

## LABOR PROTESTS IN KAZAKHSTAN: DYNAMICS AND GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS IN 2008-2021

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**Abstract:** *This article attempts to describe some of the parameters of workers protest movements in the Republic of Kazakhstan for the last years. For this purpose, author compiled a dataset with use of protest event analysis (PEA), based on digital newspapers archives and labor activists' reports, as well as OXUS society Central Asia Protest tracker and Protest Event Database by Heiko Pleines. It shows how the number of labor protests have changed over the period from 2008 to 2021, how they distributed over the country and by sector, what forms of protests workers used, how state and companies responded to these protests and other characteristics.*

**Keywords:** *labor protests, Kazakhstan, protest event analysis, social movements*

### **Introduction**

This article attempts to describe some of the parameters of workers protest movements in the Republic of Kazakhstan for the last years. Based on dataset compiled the author, it shows how the number of labor protests have changed over the period from 2008 to 2021, how they distributed over the country and by sector, what forms of protests workers used, how state and companies responded to these protests and other characteristics.

Kazakhstan is seen as fragile and institutionally weak by international human rights organizations, particularly when it comes to protections of workers' rights. Domestic labor unions are often criticized for the lack of independence and weak performance in protecting employee rights (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

According to Global Index of the International Trade Union Confederation, Kazakhstan has been among the 10 worst countries for protecting workers' rights.

Holding a legal strike in Kazakhstan requires an extremely complicated procedure, requiring a considerable amount of time, the completion of a large number of documents, and carrying out complex warning measures. Almost no one can meet the requirements of the law, so the majority of strikes are spontaneous and therefore not recorded by the official statistical office.

Very few studies have provided a thorough analysis of labor movements in Central Asia.

Sanghera and Satybaldieva (2021) indicate that despite the frequent clashes at extracting enterprises, there is strikingly little analysis of the relationship between labor and capital that engenders so much violence. Although Zhanaozen case garnered some attention, the role of transnational corporations has often been overlooked in shaping labor politics and state responses. The cause of the workers' grievances is often blamed on the autocratic state without understanding how the state is intertwined with transnational corporations. Sanghera and Satybaldieva state that most scholars tend to pathologise the state, and portray corporations either as innocent bystanders or benevolent actors.

Sorbello (2021) states that workers and their organizations have seldom been the scholarly focus in the literature on industrial relations and have rarely been treated as a diversified unit of analysis. One of his main arguments is that trans-national companies (TNCs) have translated their global standards and practices into their projects on Kazakhstan's territory, dramatically changing the lives of oil workers used to Soviet-era industrial relations.

### ***Protest event analysis as an analytical tool***

Protest event analysis (PEA) has become a key method of social movement research over the past decades. PEA is a key methodological innovation that emerged within the social movement itself. It is a variety of quantitative content analysis, to systematically assess the amount and features of protest across various geographical areas and over time. PEA allows for the mapping of the occurrences and characteristics of protests

across geographical areas, across issues/movements and over time. As textual sources newspaper articles are used, but police reports, digital media and activists' reports can also be included (Hutter, 2014).

A researcher starts with choosing a range of events to be covered by coding unit, then decides on time frame and geographical area, delimits a series of events; chooses sources and gathers information. For selection and coding main steps are: selecting articles that definitely refer to protest events; sorting articles according to protest themes and campaigns; reading articles over a period of several weeks or months; coding protest events; putting aside problematic cases for further discussion or a decision to be taken by the supervisor.

PEA is traditionally employed to study citizens' protests against government actors, but can also be used in labor conflict research (Bizyukov, 2021).

The dataset is based on materials of online newspapers and labor activists' websites, such [www.socialismkz.info](http://www.socialismkz.info), as well as the Oxus Society Central Asia Protest tracker, covering the 2018-2021 period and Protest Event Database, 2010-2019 by Heiko Pleines available at [www.discuss-data.net](http://www.discuss-data.net).

The dataset covers labor protest actions in Kazakhstan from 2008 to 2021. In overall, 282 cases were registered for the entire period. The collection is ongoing and will be supplemented by printed press. The reason for collecting printed press is that online sources used in this study start to appear in the second half of 2008 and after. If available, information is extracted on the time, location, industry, number of participants, company ownership, type of protest, issues raised by workers, bargaining gain, state and company response.

### ***The scale and dynamics of labor protests***

Preliminary results show that from 2008 to 2011, there was a sharp decrease from 5 protests in 2008 to 22 protests in 2009 and then 26 protests in 2011. The protests mainly took place in western Kazakhstan and were connected with consequences of crises in 2008, as well as adoption of the new Labor Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan which made hired-workers voiceless. The main issues raised by workers were connected with law wages, changes in the way salaries were calculated, independence of

trade unions, as well workers were against companies' privatization. The most long lasting and violent protest took place in this period, when in 2011 a six-month strike ended up in massacre and 16 workers were killed, protesters were dismissed, prosecuted and arrested.

From 2012 to 2019, the indicators stay almost on the same level. The lowest indicator is in 2015, when 6 protests took place. This can be attributed to adoption on new laws on trade unions and peaceful assemblies, which restricted workers to organize new trade unions, or re-register existing ones and express their grievances. During this period another violent protest took place. In 2016, workers of goldmining enterprise Kazakhaltyn JSC in Stepnogorsk were injured in a shooting by security guards. As a result, more than 300 people had gathered outside the mine administration, who had no intention of leaving in spite of the shooting. The miners were supported by their fellow villagers, many of whom were their close relatives. The miners openly blame the incident on the management of the company, which tried to introduce a virtually prison system in the mines.

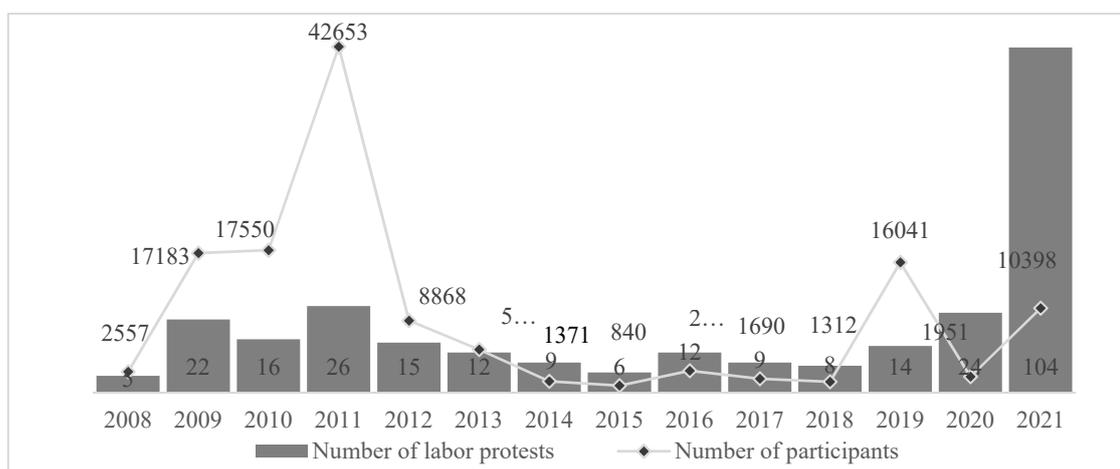
In 2020, the number of protests accounted for 24 versus 14 in 2019. This is mostly attributed to Covid-19 pandemic consequences. In this year, workers raised issues regarding worsening working conditions and low wages.

There is a sharp increase in labor protests and strikes in 2021. This is the highest indicator in the whole studied period, which accounts for 104 protests out of total 282 protest or 36.8 percent. Bus drivers, livestock farmers, couriers, oil workers were protesting against low wages and bad working conditions. The strikes were primarily related to low wages, which are now depreciating as a result of the tenge devaluation. The strikers also demanded freedom of trade union activity and the right to establish their own independent organization (Kurmanov, 2021).

The number of participants varied in accordance with the type of protest. The highest indicator is in 2011, when 42,653 workers participated in the longest 6-month strike in western Kazakhstan. This is followed by previous years 2010 and 2009 with 17,550 and 17,183 protesters correspondingly. The decline in number of participants can be attributed to adoption of new law on peaceful assemblies and new forms

of protest workers used, like recording video appeals to authorities and posting them in social networks. Figure 1 shows these figures.

Figure 1 Number of labor protests and participants



Oil and gas extracting Mangistau region is in first place in terms of the numbers of labor protests from 2008 to 2021, with 93 protests, accounting 33 percent of the total. This is followed by two regions Aktobe and Karaganda and Almaty city with the same indicators of 28 protests in each, accounting to 10 percent each of the total. Atyrau region was the fourth, with 20 protest accounting for 7 percent of the total. Table # 1 shows these figures.

Table 1 Geographic distribution of labor protests in Kazakhstan by regions, 2008-2021 years

#	Region	Number of protests	Percentage	#	Region	Number of protests	Percentage
1	Mangistau	92	33 %	9	West Kazakhstan	12	4%
2	Aktobe	27	10 %	10	Almaty	6	2%
3	Almaty city	27	10 %	11	Akmola	5	2%
4	Karagandy	27	10%	12	North-Kazakhstan	4	1%
5	Atyrau	22	7%	13	Pavlodar	2	1%

6	East Kazakhstan	17	6%	14	Zhambyl	1	1%
7	Nursultan city	16	5%	15	Kyzylorda	7	2%
8	South-Kazakhstan	14	5%	16	Kostanay	3	1%
Total						282	100%

### Distribution of labor protests by economic sector

From 2008 to 2021, labor protests in Kazakhstan were distributed across a number of economic sectors. Labor protests in oil and gas extraction accounted for 27 percent of total or 76 protests, putting this sector in first place. This is followed by oilfield services, which comprised 21 percent of total or 56 protests. Metal and coal mining accounted for 12 percent of total or 33 protests. The transportation sector comes in fourth place, comprising 11 percent of the total protests or 32 protests. This is followed by construction sector with 7 percent of the total protests, comprising 20 protests. The remaining 22 percent include healthcare and utility services, self-employed, precariat and unemployed workers.

### *The issues raised by workers*

Out of 282 protests, 73 percent of protests had multiple aims. In total the dataset distinguishes 12 issues: law salaries, changes in system of payment,

The main issues raised by the workers are connected mainly to salaries. Demands to increase salaries account for 197 protests out of total 282 protests or 70 percent. The workers disagreed with non-payment of wages and delays, and this issue account for 132 protests or 48 percent out of total. The share of issues on system of payment changing account for 72 protests or 26 percent out of total.

This is followed by the issues workers raised regarding to worsening working conditions which accounted for 65 protests or 23 percent.

The share of issues regarding labor union activity accounted for 45 protests or 16 percent. The highest indicators were in 2009, when the share of trade union issues accounted for 36 percent, and in 2014, when trade union issues made almost half of all issues raised, about 44 percent. In

2009, workers raised concerns regarding prosecution or dismissal of trade union leaders. In 2014, workers were protesting mainly the new law on trade unions adopted in June, 2014.

The share of issues raised against company privatization, for company nationalization accounted to 25 protests or about 9 percent. The highest indicators were in 2008 and accounted for 80 percent, and in 2017 accounted for 66 percent.

### *The form of labor protests*

According to the Labor Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan a strike is “full or partial termination of work in order to meet the social and economic and professional requirements of employees in a collective labor dispute with the employer”. In accordance with article 14 of the Law on Collective Labor Disputes and Strikes, a strike may be considered illegal when it has a political motivation (such as claims to change the constitutional order) or a certain procedure prescribed by law was not observed. According to the article 12 of the Labor Code an employer must be notified in writing about a planned strike and its possible duration by the authorized body not later than fifteen calendar days beforehand.

The Law On the procedure for organizing and holding peaceful assemblies in the Republic of Kazakhstan provides the following types: picketing, marches, meetings, demonstrations. There is also a requirement on local authorities written notification and getting approval to hold an assembly.

Analysis of newspaper articles shows that often it is not clear whether the workers received permission to carry a strike, that is why in this study it is not possible to distinguish between a legal and illegal strike. In this paper, a strike means partial or complete stoppage of work.

In practice, the forms of protest that workers use is much wider than provided by Kazakhstan’s legislation. The study shows that workers use different ways to protest.

For the whole studied period, the most popular forms of protests were partial or complete stoppage of work, which accounted for 37 percent. This is followed by rallies which accounted for 24 percent. Picketing and protests marches accounted for 22 percent. Less used forms are public declarations to the authorities which accounted for 12 percent, stating

demands – 12 percent, hunger strike – 7 percent, sit-down and underground strikes – 11 percent, solidarity strikes – 4 percent and blockades – 3 percent.

The total number is more than 100 percent, as a single protest action included a simultaneous or consecutive use of various forms of protest. Thus, for example, an action might start as a public declaration of demands and then turn into a strike, a hunger strike or something else. The use of more complex forms of protest suggests that the workers have to resort to ever greater force to start a dialogue with employers and state.

#### ***Achievement of labor protest demands***

The numbers indicate that a majority of labor protests didn't have their demands met. Company management and government did not respond to 53 percent of the total labor protests, accounting for 150 protests. There were 59 protests whose demands were partly met, accounting for 21 percent, while 20 protests had achieved all or most of their claims, accounting for 6 percent. There is no available information about 56 protests gain, which accounted for 20 percent of total protests. Table # 2 shows these figures

Table 2 Labor protest distribution by achievement of demands

#	Were the demands met?	Percentage	Number of protests
1	No gain or very limited gain	53 %	151
2	Partial gain	21 %	59
3	No gain	6 %	20
4	Information n/a	20 %	56
	Total	100 %	282

#### ***State and company response***

State position was neutral to labor protests in 56 protests, which accounts for 20 percent. Almost the same indicators show companies' response which accounts for 51 protests or 18 percent.

State response was negative, i.e., court made decisions against striking workers, with regard to 14 protests, which accounts for 5 percent, while companies' response was negative, i.e., dismissed workers, in 20 protests, which accounts for 7 percent.

State acted violently, i.e., arrested protesters in 28 protests, which accounts for 10 percent, while companies acted violently, i.e., intimidated workers in 39 protests, which accounts for 14 percent.

Numbers show that in 33% of cases state acted constructively, i.e., the representatives of government departments met with protesters and promised to solve their issues, and 31% of cases when companies also met with the protesters.

The share of 32 percent of state response to labor protests is not covered in newspaper. The same situation is with companies' response, which accounts for 30 percent. Table # 3 shows these figures.

Table 3 State and company response

#	Response	State		Company	
		Percentage	Number of protests	Percentage	Number of protests
1	Constructive	33 %	93	31 %	87
2	Information n/a	32 %	90	30 %	85
3	Neutral	20 %	56	18 %	51
4	Violent	10 %	28	14 %	39
5	Negative	5 %	15	7 %	21
	Total	100 %	282	100 %	282

### ***Company ownership structure***

Labor protests, which took place in subcontractor companies are in the first place. They account for 32 percent or 89 protests. Some of these subcontractor companies were previously branches or departments of state-owned enterprises.

For instance, Burgylau LLC, was privatized in 2007 by the order of the president of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Nazarbayev N.A. Previously,

it was a subdivision of a state enterprise Ozenmunaigaz JSC. Now, the main activity of the company is provision of drilling services to Ozenmunaigaz JSC as a subcontractor. According to [www.forbes.kz](http://www.forbes.kz) the main owner of the company is not known and registered in Netherlands.

In the second place are labor protests in local private companies, which account for 28.3 percent and comprises 80 protests of the total. Most of these private companies were also privatized and previously had been national enterprises, or their branches and departments.

Often, such restructurizations of companies had resulted in disagreements over changes in the way the salaries were calculated, worsening of labor conditions, dismissals of workers or reduction of salaries. Subcontractor and local private companies start to dismiss workers and hire new ones on a seasonal basis. They connect this decision with reduction of production.

In the third place are protests in foreign companies which account for 13.1 percent or 37 protests.

This is followed by protests in quasi-state enterprises, which accounts for 9.5 percent or 27 protests. An example of such enterprise is KazMunaiGas National Company JSC, which also have foreign participation in ownership structure.

Self-employed, precariat or unemployed workers 7.0 percent or 20 protests. These indicators start to appear and increase starting from 2018. Taxi drivers and couriers protested against changing working conditions and change in the way salaries were calculated.

Table # 4 shows these figures.

Table 4 Types of company ownership, where labor protests took place in Kazakhstan from 2008-2021

#	Company ownership structure	Percentage	Number of protests
1	Subcontractors	32.0 %	89
2	Local private companies	28.3 %	80
3	Foreign companies	13.1 %	37
4	Quasi-state enterprises	9.5 %	27

5	Joint-stock companies with foreign participation	3.1 %	9
6	Municipal enterprises	7.0 %	20
7	Self-employed, precariat, unemployed workers	7.0 %	20
	Total	100 %	282

### ***Discussion***

As indicated above the results presented in this paper are preliminary and will be supplemented by printed press. For this reason, the paper provides general characteristics and trends and doesn't include correlation or cluster analysis. When the work on the dataset will be completed, correlation analysis of achievements, issues and state and company response, as well as cluster analysis of issues raised by the workers will be implemented.

### ***Conclusion***

The paper shows that the number of labor protests is increasing, especially there is a sharp increase in the last two years. Workers' wages continue to be low, conditions are worsening, trade unions lose their independence and there are less ways for workers to express their grievances. The companies and government take measure only when workers start to use more severe forms of strike.

Labor protests mainly take place in extracting industries, oil and gas enterprises located in western part of Kazakhstan, metal and coal mining enterprises located in central part of the country. There are new industries where labor protests take place, such as transportation and courier services and the geography of protests has been expanding especially the last four years.

The study shows that almost half of the protests registered didn't achieve their goals, though in almost third part of protests companies and the state acted constructively and gave promises.

The usual pattern of modern labor protests develops in a very common scenario: the employer, violates the rights of workers, who, in turn, use well-tried levers of influence (work stoppages, rallies and

pickets, appeals to authorities). Such conflicts often do not find a solution, and the problem is postponed for the future, generating new outbursts of discontent. The same kinds of conflicts repeat, institutional solutions are not found, and, as a result, the general tension grows.

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