

SILENCED VOICES: Vladimir Kozlov

by Cathal Sheerin

Zhanaozen, in western Kazakhstan, is an oil town, and those employed by the state-owned oil company work in harsh conditions. In May 2011, they went on strike, demanding better working conditions and the supplementary payments they were owed for doing hazardous work. Local courts declared their action illegal and nearly a thousand strikers were fired. The workers responded by occupying the town square, and, as the strike continued, the protest expanded; in mid-December, some workers crossed a dangerous line, calling for the right to form independent political parties.

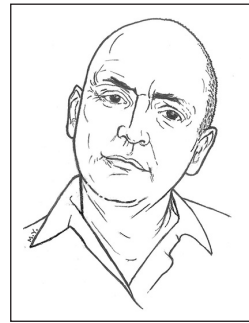


Illustration by Maxine Young

Vladimir Kozlov

A determined, worker-led, pro-democracy movement would not be tolerated by the Kazakh authorities, and on December 16, in circumstances which are not entirely clear (Kazakhstan has never permitted an independent investigation), riot police opened fire on the unarmed protesters. When villagers from nearby Shetpe protested the shooting, they were also gunned down. Fifteen people were killed and over a hundred wounded. In the days following the massacre, the area was sealed off and dozens of oil workers, activists, and journalists all over the country were arrested. Thirteen workers were sentenced to three to seven years' imprisonment; another sixteen were given suspended sentences. Twenty two of the accused testified that they had been

tortured in detention, enduring beatings, chokings, threats of rape and retribution. The victims identified the officers whom they accused of torturing them, but the prosecutor's office "found no confirmation" of these events.

The European Union, the United Nations and international rights groups protested the massacre and pressured Kazakhstan to redress the injustice done. Nazarbayev, aware of his image and hoping to attract foreign investment, is susceptible to international pressure, and in late 2014 Roza Tuletayeva, one of the leaders of the strike, was released. The remaining workers were given early parole in 2015 on condition that they showed "repentance for the offenses committed." They now avoid talking to journalists.

Only one man, journalist and politician Vladimir Kozlov, remains in jail, despite persistent appeals for his release. Kozlov, fifty-five, is a human rights defender and one of the founding members of Alga! (Forward!), a popular but banned opposition party. According to its charter, Alga! seeks to "change the political system of the Republic of Kazakhstan via constitutional methods and transform it into a presidential-parliamentary Republic in which there is a true separation of all branches of government, the equality of citizens before the law is ensured, integrity of a person is strictly enforced, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights is executed, the economy is socially oriented, and people, as a constitutional source of power, have a real opportunity to exercise this power."

Following the 2011 massacre, Kozlov met with Members of the European Parliament and the European Commission, calling for an international investigation. On his return to Kazakhstan on January 23, 2012, he was arrested and detained by staff of the National Security Committee. Finally, on August 16, 2012, he was charged with "inciting social hatred" and "calling for the overthrow of the constitutional order of the state." He denied all the charges, but was convicted in October 2012 and sentenced to seven and a half years in prison.

For a long time after his conviction, Kozlov was upbeat. In late 2012 he wrote about the reasonable conditions of the facility. He joked that he'd use the experience to lose weight. He shared the books that he

received from outside with others: “I have already distributed over fifty throughout the jail; sometimes I see both prisoners and guards reading them...books have never once done any harm to anyone... just so long as they aren’t used to beat someone over the head!”

But as his eligibility for parole drew closer, his prison experience deteriorated rapidly. On July 17, 2015, Kozlov (who takes medication for circulation problems) said he could no longer endure the 122°F heat, and so went to the prison dormitory to lie down. The prison authorities accused him of doing so without permission and punished him by placing him in solitary confinement. Kozlov began a hunger strike in protest, and on July 22, having ended his hunger strike, he was sentenced to another year in a much harsher facility where he and nineteen others share a barrack of only 165 square feet. The next month, a phone SIM card was found in Kozlov’s cell. He said that it was planted—not an unusual practice in Kazakh jails—and he was sent to a punishment cell for fifteen days.

Having served over half his sentence, he is entitled to be considered for parole, but on December 8, 2015, Kozlov was refused parole.

Appeals calling the immediate and unconditional release of Vladimir Kozlov can be sent to:

Nursultan Nazarbayev, President of Kazakhstan
 President’s Office
 010000 Astana, Kazakhstan

You may want to use this [sample letter](#). Please also send a copy of your letter to your nearest Kazakh diplomatic representative. In Washington, D.C., it is:

The Honorable Kairat Umaro
 Ambassador of Kazakhstan
 1401 16th Street NW
 Washington DC 20036 email: washington@mfa.kz

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