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Russian Federation: Miners protest in the Kuzbas

On 14 May a mass protest, in which between 1500 and 3000 people took part, took place in Mezhdurechensk (Kemerovo oblast), after the disaster in the Raspadskaya mine in which 66 miners and rescue workers died (a further 24 are as yet unaccounted for). On that same day, clashes with the police took place, and a group of demonstrators who blocked the railway lines was arrested. Despite the district authorities' declaration of their willingness to make concessions, an escalation of the protest was announced; this proves that the authorities' reaction was insufficient, and the situation in the mines may be a source of social protests.

The demonstrators demanded changes in pay regulations, as well as pay raises and the improvement of their working conditions. The social demands were accompanied by political ones, which the district authorities deemed to be provocations. An open letter to the president of Russia was published both online and in the traditional media by an unknown organisation called the Society of Kuzbas Residents; its demands included ceasing the repression against independent miners' trade unions, the withdrawal of Interior Ministry units whose members were drawn from other towns, and the release of the people arrested during the demonstration, under threat of spreading the protest throughout the whole area. The district authorities met these demands halfway; they agreed to the pay demands, and declared that they had initiated criminal procedures against the mine's management. An improvement of the existing system was also proposed by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. He issued orders increasing the effectiveness of the federal supervisory institution Rostechnadzor (which will hereafter be directly answerable to the government, and will be empowered to close without legal sanction any mines which violate health and safety regulations), and also changing the pay regulations in such a way as to make wages less dependent on fulfilling work quotas.

However, these changes will not substitute for the lack of systematic regulations, i.e. a law obliging owners to invest in raising safety levels in their mines. The government's current decisions seem intended to ease social tensions after another mining disaster, rather than to liquidate their causes throughout the sector. <epa>