

Kazakh Trade Unions

GENNADY NEKITIN

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Helsinki Commission for inviting me here to speak with you all today. Even before coming here, I was an admirer of the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe, after its monitoring work of the March 1994 elections in Kazakhstan which were critical of a highly flawed electoral process.

For a Kentau miner, one day is the same as the next. Each day is full of worry and uncertainty. Each day is more existence than life.

Let me describe a typical day in the life of a Kentau miner. Morning begins with trying to avoid the despairing eyes of his wife and children. The miner goes off to work. He has to walk, since he has no money for transportation. He will eat breakfast in the mine cafeteria where he is fed with special nutritious food for miners. The miner is treated like a machine fueled to do a certain volume of work.

Work in the mines is like a game of Russian roulette. When exhausted people use worn-out equipment, it is not only dangerous but counter-productive. There is not enough money for safety devices for the miners. There is a severe shortage of safety gloves, flashlights and helmets. As for goggles, miners have already forgotten what they are. All this leads to accidents and production losses and affects the general morale of the work team. Every descent into the mine is like dropping into hell.

“At my mine, ten to twelve people are killed by roof collapses and other accidents every year—and this is in a normal year.”

When a miner gets out of the mine, filthy and tired, he takes a cold shower. There is no hot water, no soap or towels. A meager supper awaits the miner at home. Supper is prepared with food bought at the company store at the mines. He and his family will probably have to eat in the dark because in Kentau there is electricity only eight hours a day. If it is winter, they will eat with their coats and hats on—there is usually no heat either.

The mines squeeze the worker dry. To see this, one need only look at the wage system. Wages are paid only three or four times a year and are based on the amount produced, with a bonus for exceeding the production target. Miners keep working, even when conditions are unsafe, because they know if they don't they won't get the bonus, which is a substantial percentage of their salary.

After the decline of economic links between Russia and Kazakhstan, our economy no longer has the technology to maintain safe working conditions. For us, safety is a religion we no longer can practice. As a result, there are many deaths and a high incidence of occupational diseases. At my mine, ten to twelve people are killed by roof collapses and other accidents every year—and this is in a normal year.

Gennady Nekitin is the acting chairman of the Association of Independent Trade Unions of Kentau, Kazakhstan. This article is based on the opening statements given by Nekitin before the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe.

Four or five years ago, even though the Soviet economy was already faltering, it still provided us with a decent standard of living—at least we thought so. We got our wages on time. We had a rationing system in place. We had a work ethic. We saw our government as legitimate. We were certain of our future. No wonder that now people are nostalgic for the good old days, otherwise known as Communism. Our forward-moving society turns its head to look back at the past and so risks breaking its neck.

People had great expectations of *perestroika*, hoping for improvements in their lives. Unfortunately, however, *perestroika* was not constructive, but proved to be destructive.

Born out of social upheaval, a force emerged from the working class to really protect human rights: the independent trade unions of Kazakhstan. This force was needed because the government merely fakes reforms, and they are blindly supported by the old Soviet trade unions.

The government trade unions are incapable of reform. Their function is to distribute goods and services, not to protect the rights of workers. Today, the government trade unions still try to continue their old distributive functions, even though they have almost nothing left to distribute.

Leaders of the independent trade union movement in Kazakhstan emerged from the working class. They understand the role of independent trade unions in society: they defend their members' rights at the workplace and in court, they participate in election campaigns, they take part in collective bargaining sessions from the branch level to the national, they provide community services, and so on.

“Unfortunately, however, perestroika was not constructive, but proved to be destructive.”

Many important problems are resolved by independent trade unions every day.

Finding and getting equipment for trade union members. Getting management to pay wages on time, instead of seven or eight months late.

All this activity is motivated more by enthusiasm than by professionalism. But enthusiasm, after all, is short-lived. It may even do more harm than good. Independent trade unions usually lack computers, copying equipment, transportation, and printing equipment. They also lack the experience that comes with years of working in a union because many of their leaders are new. We are still learning, and we have a long way to go.

At the national level in our country, a trade union movement is being created, including regional labor union centers and branch confederations. The information blockade has been broken. Kazakhstan authorities now view independent trade unions as partners, as seen in Nazarbayev's recent signing of a nation-wide tripartite agreement. The Independent Trade Union Center of Kazakhstan, headed by Leonid Solomin, generates ideas for the building of a civil society. It also is working towards an almost completed General Tariff Agreement.

Independent trade unions are now represented in the city, regional and national parliaments. The five-year history of the independent trade unions in Kazakhstan has occurred under difficult conditions. This period was marked by a struggle against the Soviet command system supported by the powers-that-be: government, the organs of social hygiene (the KGB and the Ministry of Internal Affairs) the procuracy, courts, and the mass media.

On their side, independent trade unions were armed only with self-respect grounded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. They are providing a way for ordinary

workers to defend themselves against the many forces that make their lives difficult, and representing their interests at all levels. Independent trade unions have played and are playing a key role in the development of democracy in Kazakhstan.