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RUSSIA: Sacked for being Jehovah's Witnesses

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Sergei Popov and Aleksandr Takhteyev, two of three Jehovah's Witnesses sacked on 1 April by a private firm on the Russian Pacific island of Sakhalin, claimed to Forum 18 News Service that there was a direct link between the decision to sack them and the ban on the Jehovah's Witnesses in the Russian capital imposed by a Moscow court several days earlier. One manager of the food distribution company told the astonished Jehovah's Witnesses that since the group constituted a "sect", the three would steal money from the firm if told to do so by their religious superiors, and could not therefore be trusted. The firm's senior manager for Sakhalin overtly referred to the Moscow ban in an e-mail justifying the dismissals. "According to the charges, this sect interprets the Bible incorrectly, violates the rights of Moscow citizens, destroys the basis of the family and incites members to commit suicide," he claimed.

Just days after a Moscow court ruled to ban the Jehovah's Witness community in the Russian capital, a private firm on the other side of the country sacked three Jehovah's Witness employees, claiming that as members of the group they might represent a threat to the security of the company. The three young men, sacked on 1 April, were employed at a food distribution firm on the Russian Pacific island of Sakhalin. Two of the three, Sergei Popov and Aleksandr Takhteyev, suggested to Forum 18 News Service at their community's Kingdom Hall in Sakhalin's main town of Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk on 23 April that there was a direct link between the decision to sack them and the Moscow ban.

In the wake of the 26 March Moscow ruling (see F18News 29 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=289), Jehovah's Witnesses in various Russian cities and towns were denied access to buildings they had previously been able to rent (see F18News 13 April 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=297), but this is the first known case of Jehovah's Witnesses being sacked from their jobs in the wake of the ruling.

Popov reported that when the three were summoned to the director's office, they at first thought that they were the subject of an April Fool's Day prank, "but it turned out to be for real." When they asked why they were being sacked, he continued, one manager eventually replied: "Well, you're Jehovah's Witnesses, aren't you? There you are then - because of that." On challenging this in disbelief, Popov told Forum 18, another manager explained that since the Jehovah's Witnesses were a "sect", the three would steal money from the firm if told to do so by their religious superiors, and could not therefore be trusted.

At the end of the 1 April meeting, Popov reported, he and his two colleagues were urged to write statements saying that they were leaving the firm of their own accord, but they refused to do. Takhteyev added that another employee was subsequently forced to compile a negative evaluation of the three Jehovah's Witnesses' work record, and that they were then given the option of either leaving "nicely" or of being sacked on the basis of this negative report.

While Popov, Takhteyev and their colleague Yevgeni Perov are still formally on the pay-roll of the firm ("Nevada"), Popov told Forum 18 that they are not being issued with orders. Since they are paid according to the number of orders they complete, he explained, they are therefore not currently receiving wages.

In a 16 April e-mail message forwarded to the three Jehovah's Witnesses by the general director of "Nevada" on Sakhalin, Yuri Yegorov, the firm's regional director in the Russian Far East states that the dismissal was dictated by security considerations. "It is known from official sources that the question of placing a ban upon the activity of the 'Jehovah's Witnesses' sect has been repeatedly examined by Moscow courts," writes Vadim Polishchuk. "According to the charges, this sect interprets the Bible incorrectly, violates the rights of Moscow citizens, destroys the basis of the family and incites members to commit suicide. It should also be pointed out that France has banned the activity of religious sects on her territory."

In his message, Polishchuk goes on to mention that the Jehovah's Witness employees have distributed religious literature in the workplace. While he does not doubt "the positive intentions of the sect's representatives in this case", he concludes that he cannot alter Yegorov's decision, since the Sakhalin manager would otherwise be "unable to account for the stability of the moral climate and the level of security of material resources" at his firm. Polishchuk acknowledges, however, that "the circumstances of the dismissal may have been overly hasty," and proposes a "peaceful solution" in which employment might be offered "without access to material resources".

Takhteyev emphasised to Forum 18 that he and his colleagues are also seeking a "peaceful solution" and do not wish to involve the courts, since they enjoyed working at the firm and would do so again if possible. So far, he said, the three have submitted an official statement regarding their dismissal to the local labour inspectorate and sought the advice of a lawyer. Popov stressed to Forum 18 that the Sakhalin state authorities are in no way involved.

For more background information see Forum 18's latest religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=116

A printer-friendly map of Russia is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=russi>

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