

Interview with the team behind antijob.net

Antijob

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We have to work most of our lives. Our efforts, time, ideas, successes and failures are compressed into rubles, dollars and euros – impersonal banknotes, which are constantly lacking to fulfill our desires and needs. Typically, work is fraught with wage delays, employers' machinations, nervousness and humiliation from idiotic rules and bosses fooling around.

antijob.net

That's how antijob.net, the most successful anarchist project from Russia, starts its manifest. It's a website where workers can leave a review on their (ex-)bosses, helping each other in finding the job that sucks less. AGA took an interview with the team behind it.

Tell us about the project, its history and its mission. Why did you choose this format?

The project started in the early 2000s. More than 20 years have passed since the first version of the site. It was created in a radical anarchist environment and was designed for young people who had recently graduated from universities, but instead of respect for the profession, they found exploitation and deception in the labor market. These were the main users of the Internet in Russia at that time.

The aesthetics of the site, name and approach are a joke on the Job.ru portal, at that time the largest job search service. It created the illusion of a stable future, everything as usual – happy people in office clothes who are pursuing their career aspirations and strive for some form of American-Russian middle-class dream. In practice, for most of those looking for work in Russia, there are no bright prospects and career aspirations. And if there is, then reality quickly puts them in place.

Reality can be changed, but only the workers themselves can do this, if they understand their position and will fight for better working conditions. The mission of our collective is to promote “direct action” in solving labor conflicts and create a place for coordination of forces in the class struggle, as opposed to the judicial-bureaucratic system, which in fact acts in the interests of our class enemies. To do this, we collect and distribute feedback, which is the voice of the workers themselves. From these we form a database – the “black list of employers”, and the Internet indexing mechanisms help to spread it.

Tell us about the team behind the project.

The team has changed almost completely over the years, but the spirit of anarchism, self-organization, revolutionary spirit and, to some extent, epatage, have been preserved. Although less so than before. Today we are not promoting “radical laziness” as a concept and theft of an employer's property as a method. But now we are talking more about the trade union struggle and direct, acute, conflicts between workers and employers.

For the most part, we all come from an anarchist environment, various political projects or radical political music scenes. Some of the participants are over thirty, some already have children, we are sedate, somewhat cynical, but we still believe in the values of freedom, solidarity, in the

fact that people can organize themselves, draw conclusions from experience and create better kinds of interaction and economy. Well, that one day we will be able to defeat capitalism, the state, hierarchies and all this retrograde nonsense =)

Tell us about the specifics of the situation of workers in Russia and the ex-USSR. What are the laws and practice of their application?

The specifics of Russia is that a rather large layer of laws and norms of the times of the USSR remains, which the state selectively uses. Some laws look more progressive on paper than in many countries, but they still work on the basis of political will – as and when the powers that be. If the current policy is to promote business, then employees will lose the courts, and they will turn a blind eye to violations of the labor law, but if it is necessary to grease the “broad masses”, then employers will be screwed. In general, the levers of influence are somewhere in the heavens.

There are trade unions in Russia, but mostly yellow ones. The largest of them is the FPNR. This trade union is politically engaged with the current government and acts as a labor regulator at the request of the top. It has significant resources of property and political influence, which allows at the level of “service”, such as gifts and vouchers, to achieve some success and sometimes even carry out some generally useful, albeit microscopic in scale, legislative initiatives. As with all yellow organizations, this association cannot even be called “reformist”, because it has no reform goal.

Alternative trade unions are represented mainly by Novoprofs and KTR, these are more workers’ organizations that have influence. The cells carry out a social agenda and in general they have a strong leftist connotation. They are not that radical and use a wide range of methods from strikes to participation in a tripartite commission (employers, trade unions, government officials) that agree on legislative labor amendments. The trade unions we work with often belong to these associations.

There are almost no radical trade unions, to some extent such can be called the recently appeared Courier, whose organizational composition is from the left and close to libertarian environment. Now they are also in the KTR, and using the topic of platform capitalism and Coronavirus, they manage to catch media attention.

Labor issues in Russia are acute, the latest reform of the retirement age has mobilized thousands of people in hundreds of cities for mass actions, caused a wave of indignation, but did not lead to anything. We put forward the slogan of a general strike, which was clearly supported “from below”, but was pessimistically assessed by the trade unions. As a result, the law was adopted with minimal amendments. There is no culture of radical labor protest in Russia at the moment, but we can not exclude that sooner or later this will result in something much more radical than a series of rallies.

Tell us about the impact of the project on society and how it helps in the fight against capital.

For those who write reviews, we help punish the employer – the review greatly affects the reputation of the bosses. It is a very common situation that a former employer pays debts to an employee, having seen a review about himself on AntiJob, if only the employee cancels it. For those who read reviews, we help to avoid cheating, non-payment of wages, etc. In short – the site has a large database of “black employers”, which is well indexed by searches with our help. Anyone who got into our black list finds himself in the first results of a search engine when typing in the name of the company. Thus, new employees and even customers of the fraudulent company begin to bypass it, because the reviews are shown above the information about the company itself.

We also highlight the underside of hired labor. We have rules – only negative reviews get to the site and the employer is wrong by default. We call this the employer’s presumption of guilt. This is how we sift out the countless number of self-praisers that splurge and prevent us from seeing existing problems.

This is useful not only for system critics. For the same employers and politicians, this is an invaluable storehouse of refined information and feedback that they apparently do not know how to use or do not want. We have more than one hundred thousand reviews from several countries about various areas and companies with direct speeches from employees, which allows us to make a good picture of the specifics of work in various areas. And this picture is not very beautiful.

Reviews are not written by activists or politicians, it is easy to find common problems on which left-wing activists and anarchists should build and adjust their optics and rhetoric, these are not only problems with non-payment of wages, but also an acute sense of disrespect, attitude as a thing, frustration – everything that is easily described theoretically by alienation and class contradictions.

We plan to work with this and our end goal is to bring people from the level of presenting the problem to its politicization, and then to action.

Tell us about offline activity around your project.

One of the important offline channels is stickers. We send dozens of envelopes with stickers by regular mail to everyone for free. So those who wish can tag a black employer or simply decorate the streets of their city.

At the beginning of the project, our stickers were spread by dozens of anarcho-groups throughout Russia. By the way, this was a good promotion – in those cities where the biggest spreading happened, we still have the highest visitors count. The secret of success – the stickers were not politicized and simply offered to add their employer to the blacklist. And since there are a lot of dumb employers, the stickers almost were not removed and hung for years at stops and in public transport.

Formally, the site’s team does not conduct other offline activities due to anonymity, but for some time we have actively promoted not only the idea of organizing trade unions (rather as a

concept), but also the organization of “Solidarity Networks” cells – groups that dealt with labor conflicts on the ground.

Such existed at different times in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Novosibirsk, Voronezh, Nizhny Novgorod, Irkutsk, Barnaul.

Some of the actions were successful, they managed to apply pressure in a super-direct format. This was unexpected for employers and atypical even for the police, who rarely intervened. Similar projects periodically flare up again. Recently, a group in the same format, “Moscow Syndicate”, appeared in Moscow, that operates as a Solidarity Network. We did not participate in its organization, but we are always happy to support them with information. We are monitoring this activity and will promote it whenever possible.

Does your team has security risks? There is a constant repressions against activists in Russia. Do you feel pressure from the bosses?

We keep the team anonymous. This is directly related to safety, but equally from the state and employers. There is no great interest from state structures in us. So far there is no experience for someone to be arrested or tracked down for involvement in the project, even despite some politicization. But we are ready for such a turn.

It’s more difficult with bosses. They are directly interested in a conflict with us. We do not delete reviews, sometimes we were offered thousands of euros for “cleaning up reputation”. Of course, for this money, they can find ways to pressure us in different ways, physically or legally. There was a precedent when information was leaked on one of the foreign comrades, who was considered the “owner of the antijob” (including clearly personal and clearly related to police data) and they tried to shake us. But in the end they failed.

We are periodically attacked, DDOSed, and sometimes even hacked. Because of this, we had to pump up security a lot and switch to a new project engine. In general, considering the circumstances, we are constantly scared, that somewhere in the site we have security holes and we can be hacked. If among those who read the text there are comrades who are fond of penetrate testing, we are always grateful for information on vulnerabilities and possible fixes on our website.

We are being sued, in the databases of the courts you can find countless claims against the site for “harm to business reputation”, “disclosure of personal data”, “libel” and so on. Courts go on without us and sometimes even make decisions. Those who threaten to block the site reach us. But not all. For example, we were blocked without notification in Belarus and Kazakhstan. There have been no precedents of police prosecution based on court decisions yet. But if we had some kind of official form of organization, undoubtedly, we would have to leave a lot of nerves and money for legal nuances.

Anonymity greatly hinders further promotion and basic collection of resources. We can even make permanent donations to the site only if we find or create a legal entity. But if we create it, then we will get a lot of problems – [such is the fork].

What about your future plans. You recently started crowdfunding campaign, what do you want to do next?

Our minimum plan is to drive all “competitive” commercial feedback websites into a hole from which they will not get out. There is a lot of them. The demand for reputation cleansing creates supply. Sometimes it gets to the point of absurdity and someone copies all the available information from our site, making a similar domain. Sometimes they even buy ads to push us to lower positions in the search. This is done because there is a problem with working in Russia, and traffic can be monetized. Also, if you do not have a political position, you can also take money for removing reviews.

We have a brand and a reputation, but we strive for convenience and usefulness. Now we are developing a new version of the site, which will be more complex and more difficult to copy, but at the same time much more useful and user-friendly than crude fakes. To do this, we carried out crowdfunding, some of which still goes on the firefund.

We also plan to create a full-fledged platform that will help to collect important information about labor issues, and then help deceived workers to coordinate. Plus it may involve trade unions and other projects that operate in the field of labour. This will undoubtedly require a lot of time and resources in the future, but it can potentially give an opportunity to operate not only in Russia. Now, in this regard, we are building cooperation with the local trade union of workers in the technological sphere, where there are IT engineers who are also interested in such a project.

We have a strong suspicion that there are labor problems in almost all countries, as well as the desire of people to share them. Especially if this can affect the employer’s reputation. Our project cannot go global simply by adding a translation to the site. To be useful to users abroad, you need knowledge of the language for moderation, understanding of local legislation, the nuances of requests and local problems. However, we urge to create similar web projects of comrades from other countries, contact us, exchange experience, assess problems and then look for integration opportunities for joint development and saving resources (including development labor resources). We would like to take advantage of the platform effect that today gives a lot of power to corporations, but change it, make it a local initiative, while maintaining the advantages of “scale” and economy on resources.

If you wish to support the project, you can donate money at www.firefund.net

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