full responsibility for life, health, income, and any financial and production risks that come with work.

Gig workers can benefit from flexible hours but are more vulnerable than their full-time corporate counterparts. 2022 has changed little in the balance of forces in the market, except that there are far fewer opportunities to find a well-paid job after large foreign manufacturers have left Russia. The share of non-standard employment in large cities will probably continue to grow due to a shift of workers from the industrial to the service sector. In addition, the accelerating crisis will force companies to reduce pay rates for full-time employees. Many skilled workers will turn to platforms in pursuit of regular part-time work while maintaining their primary occupation (1). Therefore, a set of issues related to the legalization of gig workers and working conditions on platforms will sooner or later be on the public agenda.

There is no doubt that today platform workers are excluded from national social security systems, including unemployment benefits, health insurance, and pensions. They are not protected by labor law that sets standards for working conditions, including working hours and compliance with health and safety requirements. Finally, gig workers cannot unionize or go on strike.

In the West, the political debate around the platform economy centers on the issue of legal employment for gig workers, who now, in fact, are concealed employees, but without the right to social benefits, health insurance, redundancy bonuses, etc. Due to Russia’s massive political anabiosis, such public discussions are absent. As there is almost no contestation of different positions on this issue, it is difficult to understand the position of the Russian platform precariat in large cities, where it is most massively represented. According to what workers say in private, at this stage, the trajectory of the discussion here would probably resemble the American case if not for the overall political situation.

A 16-year-old Yandex courier values, above all, the flexibility of working hours, which allows him to combine his education with a steady income:

“I chose Yandex simply because of the schedule. I can come home after school, have a meal, get ready, and go to work for as long as I want.”



Middle-aged workers have a similar sentiment regarding precarious employment. One could expect that the demand for stable jobs also should be accompanied by the demand for long-term planning of life and finances. However, that is not the case:

“I earned enough for the vacation and decided to rest, so I left for a week. I have money.”

The absence of this kind of demand can probably be explained by the state of the labor market and the quality of jobs, especially in the low-skilled segment. Comparing gig employment with other available options leads many workers to conclude that they would lose considerably more than they would gain if they switched to more stable jobs.

“Couriers are paid well at Yandex and Delivery. Because if you work as a courier anywhere else, 20 thousand [rubles] a month is what one can expect at best. Here they pay a lot more.”

In addition, only a few have been happy about the timid attempts by unorganized unions to pressure major platforms to give workers a choice between stable and flexible employment. If the political campaign is successful, workers do not expect their conditions to improve. They doubt it will result in the reduction of corporate profits but instead in lower pay rates and fewer bonuses:

“First of all, there will be less free time; <...> we will have to work minimum hours required by law; <...> the couriers’ wages will be cut in half. <...>

there will be deductions [to the Russian Pension Fund]; <...> an average salary will be around 40,000 rubles. In comparison, now you can work well and make 100 thousand rubles.”

This is not a groundless concern. Due to the economic crisis driven by the unprecedented sanctions, the outflow of investment and consumers from the megacities, and the lower solvency of the population as a whole, the predictions may be accurate. Numerous studies also confirm the trend: Russian employers tend to retain staff in times of crisis by generally reducing wages and manipulating the fixed and variable parts of the workers’ payment. In other words, by gaining official employment, gig workers risk getting an unstable wage, with lower rates and no flexibility in the schedule.

## **Unions and Collective Actions of Gig-workers**

The organized protection of workers’ interests via unions and collective bargaining was an essential element in the institutionalization of class conflict in industrial society and contributed to the formation of the welfare state.

In contrast to typical mass-production industries, decisive structural factors inherently limit the potential for unionization in the gig economy. The decentralized production and individualization of labor, the lack of collectivity at work, the social heterogeneity of workers and their interests, and the legal vulnerability of the informally employed and migrants

impede large-scale collective action.

Despite the ban on strikes, Russian gig workers have already organized more than 1271 protests (primarily in the delivery and mobility industries(2)). Some of them involved more than a thousand workers at a time. Official trade unions backed these collective actions and helped gain supporters and media coverage. Besides strikes and demonstrations, other forms of struggle included coordinated activities online and various manipulations with the platform apps (for example, drivers simultaneously logged out of the ride-hailing app during peak hours).

Platform workers organized collective actions on the go as modern Russian history does not have a tradition of independent unions. Platform workers' protests sought to attract media attention and gain public coverage of their problems, demanding concessions from the de facto employer (not the mediators). As a rule, a narrow informal circle of activists coordinated and carried out actions. Still, in most cases, the number of journalists at the protests exceeded the number of protesters, usually limited to a few dozen.

But even these strategies have been progressively hampered by political constraints, especially after the outbreak of war. First, as the state control of the media rapidly increased in 2022, no independent publications were left, and any political content, including the coverage of grassroots protests, was censored. Under these conditions, workers are effectively deprived of their primary tool of

struggle, public awareness of the problems of platform employment.

Second, the state politicized and criminalized collective action in the labor sphere. Although workers usually did not make overt political demands, security agencies began classifying any grassroots collective action as political. The above-mentioned is not unique to labor relations but describes everyday life under authoritarianism, quickly becoming a dictatorship. One can see it clearly from the case of Kirill Ukraintsev, the head of the Courier union, one of the few organizations of platform workers in Russia. In April 2022, Kirill was arrested and charged with repeatedly violating "the established procedure for organizing or holding meetings, rallies, demonstrations, marches, or pickets" (Article 212.1 of the Russian Criminal Code). He remains in prison to this day. Ukraintsev's case is an important precedent, effectively criminalizing any labor protests and making their prospects in the current environment highly unlikely.

[1] And this may result in uncontrolled supply growth while there is a general decline in demand. In this situation, one would expect service prices to fall, but platform pricing algorithms are far from transparent to the outside observer.

[2] The standardization of labor and the ability to be physically present at formal and spontaneous worker gatherings facilitates collective action in these sectors.



**The state politicized and criminalized collective action in the labor sphere. One can see it clearly from the case of Kirill Ukraintsev, the head of the Courier union, one of the few organizations of platform workers in Russia.**





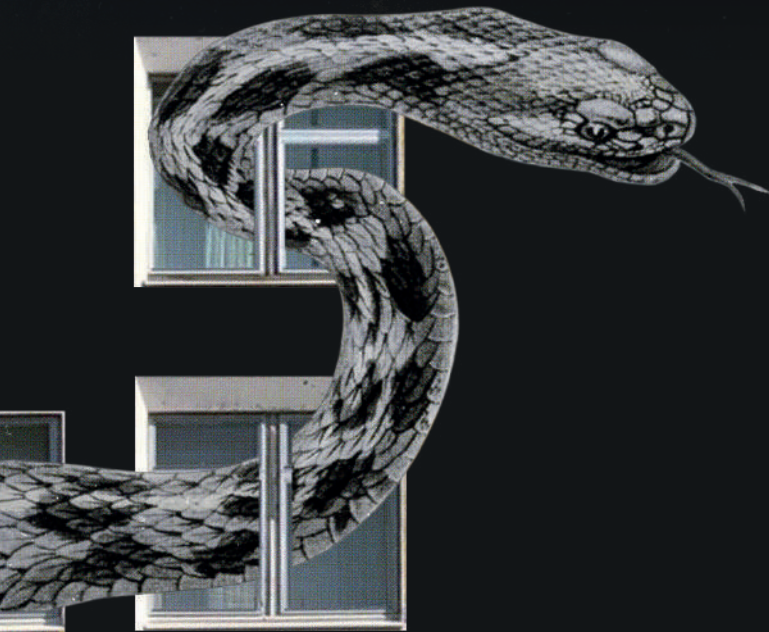


# “The Very Fact That This Class Exists Is Annoying”: Recent Developments in Russian Schools

Aleksander Pokrovsky

Russian schools are far from being uniform, which makes it difficult to describe the situation of school workers in general terms. Therefore, in this article I'll try to cast light on those aspects of secondary education that I've personally encountered since

February 24th as a teacher and labor union activist in Moscow. As a key social institution, the school is reflective of the conflictual processes underway in the country more broadly. Violence, bullying, petty despotism and spineless submission, arbitrariness, stupidity, incompetence — these are common problems for the modern school and are, in many ways, also at the heart of this war. Yet there are also encouraging sides to school life: knowledge, care, friendship, cooperation, solidarity, dialogue between generations, a sense of local community. These, I believe, could show us a way out of the social and political catastrophe that we are experiencing. I will return to this later, once I've described several narratives that characterize the situation of secondary education since the onset of the so-called “special military operation” in Ukraine.





## Standardization and optimization

Russian schools report to local authorities at a municipal and/or regional level; their funding is almost entirely dependent on local budgets. Determined by a local budget's size and structure, the resources available to schools in different regions — even in neighboring municipalities — obviously vary. This unevenness is exacerbated by the principle of per capita financing, in which a wage fund is determined by a given school's total enrollment, and each teacher's salary depends on the number of students in class. In many cases, wages are also impacted by school managers' arbitrary decisions regarding particular matters that factor into their calculations: these managers may, for instance, manipulate the workload and withhold or unfairly distribute incentives and rewards. On top of this, per capita standard rates of school funding remain at the same level for years without adjustment, and thus do not reflect the actual financing needs per student. As a result, school funding gradually loses touch with reality: at best, it stagnates, at worst, it diminishes in real terms.

The state regards secondary schools in purely functional terms, as an instrument that must dutifully serve its political and social objectives and,

to boot, be cheap to maintain. Accordingly, following the onset of full-scale war in Ukraine, demands to double down on patriotic education in schools has not been accompanied by a significant funding boost. The only measures have entailed raising class supervision bonuses to 5,000 rubles [less than €100] per month and allocating 15,000 rubles per school per month for educational outreach specialists (i.e. creating a new position, “Deputy Principal for Educational Outreach”, to be paid at this rate). Even by the standards of an average small-town school, none of this amounts to serious financing that could change the situation in a meaningful way.

In this context, both the public and education workers can only wonder at the Ministry of Education's innovations, most of which resemble hollow publicity stunts or attempts to please President Putin personally — for example, by launching a students' history movement, “Power in Truth”. Of particular note is the addition of courses like “Crimea and Sevastopol's reunification with Russia” and “the special military operation in Ukraine” to the standard curriculum in Russian History for high school students.

So far, the impression one gets is that the recent educational innovations' main objective is not a concrete change in terms of substance but rather

the standardization of teaching and learning processes. Amid serious political challenges and the worsening economic crisis, both of which are directly connected to the war in Ukraine, the Russian state intends to make secondary education as uniform as possible, which would in theory make it easier to control.

In this respect, the educational reforms implemented in Moscow in the early 2010s offer a paradigm for today's officials. The reforms were championed by the then chairman of the Moscow Government Department of Education, Isaak Kalina, who notoriously compared students to gherkins that need to be pickled by the school system in a standardized fashion. In Moscow, this regularization was an almost complete success, flattening erstwhile diversity and whittling the system down to just two kinds of institutions: prestigious public schools that enjoy some circumscribed autonomy, and all other schools that must submit to any and all demands without question.

Something similar to this model is now, apparently, envisaged for all schools across Russia. But there is one catch: money. The state does its best to avoid investing in the education system, especially in mainstream public schools. Kalina's authoritarian standardization in Moscow necessitated some increases in per capita funding for regular schools, thereby mitigating

the reforms' negative consequences with an additional cash injection. In most regions of the country, public secondary schools rank extremely low in leaky local budgets.

## Rallying round the flag

September 1, 2022 heralded two innovations by the Russian government: a weekly, solemn ceremony of raising the national flag (for which imposing flagpoles were installed on school grounds in Moscow) and a special new class, pompously entitled "Important Conversations", mandatory every Monday. To illustrate how students and teachers have responded to these ideological interventions, I'll cite several examples from school life this past autumn.

One of the episodes was at a mathematics-focused high school in Moscow, which I recently visited on a colleague's invitation. Two senior students, a boy and a girl, were sitting in the school lobby, reading the classic dystopian novels, Orwell's 1984 and Zamyatin's *We*, for everyone to see. This act was the students' response to being assigned to flag raising duty on the first day of the new school year. In this school, classes raise and lower the flag on a rotational basis, so it was going to be a few months before these Orwell readers would have a chance for another escapade.



Also worthy of a mention is an account by a form master from a different Moscow school, whose class was assigned to officiate the flag raising ceremony for the whole school year: “Only a few students were willing to participate in raising and lowering the flag. And yet these students’ eagerness to do it was somewhat unsettling. They were very upset that the ceremony would not involve a marching drill.”

When they lowered the flag right outside the classroom window where

I teach on Fridays, the scene attracted a great deal of attention from my students — I even had to interrupt the class for a few minutes (unlike during the recent solar eclipse). It’s not the flag’s movement that primarily interests the students, of course, but the ceremony’s participants: the way they stand upright, lower the flag and solemnly carry it back to the school building. It’s hard to say how successful the ceremony is in inspiring patriotic feeling. Rather, I’d venture that the raising of the flag is perceived as a demonstration of the state’s power





to compel obedience: no matter what our personal opinion is, we, both students and teachers, are obliged to comply and have no other option. In this sense, an experience of any kind of visible resistance to the ceremony is extremely important today.

## “Important Conversations”

As of this September, each school week starts with a newly introduced extracurricular class, “Important Conversations”, whose weekly topic is approved by the Russian Ministry of Education. Many school students aren’t exactly thrilled by the new class. My student, Kirill, said that, “although teachers make an effort to make the class informative and worthwhile, the very fact that it exists is annoying”. Kirill thinks that, by introducing the subject, the government is blatantly meddling in schools’ internal affairs.

Some of the topics for “Important Conversations” are hardly compelling for students on a Monday morning: it’s unclear, for example, how to capture students’ interest by discussing the meaning of recently introduced holidays like National Unity Day or the Day of the Elderly. Equally unattractive is the lesson plan for the topic titled “We are different, we are together!”, which invites the children to discuss how the “historical

experience of intercultural and interfaith connectedness” serves to “reinforce Russian statehood”. Granted, there’s no doubt that intercultural communication is a highly relevant topic: rising social inequality often assumes the form of ethnic segregation. A stark example of such segregation is the outrageous existence of separate “gypsy classes” in many Russian schools. Sadly, the officially recommended guidelines for preparing and holding this “important conversation” include no mention of this or other relevant problems that students may actually encounter, which would be worth talking about.

Written in officialese, the lesson plans for these “Conversations” show no evidence of the state’s trying to help schools to address pressing issues in education, nor do they offer any tools for solving everyday disputes and conflicts, all too often underpinned by ethnic differences. Moreover, should a teacher make the decision to have a frank conversation of this kind, it’s unlikely their immediate superiors would support or appreciate the effort. However, some class supervisors, including those opposed to the war, have responded positively to the introduction of “Important Conversations”. Now they finally have time allocated for convening the whole class to discuss societal problems. Dialogue is unquestionably something that’s in short supply in all Russian schools.



The state is not exactly trying to refashion the secondary education system according to its political agenda, transforming it into a fine-tuned propaganda machine. Rather, the strategy is constantly increase pressure on schools by way of selective repressions, ideological interventions, endless inspections and compulsory bureaucratic reports. “Important Conversations” is a salient example of how this strategy is being implemented and how it works in real life. The new lessons have no real substance in terms of education but rather amount to pure violence, the purpose of which is to demonstrate to the children how their teachers are compelled to obey the demands of the state, thereby instilling obedience in the students themselves.

## Propaganda at school

Reflecting on teachers’ role in propagating ideology recalls the famous quote that it was Prussian history teachers who won the 1866 Austro-Prussian war (the quote is sometimes falsely attributed to Bismarck himself). The authorities would probably be happy to have such teachers in Russian schools but for parents it’s the stuff of nightmares. Fear that their child will be subjected to propaganda is a reason many parents cite when they explain their decision to leave the country or to have their child transferred from a public to a private school (or even to switch to homeschooling). This isn’t unfounded,

as militaristic propaganda is definitely present in schools. However, my experience of talking to teachers and parents suggests its main source remains television and other media.

School propagandists are, most often, a special breed of teachers who might be inclined to reenact something from a tv show like “60 Minutes” or “Tonight with Solovyov” during class. They didn’t learn this at the teacher’s college, nor at career enhancement training. They likely cultivated this skill themselves; some have a natural talent. This type of teacher isn’t all that common in contemporary Russian schools, since, strange as it may seem, there’s no extra salary for propaganda of this kind. The state makes no special effort to attract its ardent supporters to educational work: it’s far more interested in people who can take on additional responsibilities, supervise a class or two, fill in reports, and actively participate in organizing elections. In some particular regions, teachers have also been obliged to work at the Student Games construction sites (as in Tatarstan) or to undertake door-to-door surveys of school students to gather data (in Orenburg and Nizhegorodskaya Oblast). The currently existing school system sees the ideal teacher as someone who bows to its demands: a cog in a machine, not a soapbox orator. A teacher unwilling to partake in state propaganda can easily avoid it by sticking to their primary responsibilities, as there’s no one else to do all the required work.

## Do teachers need a draft exemption?

The military draft in September of this year impacted Russian schools and their employees in different ways. In some villages in Bashkortostan, teachers were assigned to distribute draft notices before they began receiving call-up papers themselves, according to one school worker, Airat, who fled to avoid the draft. Anatoly, a teacher in Sakha (Yakutia), who was likewise forced to leave his native republic, also reported the drafting of teachers.

Male teachers began disappearing from Moscow schools as well. My colleague Oleg, who ended up in Tashkent, said that everyone was surprised when he showed up in his school on September 28, a week after the draft was announced: “Why are you still here?” The principal was the only person who didn’t urge Oleg to leave and, on the contrary, tried to persuade him to stay. In fact, unlike in many other cities and villages, teachers in Moscow were not drafted on a massive scale, and principals managed to help those employees who did receive a notice. Now that the draft has been ostensibly fulfilled, official draft exemptions are being prepared for Moscow school workers. Does this mean Moscow

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teachers won’t be affected by the next wave of mobilization? No one knows for sure.

It’s still unclear how severe the staff shortage is in schools but several Telegram chats for teachers who’ve left Russia list thousands of members. Some have decided to remain overseas for the time being and are looking for work abroad, while others have taken unpaid leave to wait out the draft in one of the countries associated with the current Russian exodus. Entire communities of teachers have formed in Central Asian cities. Tashkent is an especially popular destination: meetings of Russian teachers are held there on a regular basis, while local schools have been able to compensate for labor shortages by hiring new immigrants, according to Dmitry, one of the school principals.

There was a discussion recently on an anti-war online group for teachers about whether the community should push for draft exemptions for school



workers. Some members of the group pointed out that a call to exempt teachers from being mobilized might appear to be a justification of the war: “we’re not against it, we just want teachers to be kept out of it”. Others insisted that the fewer resources the Russian army has, the better, and campaigning for exemption is also a form of anti-war resistance.

Meanwhile, fighting for labor rights at the workplace remains as relevant as ever. Members of the Teachers’ Labor Union say that current events have led neither to the growth, nor to the diminishing, of labor rights organizations. By necessity, teachers do keep cooperating and defending their rights across the country.

## **Resistance is possible**

The past several months have witnessed at least several dozen scandals sparked by teachers’ openly anti-war statements in class. The scandals typically involved students secretly recording their teachers and publishing the recordings online or handing them over to their parents, who then complained to the principal or to another authority. These anti-war statements have often led to the teachers being fired, which is then publicized in the media. These cases starkly illustrate the vulnerability of teachers with anti-war views, especially where there is a conflict with a student,

who can seize on an opportunity to take revenge for the teacher’s perceived high-handedness or for poor grades, or take action simply out of class hatred towards school workers.

Luckily, we have not yet heard of literature teachers being fired for their analyses of Leo Tolstoy’s anti-war prose or for discussing Leonid Andreyev’s *The Red Laugh*, nor have there been any known instances of punishing social science teachers for their discussions of ethics, humanism or international law, or condemnations of war as a means of resolving international political conflicts. On the contrary, there are plenty of photographs on social media showing doves and peace slogans pasted over walls in school hallways.

Right now, it feels more important for many teachers, myself included, to impart values of humanism and justice to our students rather than to pass a judgement on a particular political event. However, sometimes it is precisely this values-based approach that calls for us to speak out about current events in frank and categorical terms. Unfortunately, to be able to do so, one has to be confident that none of the students would use such statements to compromise the teacher. Expressing opinions and fostering anti-war attitudes in students is doubtless an element of resistance. In the current

authoritarian system, every act directed against this war of conquest will weaken the hegemony of militarism and of putinism. By being honest in their work, teachers can make a contribution by bringing up a generation that won't rush headlong to the military recruitment office to become occupiers of a neighboring country.

No less important is to continue to foster cooperation between teachers at their workplace, so that they can defend their basic interests: a respectable salary, decent working conditions and academic freedom. The logic of war means devouring the entire country's economic, human and moral resources for the sake of





a senseless delusion. In this sense, a consistent anti-war stance calls for us to reclaim these resources for ourselves, which should be directed towards solving Russia's most serious social problems, including those found in schools. This is why, in spite of all the difficulties, the need for social and labor action feels as urgent as ever.

## What comes after the war?

Educational reform could be among the ways out of the catastrophe into which the war has plunged Russia. Using revenue from commodity exports to

invest in the creation of a humane, proficient mainstream school system; spending money on training teachers, the repair of school buildings; establishing a system of social, educational and psychological support for students — all of this would give Russian society a chance to solve its fundamental problems and heal the wounds inflicted by the senseless war.

It is for good reason that members of the educational community have, for decades, insisted on the principle of school independence. It is the internal freedom of the school as a community that sustains it as a place where children can find trust and safety.



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