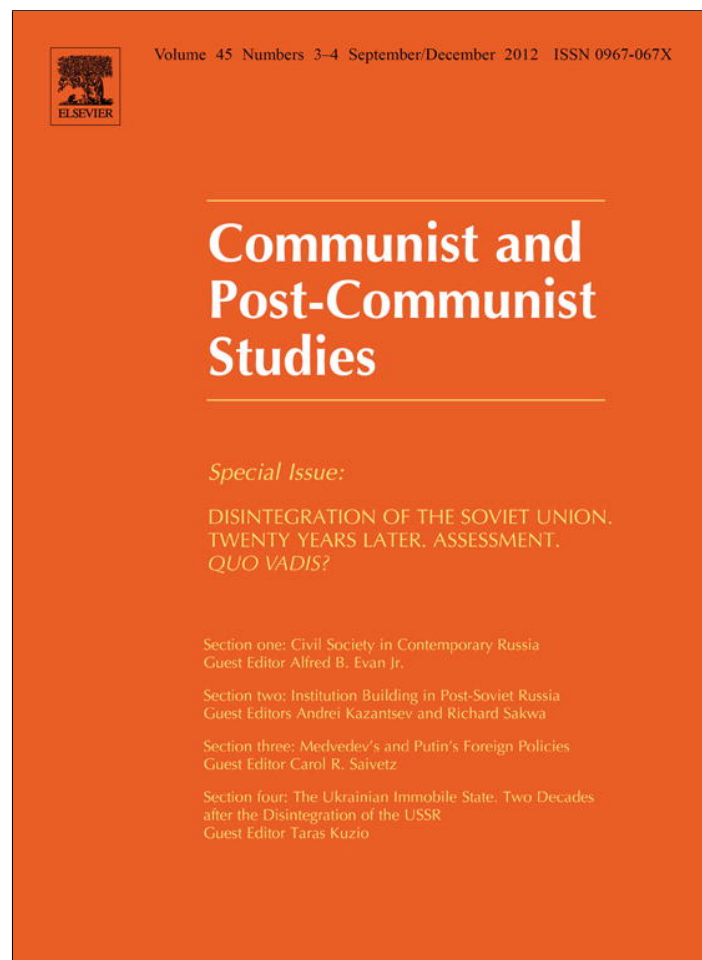


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## Russian labor: Quiescence and conflict

Elena Vinogradova<sup>a,\*</sup>, Irina Kozina<sup>a</sup>, Linda Cook<sup>b</sup><sup>a</sup> Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russian Federation<sup>b</sup> Brown University, USA

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## ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explain the characteristics and internal mechanisms of protest activity and solidarity among Russia's industrial workers over the past two decades. Both academic discussions and officials' attitudes toward protests prove contradictory. Even in periods of increase, labor activism has remained limited. Yet authorities continue to show concern about real and potential discontent, while academics puzzle over the dominance of quiescence as well as the reasons for sporadic activism. The research presented in this article advances our understanding of both: the limits of protest, and the causes, forms and goals of Russian labor's periodic collective activism. We rely on a combination of available statistical and recent survey data to try to resolve the paradoxes of labor's quiescence and conflict, as well as elites' neglect and concern.

The research finds changes in patterns of labor activism over the two decades. During the 1990s, most strikes were limited, defensive, managed, or desperate in character. In Russia's recovered economy, from 2006 a qualitatively different, "classical" pattern of strikes and labor relations emerged. Workers' collective actions mainly affected large, profitable industrial and transnational enterprises and took the form of "normalized" bargaining and conflict between labor and management. With the 2008–09 recession workers returned to the defensive strategies of the 1990s, protesting wage cuts and factory closures. Survey research from 2010 shows workers to be almost evenly divided between groups with positive and negative attitudes toward solidarity and bargaining.

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This paper contributes to explaining some of the characteristics and internal mechanisms of protest activity and solidarity among Russia's industrial workers from 1990 to the present. Academic discussions about issues of labor activism in Russia, including both perceptions by society and attitudes of authorities, are in important respects contradictory. On the one hand, even in periods of relative increase in the scale of protests, labor activism has remained limited, and for this reason it has not become either a major research field for social science, or a threat to overall social stability. None the less, researchers have paid attention to this topic, discussing both the puzzle of labor's quiescence, and causes for sporadic protests. Russian state authorities have continued to show concern about real and potential workers' protests. Their concern is evident in the very severe limitations on workers' strikes that are imposed in the 2002 Labor Code, and also in the active responses of top state leaders to the protests that do occur.

So what is going on? The research results presented in this article constitute an attempt to advance our understanding of the patterns of labor protest in Russia through the past two decades. While limits of objective statistical information do restrict the possibilities for theoretical analysis, especially for the 1990s, we rely on a combination of available statistical and recent survey data to try to resolve the paradoxes of labor's quiescence and conflict, as well as elites' neglect and concern.

\* Corresponding author.

Our study looks at changes in the patterns of labor activism over the past two decades. The first part considers theoretical explanations for the predominant quiescence and defensiveness of labor during the 1990s, as well as the exceptional 'islands' of activism in the coal basins and among public sector workers. We next examine the re-emergence of labor conflict in a 'classical' pattern of union organization and activism from 2006, followed by a return to defensive strategies of protesting wage cuts and factory closures with the 2008–09 recession. The final part of the paper reports the results of sociological research on workers' attitudes towards key issues of industrial relations, meaning solidarity, bargaining, representation, conflict resolution, relations with management, etc. This research was carried out in summer 2010 at three large Russian industrial enterprises within the framework of the Program of Fundamental Studies of the National Research University "Higher School of Economics". The research shows workers to be almost evenly divided between those with positive and negative attitudes toward collective bargaining with management, leaving the future of Russian labor activism uncertain.

## 1. The puzzle of quiescence

After decades of political suppression during the Communist period, Russian labor erupted with the massive miners' strikes of 1989 and 1991. More than 400,000 workers participated in these strikes. They affected major coal basins in Russia and Ukraine, with hundreds of thousands of workers participating, and led to the emergence of the Independent Miners' Union (NPG). Some scholars saw these events as the beginning of a powerful workers' movement in Russia, but from the perspective of the present it seems that the miners' strikes represented the height, rather than the beginning, of Russian workers' activism. The post-communist transition increased labor's organizational and political rights, but Russia's workers remained largely quiescent during the prolonged economic downturn of the 1990s, as well as the period of recovery and growth that followed. Labor unions participated in electoral politics, but had little effect. The Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia (FNPR), the main successor organization representing labor, led mainly symbolic protests, and by 2002 had allied with Vladimir Putin's 'party of power', United Russia. However, new strike and protest movements have emerged in Russia since 2006. The present article first focuses on the "puzzle of quiescence", that is, the general failure of Russian labor and its political activism through the 1990s and first years of the 2000s, then at the emergence of new types of conflicts since 2006.

### 1.1. Labor's role in the post-communist transition

The coal miners' strikes of the summer of 1989 constituted the first serious challenge to the Soviet regime 'from below'. The strikes seemed to reveal a great and unanticipated capacity for Russian labor's mobilization. The miners' grievances included poor working and living conditions, inept management, and the system of centralized economic control that they saw as robbing them of the proceeds of their labor. The Gorbachev leadership responded with substantial concessions to the miners' demands, but deteriorating socio-economic conditions and continuing unrest led to more strikes in the coal basins in 1991. The miners now added political demands that helped to bring the end of Gorbachev's leadership and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Oil and gas, transport, and some public sector workers also struck during this period. (Christensen, 1999; Connor, 1996; Crowley, 1997; Filtzer, 1994; Friedgut and Siegelbaum, 1990; Mandel, 2000).

As a result of the 1989 strikes, new grass-roots labor leaders and organizations emerged to challenge the monopoly of the FNPR, the successor to the Communist-era union federation. Besides the Independent Miners' Union (NPG), significant new labor unions were organized by air traffic controllers, longshoremen, and white-collar workers. Labor mobilization in Russia, Poland and Ukraine during this period led to expectations that workers' organizations would be important actors in the success or failure of the post-communist transition. Prominent specialists predicted that "trade unions ... would have to be beaten or tamed as politicians juggled the demands of simultaneous political and economic reform". (Kubicek, 1999, p. 83; Przeworski, 1991).

But developments failed to bear out these predictions. In spite of deteriorating economic and labor market conditions in Russia, strike movements spread mainly in the public sector, and even here, though strikes were markedly larger and more persistent than in other sectors, they were mainly defensive, demanding payment of wage arrears, and soon declined. Most workers remained formal members of the successor FNPR or quit unions altogether, while independent unions remained few and fragmented. (Clarke, 1995; Clarke et al., 1995; Gordon, 1995) Labor did not mobilize strongly to defend its collective interests, and, though many political parties emerged in Russia during this period, unions failed to form effective political alliances. By mid-decade Russia's political leaders retained little concern about a 'social explosion', while scholarly analysis focused on the puzzle of post-communist labor's weakness and passivity.

## 2. Why quiescence?

In 1992, the Russian government adopted a policy of 'shock therapy' reform that included price liberalization, deep cuts in state subsidies, and privatization of most productive resources. These policies, though pursued inconsistently and often incompetently by President Yeltsin and his various governments, proved largely inimical to the collective interests of workers. Economic and financial liberalization created a new class of wealthy oligarchs, while workers suffered declines in real wages, open and 'hidden' unemployment, mass dismissals and forced furloughs, and a severe decline in living standards. Late payment or non-payment of wages and pensions, that is, arrears, became widespread. Reform policies opened Russia to the

international economy through trade and capital regime liberalization, leading to large-scale capital flight and imports that competed with domestic production. Corruption, political paralysis, violence among new economic elites, demonetization and primitivization of the economy marked the decade. Russia's workers remained largely quiescent during this period. Between 1992 and 1999 only 1–2% of Russia's labor force took part in strike actions, and a smaller number of labor days were lost to strikes in Russia annually than in Western Europe. Labor exercised little influence in politics. Most of President Yeltsin's economic and social policies were damaging to the well-being of the vast majority of workers. (Crowley and Ost, 2001) Why did Russia's workers accept these developments with such little protest?

### 3. Theories of labor's quiescence

The political science literature offers four contending explanations for Russian labor's quiescence in the face of these policies: changes in the global structure of production; organizational and ideological legacies of communism; political opportunity structures and elites' interests; and cognitive obstacles to collective action. The explanations are not mutually exclusive, but each stresses different causal factors and mechanisms.

The first explanation blames changes in the structures of global production that coincided with the post-communist transition. Paul Kubicek (1999), a proponent of this explanation, argues that unions' strength generally was eroding because of several major changes: 1) decline of manufacturing industries that tended to be the most highly-unionized; 2) decline in the size of enterprises and their labor forces; 3) growth of the largely non-union private service sector; and 4) economic globalization, which advantages mobile capital over less mobile labor and intensifies competitive pressures in labor markets. All four of these changes can be observed in Russia's post-communist economy. As many Soviet industrial enterprises were downsized or closed, labor moved from manufacturing to service sectors, and from larger to smaller production units. Services expanded as a sector of the privatizing economy. Capital outflow greatly exceeded the inflow of foreign investment, and much of that investment was short-term. Labor supply exceeded demand. These changes in the structure of the international economy weakened labor's collective power even in Western Europe, where unions and tripartite bargaining were well-entrenched. In the post-communist states, globalization militated against unions' potential even to establish influence; in Kubicek's (1999) terms, by the time Communism collapsed, the 'Western sun was setting' on organized labor's power globally.

The second explanation blames post-communist labor's quiescence on the legacies of communism, particularly in production relations and ideology. Its proponents emphasize that Soviet workers relied on their enterprises not only for jobs and wages, but often for housing, medical care, social services, recreation and so on. Managers controlled and manipulated many benefits, mixing paternalism with control over workers. This common practice of distributing social goods through enterprises produced 'multiple strands of dependence' that tied workers to their enterprises, increased the potential costs of protests, and created vertical dependence of workers on management that undermined horizontal links and solidarity. The circumstances of workers differed from this norm in the few strike-prone sectors, mainly mining and public services. Mines, schools, and hospitals distributed relatively few in-kind benefits compared to most industrial sectors. So, according to Crowley's (1997) well-known study *Hot Coal, Cold Steel*, Russian and Ukrainian coal miners in some cities struck during 1998–1991 while steelworkers in the same cities did not, because steel mills distributed many in-kind goods and services to their workers in a discretionary manner that bound them to their enterprises, while coal mines distributed few.

The political science literature offers other versions of the 'legacies' argument. Ashwin (1998, 1999) seeks to explain Russian workers' 'endless patience' by studying demobilization in a formerly militant Kuzbass coal town. She finds that the struggles of everyday life during the mid-1990s produced alienation and workers resorted to individual survival strategies, resulting in a lack of collective action. Other scholars point to ideological legacies, arguing that the Soviet state had appropriated working class identity. The state's past use and abuse of the 'working class' label left real post-communist workers unable to forge an authentic collective identity, or to formulate legitimate collective interests. (Crowley and Ost, 2001) In a somewhat different vein, Filtzer (1994) argues that post-communist Russian workers had to re-form themselves as a class.

A third group of scholars point to political opportunity structures and interests to explain post-communist labor's quiescence. These analysts emphasize that Russian governmental elites had little interest in responding to workers, while union leaders, especially those in the FNPR, had little incentive (and probably little capacity) to mobilize the rank-and-file. During the 1990s Russia's government came to rely on opaque, often-corrupt relations with wealthy economic elites, rather than political and electoral support from broad social groups. Political parties proved too weak and short-lived to form effective alliances with unions. (Cook, 1997) Political elites grew increasingly insulated from societal pressures. At the same time, leaders of the main trade union federation (FNPR), relied on the government to keep their inherited property and control over social insurance benefits. (Davis, 2001) Besides, the FNPR had too little authority with workers to challenge the government or management, so it continued Soviet-era practices of cooperating with both these sets of elites to protect union leaders' prerogatives. Independent unions remained too small, weak and divided to empower labor. Christensen (1999) captures effectively the government's 'neoliberal neglect' of labor's interests during the Yeltsin period, and the resulting disillusionment of workers. Both Christensen (1999) and Kubicek (2004) argue cogently that organized labor forms a key part of the civil society that is essential for holding government accountable, and that labor's weakness and political marginalization in the first post-communist decade foreshadowed a poor future for democracy in Russia.

A fourth explanation for labor's quiescence emphasizes cognitive limitations, in particular workers' difficulty in assigning blame for their grievances, or figuring out who could or should redress them. In Russia's chaotic 1990s economy, with its

shifting mix of state and private ownership, hidden subsidies, barter transactions, and the opaque system of fiscal federalism in the public sector, workers often simply did not know who was responsible for unpaid wages and other problems. Confirming evidence for this explanation is found in a survey that was conducted by Javeline (2003a, b) at the depths of the wage arrears crisis in 1997–99. Javeline found that the vast majority of Russia's workers were unable to assign blame for their unpaid wages to any individual or institution, while the minority who could assign blame, including some public sector workers, proved much more likely to protest. Javeline argued that the widespread inability to attribute responsibility undermined labor activism. Political entrepreneurs might have compensated for this information gap, but they rarely tried in Russia during this period.

While quiescence predominated, Russia's workers and unions were far from entirely passive during the 1990s. Workers in the social sector, in healthcare and especially education, struck periodically throughout the decade. Unions also formed political and electoral alliances with a variety of political parties. Increasingly, though, sporadic, localized wildcat strikes and desperate tactics such as hunger strikes and hostage-taking came to characterize labor activism. In response to the 1998 financial crisis, miners organized 'Rail Wars' in which they blocked the Trans-Siberian and other major rail lines. (Gordon, 1995) At their most extreme, Russian labor protesters relied on tactics commonly used by the incarcerated and disempowered. Many of the strikes that did take place were 'directors' strikes', initiated and/or supported by managers or local administrators in efforts to extract resources from higher-level regional or federal governments. (Gimpelson and Treisman, 2002; Robertson, 2007) Renewed economic growth did somewhat alter this situation. After 2000 economic and social conditions for labor in Russia improved. And while the FNPR subordinated itself to United Russia and the Putin-Medvedev governments, acting largely to manage workers rather than to represent them, from mid-decade other types of leaders and activists emerged. (Robertson, 2007).

#### 4. The re-emergence of conflict

During the first decade of the 21st century, patterns of labor activism and conflict became more varied and complicated. The return of economic growth after 1999 brought improvements in the incomes and lives of both private and public sector workers, and several years of continued labor quiescence accompanied growth. From 2006, however, a new pattern of labor activism began to emerge, concentrated at large, profitable enterprises, and led by a more mature labor leadership that directed its grievances to managers rather than to the state. Though the 2002 Labor Code made it very difficult for workers to conduct legal strikes, there was nevertheless something of a 'normalization' of labor relations. With the sharp economic downturn in 2008, however, the pattern changed again. Strikes became less organized, more acts of desperation, with demands directed at both managers and government. These shifting patterns are discussed in more detail below.

#### 5. Industrial conflicts of the last decade: brief overview

Research in the field of labor activism in Russia proves a challenging enterprise, because available sources of information are fragmented and incomplete. There are two main sources of information about labor protests in Russia: official statistics provided by *Rosstat* (the Russian Federal State Statistics Service) and reports prepared by civic organizations. Unfortunately, none of the sources presents a comprehensive picture of labor activism. National statistics provided by *Rosstat* record only officially recognized strikes. Such an approach significantly limits the scope of statistical observation, as under regulations which came into force in 2002 (in the new Labor Code of the Russian Federation), a substantial part of the protests in Russia's industrial sector have actually been unofficial.<sup>1</sup>

Alternative sources of information on industrial conflicts are provided by a number of NGOs and labor unions, which continuously monitor protest activity in particular industries or regions of the country.<sup>2</sup> Their databases and analytical reviews summarize information on all types of protest activities, that is, strikes, workers' demonstrations, petitions, and others. The main problem with using these sources for professional analyses is that the figures presented in the databases are mainly obtained through newspapers and Internet reports, which are often inaccurate or incomplete. Coverage of strikes in various sources depends on editorial policy, other newsworthy events in the region that compete for attention and so on. In addition, the databases lack systematic information needed for determining the importance of disputes, that is, number of workers involved, duration of the dispute, number of work days lost, as well as for their classification, according to the result of the dispute and to the methods of settlement. Numerous limitations of information on labor protests prevent us from making precise judgments concerning the dynamics of the protest activism, but the data available do give a general idea of the scale and the character of the processes going on in this field.

<sup>1</sup> The regulations set in the new Labor Code are so restrictive that they actually prevent the exercise of the constitutional right of workers to strike. The procedures that must precede a legal strike in Russia are so complicated, and must start so much in advance, that they make strikes impractical. As a result, in many cases, workers go on unofficial strikes hoping to get a desired resolution of the dispute before the court qualifies their protest action as in violation of legal provisions. In many other cases protests take place in the form of "strike without strike": for example, large groups of workers simultaneously exercise their individual legal right to stop working if they are not paid for 15 days, or they go on "work-to-rule" strikes.

<sup>2</sup> The Institute for Collective Action – IKD ([www.ikd.ru](http://www.ikd.ru)) and the Center for Social and Labor Rights – CSLR ([www.trudprava.ru](http://www.trudprava.ru)) provide the most extensive information on industrial conflicts.

For much of the past decade, growing oil and gas revenues have raised the living standards of Russia's population, bringing desired socio-economic stability. Those were the years of high popular expectations and low civic activism, accompanied by toughening of the political regime. The new 2002 Labor Code of the Russian Federation was supplemented by new provisions which made Russian workers' right to strike both difficult and risky. «Кто сядет на рельсы, тот сядет на нары...» (“Those who try to sit down on rails will sit on plank beds.”)<sup>3</sup> This black humor by Vladimir Putin, referring to the “Rail Wars” of the 1990s was well comprehended by the workers and their leaders. (*Novaya Gazeta*, 2002).

Strikes of teachers, healthcare workers, librarians, museum workers and others, employed by state and municipal institutions (so called “*byudgetniki*”), which took place all over Russia in 2004–2005, stood out against the general background of stability during the “fat years”. (see *Table 1*) The Table provides accurate official information on this set of strikes, which were predominantly legal, organized by the FNPR. “*Byudgetniki*” strikes of the mid-2000s can be characterized as moderate “emphatic actions” aiming to attract attention to the problems of public sector workers. Though numbers of participants were impressive (See *Table 1*), the real impact of the strikes on performance of public education and healthcare institutions was not significant. The majority were one-day actions, accompanied by meetings and pickets. In most cases there were no real stoppages of work, and certain levels of services were provided by “teachers-on-duty” or within “clinic-on-strike regimes”. (*Zaitsev et al.*, 1998) Collective actions by industrial workers were overall very rare, and took place mainly at either public (state owned) or state subsidized enterprises.

To some degree, the limited character of the protest activity of education and healthcare workers was determined by ethical considerations: as both sectors are providing public goods, the workers were trying to find a reasonable compromise between group and public interests. But to a larger degree, it was a result of the leadership provided by education and health branch unions associated with FNPR – as noted above, the federation is known for its commitment to legalistic and bureaucratic forms of trade unionism and opportunistic behavior. This made the “teachers’ and doctors” strikes different from those in the industrial sector – manufacturing and transport – which were led by new independent labor unions. Most of the industrial conflicts during the first half of the decade took place at public (state owned) or subsidized enterprises, so they involved government as the “second”, not the “third”, arbitration party. They were spontaneous reactions of the workers to unusual levels of economic hardship, combined with a sense that the hardship was morally unjust. Lacking distinct leadership, they have not brought any significant changes to industrial relations. (*Kozina*, 2007, 2009; *Sobolev*, 2007).

## 6. 2006–2008 emergence of ‘classical’ strikes and labor-management bargaining

A new wave of industrial conflicts emerged with positive labor market developments in 2006–2008. (*Kozina*, 2009); The character of these conflicts differed markedly from the character of all the previous waves. In this new wave, strikes were no longer defensive reactions to extreme desperation. Rather, protest actions, including unofficial strikes, took place at a number of successful enterprises of the oil and gas sector, as well as manufacturing and food industries, where wages and levels of working conditions exceeded national averages. While most of the protests of the previous decade had been caused by wage arrears, and the workers’ demands were limited to forcing administrations to pay at least some parts of their earnings, strikes of the new (2006–08) wave were inspired by demands for decent wages and better working conditions, providing a decent life, as well as by a moral sense of justice. (*Kozina*, 2009) They were aimed at redistribution of growing enterprises’ profits, increasing the workers’ share, as expressed in the following quote by an AvtoVAZ labor union leader: “We would not mind our top managers driving luxury cars of world famous brands, as soon as all the other employees are able to afford to buy AvtoVAZ vehicles” (*Clarke*, 2005–2007).

A number of mass strikes, with “classical” types of demands and leadership, aimed at better wages and working conditions, took place during these years. Though *Rosstat* records present only isolated cases of strikes for this period (*Table 1*), even these look quite impressive: numbers of workers involved and duration of work stoppages increased dramatically. Large industrial enterprises, including some of the Russian branches of prominent transnational companies, appeared as centers of protests. The “short list” of the most important strikes includes: 2005–2008 – Ford Motor Company; 2006–2007 – oil and gas enterprises of Khanty-Mansiysk district (Siberia), which provide about 60% of Russian oil production; dockworkers of Tuapse (Black Sea) and St. Petersburg (Baltic Sea) ports; 2007–2008 – drivers of the Russian Postal Service; workers of AvtoVAZ, one of the largest Russian carmakers; *Heineken* -St. Petersburg; workers of locomotive depots of the Russian Railroads; miners and other workers of RUSAL, the world’s largest aluminum producer and others (*Kleman*, 2007, 2008). In terms of international, especially European, comparisons, the level of labor activism in Russia during this period should be considered rather low, but the very fact of its revival in the mid-2000s, as well as qualitative changes in industrial conflicts and strike patterns which took place in 2006–2008, are remarkable.

One of the most important of the workers’ demands from the mid-2000s concerned changes of remuneration practices inherited from Soviet times. For decades a worker’s monthly paycheck was comprised of two parts: a “constant” amount guaranteed by the labor contract, and a “flexible” monthly bonus with the amount depending on the manager’s evaluation of the worker’s performance. Gradual developments of remuneration policies, aimed at establishing more control over labor as well as at providing more flexibility for management, finally resulted in a situation in which the guaranteed part of workers’ paychecks shrunk significantly, often allowing more than 50% of the worker’s earnings to be easily cut. Increase of the

<sup>3</sup> Russian colloquial expression meaning “to go to prison”.

**Table 1**

Characteristics of protest actions 2000–2010.

Years	Number of striking organizations	Numbers of strikers, thousand persons	Number of strikers per organization, persons	Number of man/days not worked thousand	Number of man/days not worked average per organization
2000	817	30.9	37	236.4	289
2001	291	13.0	45	47.1	162
2002	80	3.9	48	29.1	364
2003	67	5.7	86	29.4	439
2004	5933	195.5	33	210.9	36
2005	2575	84.6	33	85.9	33
2006	8	1.2	149	9.8	1225
2007	7	2.9	414	20.5	2929
2008	4	1.9	475	29.1	7275
2009	1	0.01	0.01	0.1	0.1
2010	–	–	–	–	–

Source: *Rossiiskiy statisticheskii ezhegodnik (Russian Statistical Yearbook)* 2010, p. 170; *Rosstat, 2010 Russia in Figures*. 2011 <http://www.gks.ru>.

guaranteed part of remuneration was among the demands of the *RUSAL* miners, of Tuapse and St. Petersburg dockworkers, of workers from *Surgutneftegas*, *Raspadskaya* mine (*RBK Daily*, 2010), etc.<sup>4</sup> In addition to the demands dealing with wages, other issues appeared on the strikers' lists: safety, better working conditions, ethics of managers' behavior, workers' participation in management, restrictions on outsourcing and out-staffing, and, finally, protection for labor unions' activities.

Industrial conflicts of the second half of the past decade are notable for the change of the party the strikers were addressing, as well as for their organization. Previously workers' protests were addressed to authorities outside enterprises: to local, regional or federal government. They were often so-called "directors' strikes", supported or even initiated and organized by industrial or regional elites, who were using labor unrest to push for budget subsidies or other government funding.<sup>5</sup> The protest activities of the new wave remained within enterprises, and were directly addressed to employers as workers' adversary or bargaining partner in the conflict. The strikes were neither spontaneous, nor organized by the union bureaucracy as they had been earlier; the initiative for them came from the enterprise trade union committees.

Labor unions, which provided leadership, were mostly organizations of a new type, independent from the old FNPR organizations. Their strategic goals and demands were realistic and well-grounded from both economic and legal points of view. Union leaders' behavior was generally flexible and constructive: if enterprise management was ready for a dialog, unionists were not trying to win at any price, but tended to bargain in order to find a solution acceptable to both parties. Finally, unlike the strikes of the 1990s, the leadership of this period was free of any political influences and alliances with political parties.

## 7. Labor activism in the 2008 recession

The economic downturn of late 2008 interrupted this trend. The downturn caused contraction of employment and dismissal of workers, freezing or reduction of wage payments and social benefits, growth of wage arrears, etc. By the end of 2009 official unemployment (by the ILO's definition) had risen above 8%, with workers in single-industry or company towns especially at risk. Managers returned to the pre-1998 practices of enforced administrative leaves and shortened work days and weeks. These developments led to some increase in protest activity, mainly without legal status. According to the Center for Social and Labor Rights (CSLR), there were about 60 work stoppages in 2008, 106 in 2009, 88 in 2010, and 91 in 2011. In 2008–2009 most of the workers' collective actions turned back to defensive strategies. According to CSLR, the majority of protest actions were caused by wage arrears at enterprises where the economic situation worsened in the course of the crises; about a quarter of protests were caused by dismissals of workers. In many cases when production was decreased for economic reasons, work stoppages did not make sense, so meetings, pickets and demonstrations became more common. They were more often addressed to the government, and therefore "displaced from the enterprises' premises to the streets". (*Monitoring, 2008–2011*).

The most notorious events of 2009–2010 were protests of the workers of Altrac (a tractor production company in Rubtsovsk, Altai Region); *KD AVIA* (Kaliningrad airlines); the *Raspadskaya* coal mine; and especially the conflict in Pikalevo, Leningrad oblast. The crisis that led to the dramatic events in Pikalevo was caused by stoppages of production at three

<sup>4</sup> After a fatal accident and workers' protests at *Raspadskaya* mine, following a strong recommendation by Prime Minister Putin, all the major Russian coal companies signed a document approving addenda to the industry collective agreements for 2010–2012, raising the guaranteed part of miners' wages up to 70%.

<sup>5</sup> These practices, which were really important for a certain period of time, were studied by a number of researchers. One of the most comprehensive approaches to understanding them is presented by G.B. Robertson (2007), who proposed an elite bargaining theory of protest. It should be noted though, that after 2004, when direct popular elections of the regional governors were replaced by their presidential appointments, these practices were virtually eliminated from the regional–federal relations toolkit. On the contrary, the governors' careers and reappointments are very much dependent on their ability to monitor the protest potential and to prevent all kinds of unrest, including labor activism.

enterprises that provided employment to a large part of the town's population. These three enterprises constituted elements of a single cement production cycle, but belonged to different companies (owners). As the management of one of the companies, *Basalcement*, started reconstruction of the plant, production had to be stopped at the two other enterprises. One after another, all the three companies announced lay-offs of hundreds of their workers. Finally, Pikalevo's local central heating plant discontinued its services. After a number of meetings and conflicts of the workers' activists with local authorities, the townspeople blocked traffic on one of the busy highways, timing this action to the visit of Vladimir Putin to St. Petersburg. The resolution of the conflict was achieved under personal supervision of the Prime Minister, with concessions to the workers and chastising of management. Under the conditions of slow economic growth and uncertainty which followed in 2010–2011, workers' demands have remained quite limited. They deal more with defense of existing conditions: working places, wages and social benefits. But experience gained in the mid-2000s has not been forgotten.

Labor activism is at a crossroads. Many of the factors identified at the beginning of this article as contributing to workers' "quiescence" and failure of labor's mobilization – changes in the global structure of production; organizational and ideological legacies of communism; cognitive limitations to collective action and so on – are still in place. At the same time, though in some sense interrupted by the economic downturn, new trends, which changed the patterns of quiescence and dissociation, have emerged: more solidarity, more union leadership, more workers' self-identification as a party in bargaining with management and owners, and demands for decent wages and working conditions. (Greene and Robertson, 2008; Kozina, 2009) The prospects for labor activism and industrial conflicts in Russia depend on various economic and political factors. Workers' perceptions and attitudes, their solidarity and trust in rights defense institutions, their understanding of workers' role in achieving better employment terms – all are crucial for future developments.

## 8. The signs of new thinking in industrial relations?

Workers' perceptions and opinions on issues related to industrial conflicts were the focus of a sociological survey, which was carried out by the Institute for Social Development Studies, Higher School of Economics (Moscow) in the summer of 2010. This survey constitutes the third round of a broader longitudinal research project devoted to various aspects of industrial relations and human resources management at technically and organizationally advanced industrial enterprises of Russia. The research was carried out at three industrial enterprises and included a survey and a series of in-depth interviews. The survey was conducted with 935 employees representing all the main categories of personnel. The sample was comprised 3.3% of top managers, 5% of managers of lower levels, 25.6% of specialists (engineers, IT, finance, HR departments), 33.2% of workers of higher qualification levels, 31.6% of workers of lower qualification levels, and 1.4% of clerks. About a quarter of the respondents (25%) were less than 25 years old; 47% – between 31 and 49; 28% – 50 and older. In compliance with the general idea of the longitudinal research, the enterprises where the survey was conducted represent large, technically advanced and relatively profitable businesses. The first, *Leningradsky Metallichesky Zavod* (Leningrad Metal Works Factory) of St. Petersburg, also known as *LMZ*, is the largest Russian manufacturer of power machines and turbines for electric power stations. Founded more than 150 years ago, it is now a part of the *Power Machines* company, which unites seven enterprises producing equipment for thermal stations, nuclear, hydraulic and gas-turbine power plants. The second, *Permsky Motorny Zavod* (Perm Motor Factory - *PMZ*) produces aero-engines, gas turbines and gas turbine power stations, helicopter gear boxes and transmissions. The third, *LUKOIL*, Perm, is one of the leaders in production of petroleum products and petrochemicals.

Experiences of labor activism at these enterprises include a strike (at Power Machines in 2007) and workers' petitions addressed to administrations through labor unions, which exist at all three enterprises and are associated with FNPR. Power Machines has the experience of creating a new independent union, *Zashchita* (Protection) in 2007, which provided leadership in the strike and later associated with a union which existed earlier.

The questionnaires and interview guides included sets of questions aimed at gaining a better understanding of the respondents' perceptions and attitudes concerning:

- general vision of worker/management relations
- opinions on labor unions as well as on collective bargaining and collective agreements as institutions and instruments of representation
- perceptions of various methods of defending rights and resolving emerging conflicts
- opinions and perceptions concerning employees' solidarity.

Along with other factors – including the economic and political environment, the current situation at the enterprise and in the local community and management policies – these "proto-ideological" orientations of the workers have a significant impact on their social behavior at the workplace.

For years researchers in Russia and abroad have agreed that the most characteristic features of the Russian society as a whole were paternalistic philosophy and expectations; social atomization and individualism; indifference to civic activity; and lack of knowledge, skills and will in defending rights. All these issues are to a significant extent related to Russian labor. Paternalistic elements are still present in enterprises' social policies, maintaining a specific mixture of workers' gratitude and obedience. In addition to deep societal trends leading to atomization, at the enterprise level solidarity and collectivism are being systematically undermined by the widespread semi-formal and excessively flexible remuneration practices. It should



be also noted that independent labor activism is often suppressed and/or replaced by the official labor unions (FNPR), which are de facto being transformed into sorts of businesses providing a certain number of social services.

Recent developments in labor activism, especially involving large technically advanced enterprises, are supposed to be based on shifts in workers' perceptions, and at the same time to create a new social culture. The survey presented in this paper is one of the first attempts to look at the new trends in the context of conflict. The research program was designed to provide a picture of the respondents' divisions into two groups, characterized by opposite types of perceptions and attitudes, which we define as 'destructive' and 'constructive', eventually determining different types of social behavior. These two groups were distinguished as a result of our analyses of patterns of labor activism in Russia during the past two decades, as follows:

"Destructive" – characterized by frustration, distrust and extreme individualism – associated with potential transformations of "patience" into unpredictable "explosions" of protests, addressed to "everybody" or to the top leaders of the country, with no distinct strategy, leadership and solidarity;

"Constructive" – characterized by understanding of limits of antagonism/convergence of group interests, reasonable degree of trust and collectivism – in terms of conflict associated with organized behavior, leadership and solidarity, realistic goal-setting and strategies, ability to engage in constructive bargaining.

Our analyses of the survey data show that the frequencies of the two types of perceptions and attitudes are comparable, which means that, at least within the advanced sector of Russian industry, the new culture is significant enough to be noticed by management, government and civic movements.

Looking at worker/management relationships (Fig. 1), 43% of the respondents agree that, though "both parties are pursuing their own ends, cooperation is possible concerning particular issues" (a "yes and no" option). The group rejecting any dialog, responding "no" because "management and owners have their own objectives, and employees are seen only as a production resource", is almost the same size (39%). The group demonstrating the most optimistic vision, responding "yes", because "we are all in the same boat, nobody wants it to sink", – is relatively small (18%) and comprised primarily of managers (shop superintendents) and the youngest employees (less than 25 years old). Though in general the higher hierarchical levels (managers and engineers) have more optimistic views of cooperation than the workers, the difference is not dramatic (Fig. 2).

About half of the respondents are pessimistic about the employees' abilities to influence decision-making: 51% totally or rather agree that "administration's decisions are often unfair, but nothing can be done about that". Their opponents are less numerous (28%), but the group is quite large. (Fig. 3) The quality of communications between management and workers is almost unanimously considered unsatisfactory: 74% totally or rather agree that "management does not care about the workers' opinions". (Fig. 4) At the same time most of the respondents think that "...wages and working conditions would never improve if workers do not put pressure upon administration". (Fig. 5) Of all the statements included in our questionnaire this one got the strongest support of the respondents (78%). It is interesting to note that percentages of those who agree with it are practically the same in all groups of respondents, including top managers!

What are the best ways to deliver workers' demands to administration? "What institutions or persons can provide better protection of your rights and interests at your working place?" The most popular answer is myself (37%), which indicates the end of paternalistic illusions for a large group of workers, on one hand, and their lack of trust in institutions, – on the other. "My manager" (28%), "labor unions" (25%) and "active people working with me" (22%) are the other options. (Fig. 6).

Opinions on the ability of labor unions to protect workers' interests as well as on the protective potential of collective agreements divide the respondents into groups of comparable size. (Figs. 7 and 8). A large part of the respondents (44%) agree or rather agree to regard unions as institutions really defending and representing them; about 56% disagree or rather disagree; for the collective agreement the proportion is 41%/33%.

Addressing their unions is considered to be one of the best ways for individual or group conflict resolution by 37% of the respondents (at LMZ, where the workers have the experience of creating an independent union, this view is held by a somewhat larger part - 43%). Addressing administration and negotiations are seen as the best ways of conflict resolution by 61% of respondents, while addressing to authorities and protest actions, like strikes, pickets, etc. do not have much support. (Fig. 9).

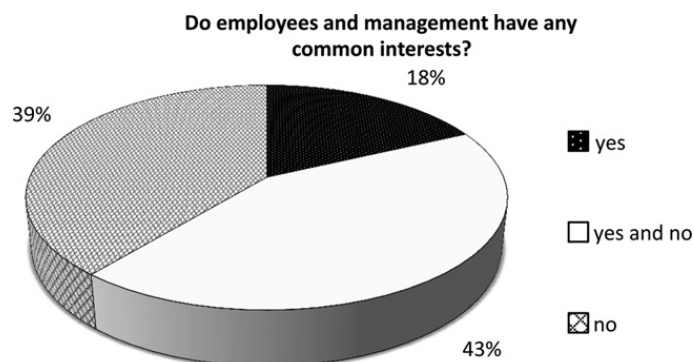


Fig. 1. Do employees and management have any common interests?

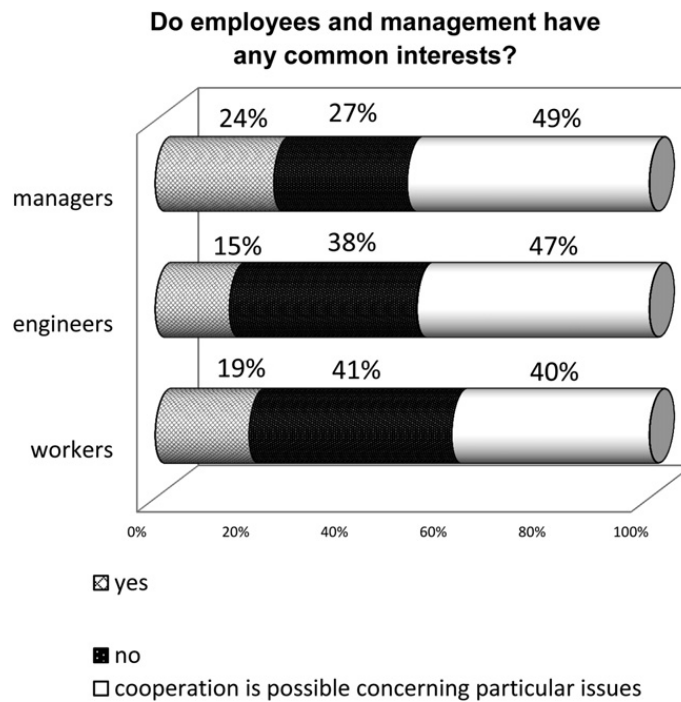


Fig. 2. Do employees and management have any common interests?

At the same time, half of the respondents consider a strike an acceptable, though extreme measure. (Fig. 10) The groups of respondents with opposite or different opinions are not negligible: 29% consider that a strike cannot lead to substantial improvements in workers' situation; 10% think that it can even make the situation worse. Attitudes towards striking differ significantly in certain groups of respondents. The percentages of those who consider it the best way to reach the workers' goals are relatively high among engineers of the highest levels and qualified workers (19% and 17% against average of 10%). It is also remarkable that among the workers of LMZ, where a strike took place in 2007, the percentage of those who consider striking the best way to reach the workers' goals is almost three times higher (26%).

Complexity and the controversial and transitional character of the workers' perceptions are especially evident when we look at their assessments of solidarity. A large majority (79%) of the respondents think that they can "always count on their colleagues' support if they have problems related to their work". At the same time the attitude toward the statement, "as concerns problems at work, at our enterprise everyone is for himself" divides the respondents into two large groups: 47% agree with it, while 35% disagree.

Within the context of solidarity assessments, the respondents were asked to identify themselves as belonging to (or feeling commonness with) one of the following groups or sub-communities (Fig. 11), which are relevant to different types of solidarity:

- 6% - "nobody", indicating social atomization;
- 41% - "friends", networking based exclusively on personal relationships;
- 20% - "employees with similar status" – indicating group solidarity;
- 17% - "employees with similar status and my manager" – indicating solidarity based on cooperation within a production team;

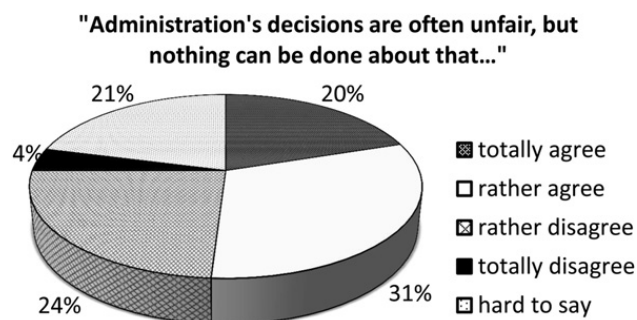


Fig. 3. "Administration's decisions are often unfair, but nothing can be done about that...".

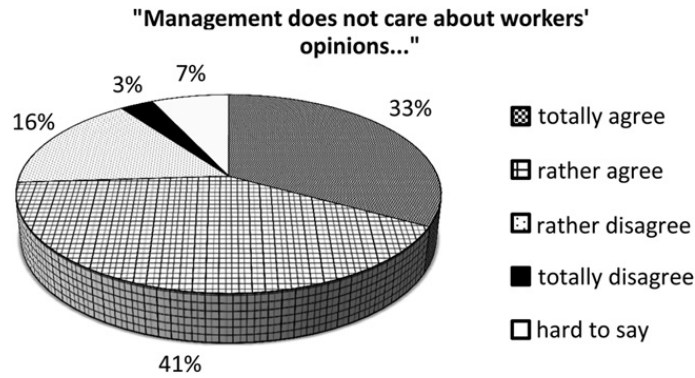


Fig. 4. Management does not care about workers' opinions...".

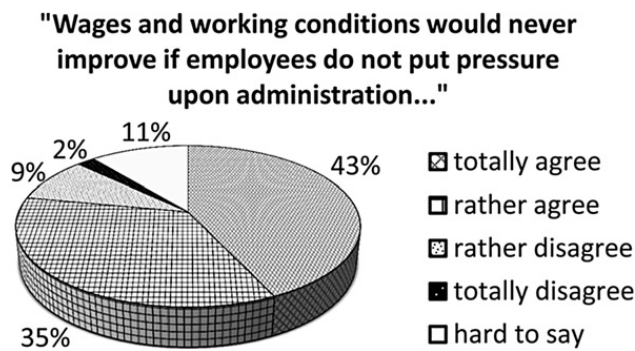


Fig. 5. "Wages and working conditions would never improve if employees do not put pressure upon administration...".

5% - "all the people at the enterprise except top managers", indicating a combination of a broad version of group solidarity with corporate commitment;

11% - "all the people at the enterprise" relevant to corporate solidarity.

As we see from the data above, the "destructive", individualistic attitudes, based on lack of trust and skeptical vision of any cooperation with "strangers", both co-workers and managers, which is characteristic of one group of the respondents, are countervailed by the positive attitudes of the other, approximately equal group of workers, who tend to trust their colleagues and are open to advanced forms of industrial relations, including cooperation as well as organized conflict and bargaining with management. The data do not fully confirm the widespread view of workers' communities as of atomized groups of

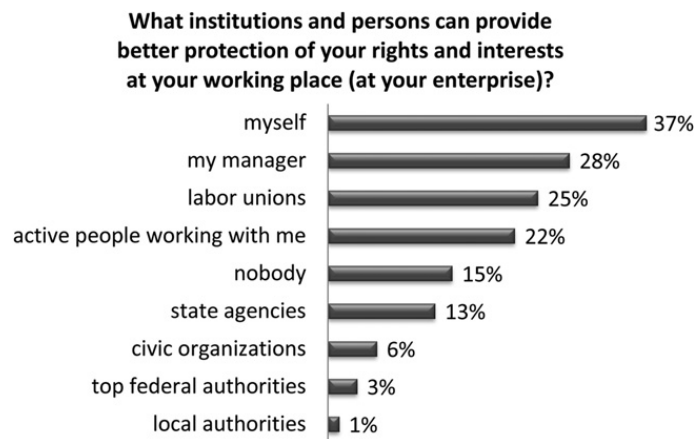
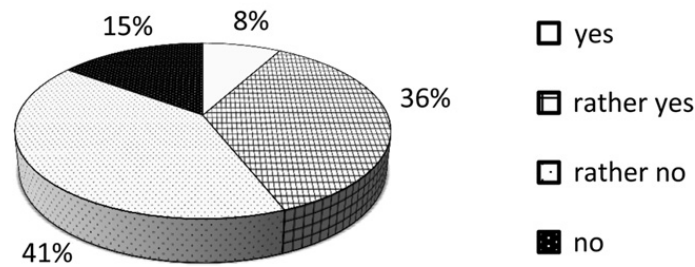


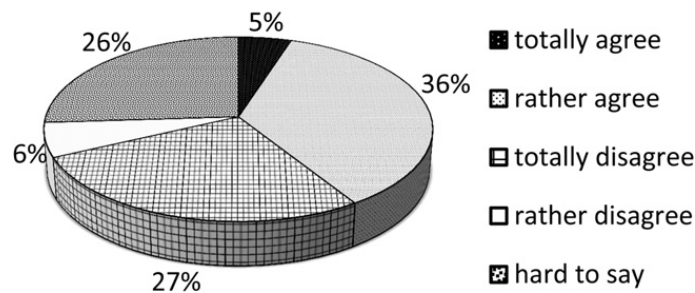
Fig. 6. What institutions and persons can provide better protection of your rights and interests at your working place (at your enterprise)?

**Do you think that the labor union(s) at your enterprise are really able to represent and defend interests of the people like you and your colleagues?**



**Fig. 7.** Do you think that the labor unions at your enterprise are really able to represent and defend interests of the people like you and your colleagues?

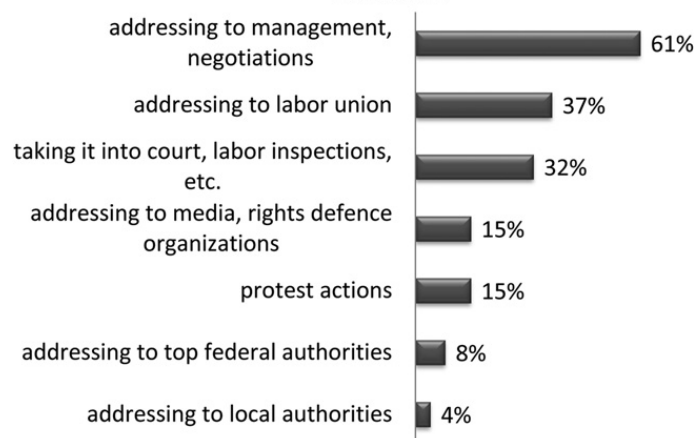
**"Collective agreement really protects all the employees..." Do you agree?**



**Fig. 8.** "Collective agreement really protects all the employees..." do you agree?

people. The view of close personal relationships as an important factor which makes solidarity work does find empirical confirmation, but it cannot be regarded as the main or the only factor, as many scholars argue. The picture of other types of self-identification, based on higher levels of solidarity and trust, is fragmented, but the weight of those who reveal any type of solidarity is comparable to the weight of those who appear isolated or atomized.

**What do you consider to be the most efficient way of workers' interests protection and/or conflict resolution?**



**Fig. 9.** What do you consider to be the most efficient way of workers' interests protection and/or conflict resolution?

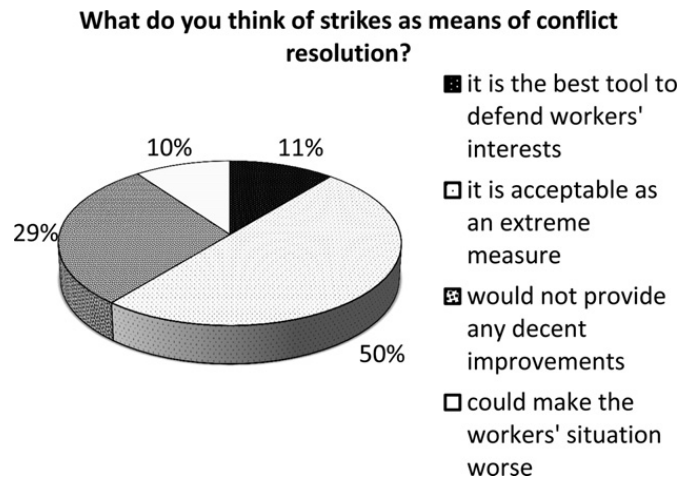


Fig. 10. What do you think of strikes as means of conflict resolution?

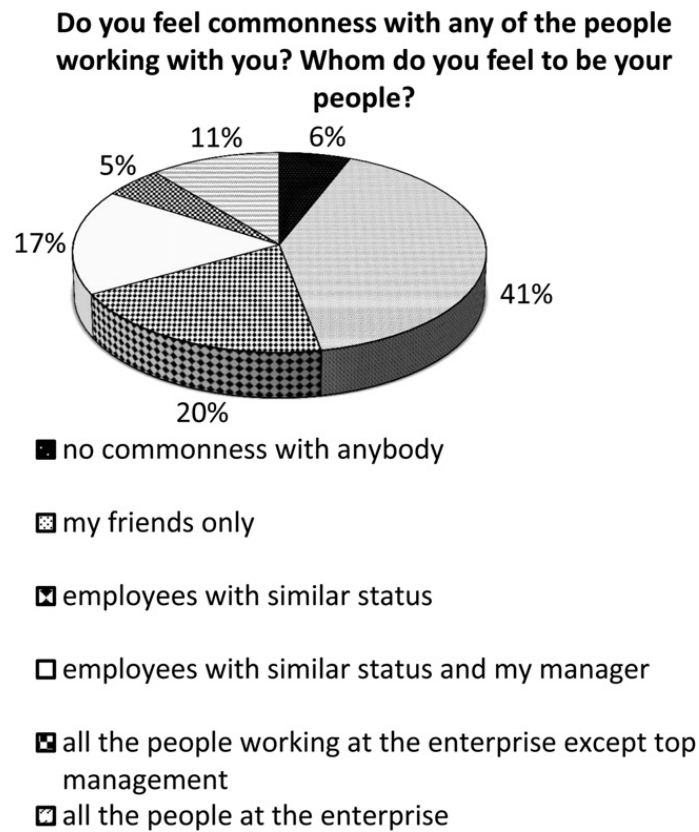


Fig. 11. Do you feel commonness with any of the people working with you? Whom do you feel to be your people?

**9. Conclusion**

The empirical research presented in this paper reveal that the internal structure of the workers' perceptions, which underlie their behavior in conflict situations, including major industrial conflicts, is more complicated than has been seen before. For a large part of workers, their evolution is neither confined within the boundaries of personal relationships and trust, nor limited by the domination of any particular ideological stereotypes of interaction between workers and management: paternalistic, class segregation and others. They accept a variety of methods of defending their rights and interests, including on-going dialog as well as strikes and bargaining. The other part, as large as the first, does conform to the traditional view. For this group of workers trust and solidarity are associated with personal networking, group interests are not articulated, and their defense with conventional methods (bargaining, collective agreements) is not considered feasible. They are more likely to react spontaneously and aggressively. The analyses of the survey results, including correlations of the variables, reveal that the line of demarcation between the two groups is not stable, leaving a large zone of uncertainty.

As a whole, our research reported in this article contributes to understanding of Russian workers' collective experiences, varied patterns of activism, and current orientations toward industrial relations. Russian workers gained independent organizing rights in the early 1990s, but under conditions of adverse structural economic change, decline and chaos, disinterested political and opportunistic trade union leaders, ideological and social disorientation, they mounted a poor, defensive, and often desperate collective defense. Labor activism changed qualitatively after 2005, with the emergence of stronger demands, leadership and bargaining orientations, mainly in large, profitable and transnational economic sectors. Though such activism declined with the arrival of the 2008 recession, both the experiences of the 2006–2008 period, and workers' orientations, suggest some potential for re-emergence of a significant labor movement. At least in large industrial enterprises, a substantial part of the labor force has a constructive attitude toward labor-management bargaining, some level of trust in collective institutions to represent their interests, and a broad view of solidarity and shared interests. In sum, we have shown that the post-communist record of workers' activism and recently-articulated attitudes, cannot be neatly categorized, and are likely to change in unpredictable ways with shifting economic and political circumstances.

## Acknowledgment

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