

Rumble in the edge of the Europe

The struggle against the KURDTT rocket fuel reprocessing plant in Votkinsk

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Votkinsk, birthplace of famous 19th century composer Pyotr Chaikovsky, is a city of 100,000 inhabitants in Udmurtia, an autonomous republic of the Russian Federation near the Ural mountains. The city was once built for the purposes of the huge soviet military-industrial complex, and now it is a planned site of KURDTT (Complex for Destruction of Heavy Fuel Rocket Engines), a plant for reprocessing fuel and engines of SS-24, SS-24M, SS-25, SS-N-20 ballistic missiles, which are to be discarded. 70% of Russian ballistic missiles are of these types.

Better if not used, but no good anyway

Each of these missiles is a small-scale environmental disaster. Even if they are not launched, the project to bring 916 of them – altogether 17,500 tons of rocket fuel – to be disembowelled only nine kilometres from the city has met with fierce resistance from local inhabitants. An active and unique social protest movement has sprung up in what is generally a disillusioned post-Soviet society.

The project was initially to be sited in the Nevada desert, but this plan was cancelled because of fears it would hurt the area's endangered tortoises.

Lockheed Martin, one of the biggest military-industrial corporations in the world, was the project's original American partner. When they withdrew from the project in May 2001, the contract was given to the lesser known American corporation Energotech, who will continue using the special technology Lockheed Martin have been developing at California's China Lake complex since 1988. Protesters didn't find out about the change of contractors until last August. Local (Russian) journalists, who travelled to America while Lockheed Martin were still involved, discovered the project budget had already swollen to US\$150 billion – but it wasn't clear who exactly was going to foot the bill for the extra costs.

Consensus decision making as the ruling class understands it

The first attempt to build the plant in Russia's Perm area of Western Siberia was cancelled due to local resistance. Votkinsk was the next contender – carefully chosen because the city is completely dependent on the military-industrial complex, because the Government of the Udmurtian republic is authoritarian and corrupt, and because Votkinsk is located in the border with Perm area – which planners thought could take a big part of the pollution without risking influencing the project decision. Currently most modern Russian ballistic Topol-missiles are built in Votkinsk.

In 1999 the project was put to a referendum in Votkinsk and 99.4% of the vote rejected the idea. Even then the result was skewed because little more than half the community actually voted, since the VMZ-factory sacked anyone who voted. This was what's called a 'binding' local referendum - a speciality of the Russian constitution – binding in theory, but in practice something local governments always find loopholes to nullify. In this case the highest court of the Udmurtian republic decided the plant referendum wasn't valid, because it should have been held in the surrounding municipality where the plant was to be located rather than in the city of Votkinsk itself. Another poll, organised in the Perm area's neighbouring city of Chaikovsky, reflected a similar strong anti-plant sentiment. The Gallup poll, organised by a local ecological organisation,

was circulated around 12 000 inhabitants, and required respondents to give their full name, address, and passport details. Only 5 people actually participated, giving the project a paltry 0.042% of support.

Never trust a NGO

Nullifying the referendum did not turn off the local movement. Ongoing petitions, mass meetings of up to 3000 participators, and taking up unsuccessful court cases against the Republic's administration kept protesters busy. Even a group of VMZ company engineers mobilised to protest against the rocket engine reprocessing plant, openly defying company threats. Some local specialists on ballistic missiles who had originally backed the project turned against it after learning more about it. They argued the project wasn't worth it as it would give little employment to locals, be governed from abroad, and be based on experimental technology. The factory's planned three year duration is expected to produce thirteen tons of cyanic natrium NaCN, — a compound more poisonous than cyanic hydrogen and which is used as a chemical weapon. And they're talking about dumping this stuff in the area surrounding the factory, without providing any special facilities to protect the environment. The 'Ecological Impact Assessment' that gave the project the green light was from the Green Cross, a corrupt business NGO founded by Mikhail Gorbachev which mostly runs by selling certificates to various business for money. It should be called a 'Green Wash'.

The local city administration has been against the project since the beginning, defying the authoritarian regime of Volkov (president of Udmurtian republic) who has by now managed to replace the leadership of all Udmurtian cities with his men. The last city to fall was Votkinsk, where A. V. Kuznetsov — not even a city inhabitant himself — managed to replace defiant mayor V.L. Friedrich in elections on the 14th of March 2002. Former mayor Friedrich suffered a mainstream media-blackout during a very dirty election campaign, which included an obviously false statement from Udmurtian government that the plant would be cancelled. The incoming mayor Kuznetsov's true position with regards to the project was not revealed to inhabitants of Votkinsk.

Protest campaign in the summer of 2001

The local movement asked the social ecologist Rainbow Keepers movement to organise a protest camp against the plant over last summer. Rainbow Keepers have organised similar summer campaigns since 1990 all over the European side of Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine. The Votkinsk camp, co-organised with the International Socio-Ecological Union, the Union for Chemical Safety, and local ecological activists, ran almost six weeks from 18th of July until 30th of August. More than a hundred people from the Russian cities of Volzhk, Kasimov, Moscow, Nizhny Novgorod, Kazan, Yekaterinburg, Kamensk-Uralsk, Volgograd, Saint-Petersburg, Samara, Ryazan and Tampere and Helsinki in Finland, came to take part. One of the camp's Finnish activists got a five year deportation from Russia for his troubles.

Protesters organised daily info-stalls and civil-disobedience actions, and a public meeting on the 26th of July drew a crowd of 3,000 people. The camp was first attacked on the 29th of July when a group of five men threatened campers after midnight. At six o'clock that morning one of the tents was set on fire, but fortunately no-one was injured. On the 3rd of August 300 inhabitants

took part in a peaceful protest outside the offices of Lockheed Martin in the city in a legal meeting, but police violently dispersed the crowd and arrested several participants. A solidarity picket for the imprisoned lasted five hours.

A closed court session against the meeting's participants was organised for the 7th of August, with locals and a bus-load of people from Chaikovsky turning up to show their solidarity outside. 25 Rainbow Keepers masked themselves up for the day, since the police had used video evidence to single people out after previous protests. Police decided to keep two of the arrested in jail until the next court session, although the court itself did not take any decision about the continuation of the arrests. This angered picketers, who then blocked the police van transferring the arrested pair back to prison, chanting "Free the prisoners!" It took police a few hours to break up the blockade after extra numbers had been called. Protesters went on chasing the van, and 40–50 were involved in more skirmishes with the police. Several were arrested and got fines of up to £20 and jail sentences of up to 15 days.

The 13th of August saw several roads in Votkinsk blockaded as a protest action. The day after a court declared July 26th's mass meeting illegal, even though it had been called by the city major himself! On August 30th thirty people, supposedly from fascist groups, organised a violent attack on the protest camp. Masked attackers surrounded the camp from three directions, and started fights with iron bars, knives and baseball bats. After half an hour of fighting five Rainbow Keepers were left with head wounds and other injuries, but no-one was hospitalised. On the 21st of August another mass meeting was organised, this time drawing a crowd of 1000 people. During the week of the 21st to 28th of August Rainbow Keepers blockaded the main entrance of the Votkinsk administration, with supportive locals protecting the activists and giving them food. Federal Inspector S.V. Chikurov, who had steadfastly refused to meet protesters for two weeks, then demanded that the city mayor "put an end to the organisation of mass disruptions in Votkinsk". 20 000 copies of an anti-plant tabloid paper were distributed over the course of the summer campaign.

The Future

The Camp ended on the 30th of August, but the all-Russian campaign has stayed active over winter. In Moscow on the 3rd of November a theatre action was organised outside the Udmurtian HQ in Moscow. Three bourgeois officials from America, Russia, and Udmurtia, were acted out as pompously opening up the new factory, when thick smoke billowed from the factory, filling the street and leading to the painful deaths of several local inhabitants. On the 12th of March a cartoon cruiser called the "Aurora" bombed the Moscow bases of Energotech, the Ministry of Atomic Energy, and Duma, with firecrackers. The running street revolution that kicked off then lasted 5 hours, as protesters evaded arrest by dodging from one administrative area to the next.

More protests will be organised in Votkinsk this summer. Officials haven't reversed the decision to build the plant yet, as the scheme was necessary to get their man elected city mayor. So far, building works on the factory's planned site are continuing.

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