

City rising against methanol terminal

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Contents

Background	3
Local self-organisation	3
Excerpts from the resolution of the meeting	4
Increasing repression	5
Stop protests, by any means necessary!	7
End of the camp	8

Background

Azov is a city of 90 000 inhabitants, located 45 kilometer southwards from Rostov-na-Donu, which is the biggest city in South of Russia. Azov is planned site of liquid chemicals terminal project, which dates back to 1996 but was halted until April of this year due to legal obstacles. Terminal, mainly meant for methanol export, is being built by Azovprodukt, joint venture by DE-CAL (51% of shares, a member of Italian multinational Triboldi) and Roshleboprodukt (Russian corporation which has 49% of shares). Triboldi already controls methanol trade in Mediterranean sea, owning 6 other terminals. The terminal would consist of six chemical storage tanks with common capacity of more than 20 000 cubic meters, a railway connection, a jetty for tanker loading and related infrastructure.

According to plans methanol tanks are to be located only 400 meters, and high-pressure methanol pipeline less than 90 meters from the municipal dwelling zone. People in Molokanovka, suburb to which terminal is built live in separate houses surrounded by gardens, from which most of them are dependent due to permanent economical crisis. According to Russian regulation safety zone around methanol storage should be at least 1000 meters, in Italy a 7 kilometer safety zone is required. Azov sea, which is connected to larger Black Sea only by a narrow channel has an average depth of 4.2 meters only, and only 280 cube kilometers of water — thus a single accident with a tanker carrying poisonous methanol load would destroy the sea ecosystem completely. Shallow water means also dangerous short waves during storms, which have sunk ships with much less dangerous loads in the past. Listing numerous legal violations committed during the project here would mean few people would ever make it to the end of this article...

Local self-organisation

Since 1996 local inhabitants have organised countless pickets and rallies against terminal project, 15 000 people have subscribed the petition with their full personal details. Initiator group for binding municipal referendum has been founded seven times, city council has once decided in favour of the referendum and twice it has make a resolution against the project. However city mayor Evgeni Lesnyak has submitted under the pressure of regional government, although he took the post over from his pro-terminal precedant in last elections by promising not to build the terminal.

Soon after court gave green light to construction in April 8th 2003, local inhabitants began organising protests. First Rainbow Keepers arrived to city 10th of June, organising a continuous information point in the center of the town. On June 26th, July 3th, July 4th and July 7th demonstrations and blockades of the road to construction hours were organised. From 700 to 9000 people participated in demonstrations, almost 10% of the local population participated to the biggest demonstration organised 3th of July. The campaign is supported by one local newspaper, and events got attention of national mass-media. The symbolical protest camp was set up near the construction place.

From 7th of July onwards local people, Rainbow Keepers and Autonomous Action made a continuous blockade on the road leading to the site of the project, this managed to to halt construction for a while. 10th of July a lorry driver tried to ride over blockade, injuring one Rainbow

Keeper. Soon lorry drivers found other ways to the site, and blockade took a more symbolical character.

17th of July in Azov (Rostov region) a meeting demanding an immediate stoppage of methanol terminal construction took place. Action began outside city administration building 5 PM, some 2000 people gathered altogether. Protestors shouted “Stop methanol, jail gang of Chuba!” (Chuba is the governor of Rostov oblast), “There won’t be any terminal!” and “As long as we are united, no one will beat us!”. Soon after beginning of the meeting one participator descended from the roof of the building with ropes writing a graffiti “War against terminal” to wall of the building.

Soon participators of meeting recognized how police officers pulled activist back to the roof attempting to arrest him and his support, so they went on blocking all doors of the building shouting “freedom to heroes!” and “today we are here with placards, tomorrow we will come with spades!”. Redactor of local journal “Chitayka” Yuri Golubev and Cossack ataman Yuri Kolobrodov mediated with officials, and protestors managed to get arrested activists freed.

Protest meeting moved to square of the Third International, where people who have participated to daily blockades of the road to terminal gave speech. When people learned how police officials had attacked senior citizens during blockades and one lorry had hit one participator of the blockade (fortunately without serious consequences), meeting made a resolution and decided to organise next blockade 21st of July.

Excerpts from the resolution of the meeting

“...participators of the meeting have also decided, that in case our demands are not fulfilled, we will began civil disobedience campaign. We will close Rostov-Azov-Starominskaya-Krasnodar highway. Besides this, inhabitants of Azov will maintain their constitutional right and freedom to organise a new protest outside the administration of the city. A strike committee is about to began organisation of a city-wide general strike...”

“..organisators of the meeting, having noticed high activity of the citizens, point out that vast majority of Azov inhabitants who have participated to meeting have declared that they are committed to eliminate the ecological danger by dismatling the terminal and blockading a federal highway, as well as by boycotting дума and presidential elections.”

26th of July there was a symbolical blockade on Krasnodar-Rostov highway, which was organised by people protesting against methanol terminal planned to be constructed to the city of Azov. Because local officials had asked not to organise a blockade since the problem will be solved anytime soon, protesters made a purely symbolical blockade just for a couple of minutes. Some 500 people participated to demonstration altogether. Soon city mayor Peshkov was spotted in the rear of the meeting, and he was surrounded by protesters. After some arrogant answers he tried to withdraw, but when people began shouting “shame on you!”, he had to return almost crying, and had to promise to stop traffic to construction site, take care about construction of a bypass road and to organise a special city дума meeting on the problem of the terminal. People let mayor go, and shouting “Azov wake up, we will win, there won’t be terminal!” people marched by Moscow street to the center of the city.

31st of July police of Azov region decided not to proceed with criminal charges against two anarchist protestors, who were arrested for distributing placards in the city. Criminal charges against Rainbow Keepers who made graffiti on the wall of the city administration during action 17th of July are still pending.

1st of August city administration sent a delegate to symbolical blockade of the road to construction site. Delegate announced, that there will soon be a special meeting in the regional (oblast) administration on the question of the planned terminal, taking into consideration resolutions made in popular meetings 3rd and 17th of July. Before that past mayor had personally promised, that during research on possible solutions of the conflict around methanol terminal the road to construction site will be blocked. There is not yet any signs of this blockade to appear, but delegate demanded from protesters to take measures to calm down social tensions in the city.

Increasing repression

In Friday 1st of August, several police officers invaded camp uprooting tents and verbally abusing participators. Pretext of their action were false claims by terminal staff that ecological protesters had stolen property from the terminal construction site. The same day Andrei Tsarevskiy (Autonomous Action-Rostov) and Ivan Ovsyannikov (Autonomous Action-Yaroslavl) were arrested for distribution of posters and leaflets about major protest of 9th of August, which has promised to blockade Krasnodar-Rostov highway in case administration has not taken steps to halt the construction.

In contradiction with police claims, distribution of leaflets and posters is completely legal. It is unlikely police had any doubt on this either, since Tsarevskiy and Ovsyannikov were not fined but they just spent 7 hours in a police station, during which police was abusing and threatening activists with torture and burning. Police also promised to destroy the whole protest camp. In Sunday 3rd of August police tried to arrest Tsarevskiy another time in the centre square of Azov, but city dwellers present in the square began protesting immediately and police had to let him go. During weekend, 3 activists were also arrested for lack of the registration.

5th of August workers of the terminal tried to destroy blockade which protestors are maintaining in the supply road every day during working hours. Seven persons came to blockade by cars, and began tearing down the blockade armed with nightsticks, handcuffs and pepper spray. Attackers managed to beat up some people, but soon protesters set up a human chain with 20 persons, which attackers could not move. Some protesters were injured, but nobody moved. Soon attackers, apparently from the security of the terminal, realized that they are photographed, and assaulted photographer. He managed to escape, and two chasing guards of the terminal had an unexpected bath in a swamp nearby. Police arrived soon, halting the attack of the terminal security and carrying them away.

6th of August, two Rainbow Keepers were arrested in the area of the terminal. Vladimir and Evgeni tried to climb to a crane, but were caught by workers and beaten up, Evgeni had his rib broken. When protesters learned about this, they organised a meeting in the gates of the construction site and moved to police station around 5.30 PM. Protesters shouted "Freedom to our comrades!", when they learned that Evgeni was imprisoned for five days for "minor hooliganism", they began shouting "Shame on the justice system!"

In legal terms, hooliganism by definition is an act without any motivation, which for sure was not case in this political protest. Vladimir is 17 years old and he was threatened to be sent to children's camp, but in the evening he was released.

7th of August around 9 am security of the construction site came to blockade of the supply line of the terminal. Security ordered to close the protest camp which they claimed to be located to area of the construction site, and threatened to run over the camp with a bulldozer. Security failed to show any documents which could prove that camp was located to area owned by the company.

There were only few people in camp that time, and they had to submit to threats of the security. Tents were pulled down, but after one hour campers came back to set up one tent. Security moved to pull tent down and to catch one activist, but police which had arrived refused to arrest her. After this security calmed down and tried not to interfere during rest of the day. In the morning of 8th of August security once again moved to pull down one of the tents, they also hit two persons who had slept in the tent, and threatened that they will call nazis to attack the camp. Eventually activists had to close the camp, and move to "campaign headquarters", and empty building with few hundred meter distance from the construction site provided by one inhabitant of the Molokanovki area. Plain clothes police kept harrasing camp almost daily basis by invading building without search warrant and without showing their documents, checking documents and arresting people for several hours, but protests had not to move another time since pulling over the house would have been too much even for the local police. Resources of the local police and FSB to clamp down the protest seem to be limitless, 26th and 27th of August from 9 AM to 7 PM two cars with antenna and retranslator were spotted near protest headquarter, so obviously FSB was also attempting to track all discussions taking place in the camp.

In the afternoon of the 8th of August, action for comrades arrested 6th of August was organised. People came to police station with flags and banner "Free Evgeni Chyotov!". 9th of August a blockade of Rostov-Krasnodar highway was organised. Action began with a rally 11 AM, 12.15 participators moved to blockade highway, everything lasted until 3 PM. More than 150 people participated to action, blockade was a mobile one which walked 2.5 kilometres on the highway to one direction and then back to the city, following the same way.

During meeting and demonstration the following slogans were scanned: There won't be any terminal! Azov is unpolluted land, build that terminal to Kreml! Shame on the city mayor! Down with power and capital! There won't be any terminal here! Today we are here with placards, tomorrow with spades! (or alternatively with machine guns) Remove governor Chuba!

There were few skirmishes with police during the blockade, provoked by police and plain-clothes FSB. A couple of times police tried to catch speakers but they failed. Three participators of the campaign were singled out from the march by plain clothes police and FSB, one of them was brutally beaten by six officials. In end of the action police officers wrote down personal details of most of the organisers.

11th of August 7 Am four police officers invaded to camp and arrested two campaign participators, Aleksander Zimovski and Marina Popova. Cops were lead by officer Dimitri Li Chun Shan, and they did not showed any documents to prove their identity and for justification of the arrest. Later people learned that two persons arrested are charged with "minor hooliganism".

Popova was sentenced to 12 days of imprisonment, and Zimovski to 15 days of imprisonment. Prosecutor had 2 witnesses, who gave contradictory testimonies — another said that action (of 9th of August) went on Kirov street, another said it was on Mehtok street. Judge K. A. Gordi-

enko did not allowed accused to use their own lawyer, and public lawyer provided by the state was denied his legal right to make a closing statement.

When 5 camp activists from Rainbow Keepers, Association of Anarchist Movements (ADA, Russian section of IFA) and Autonomous Action went to police station to learn about reasons of the arrests, they were arrested as well. This wave of arrests is for sure because of the blockade of the Saturday, police was just too afraid to arrest people during the demonstration.

In the evening of Monday the 11th, participators of the camp learned that police stops participators in the street, asks their documents, takes documents and then arrests people for the lack of the documents. Arrested people were sent to jail in Rostov-na-Donu. Dees however did not finished his stentence, since he declared a dry hungerstrike, and when he was sent to a hospital due to weakened condition he did not returned to prison.

Stop protests, by any means necessary!

Protest campers and local inhabitants of Azov decided to move protests from Azov to Rostov-na-Donu 25th of August, since the Rostov oblast governor Chuba is in any case the main person responsible for the ecologically disastrous methanol terminal project. Aim was to organise a symbolical “funeral of the nature of Azov”, where local inhabitants would lay flowers in front of the Rostov oblast administration.

This planned ultra-peaceful and ultra-moderate action provoked repression which reached a completely absurd level. Hundreds of police were mobilized to stop this “funeral possession”. Action was planned to take place 11 AM in Rostov, but soon after 6 AM every local train from Azov to Rostov (which is 45 kilometres north from Rostov) was searched by police, and two blockades were set in the road connecting Azov and Rostov. Every bus and mini-bus was searched for potential demonstrators.

Two free buses organised for Azov inhabitants were never allowed to leave for Rostov. Among dozens of people arrested in the road were 4 elderly persons, who seemed to be travelling to a real funeral with their flower buckets, and for sure much more people who just happened to have flowers with them for a reason or another were stopped.

Infamous Rainbow Keepers activist Aleksandr “Dees” Zimbovski was kidnapped by police already the previous day to do the remaining 8 days from the 15 days sentence he had got from co-organising the protest of 9th of August Dees declared a new dry hungerstrike immediately after his arrest, and was eventually released one day in prior end of the sentence, having fasted without water one week.

Protest campaign headquarters (an abandoned building in Azov) was raided 7 AM, fortunately most of the people had left for Rostov in small groups already 5 AM, so only 7 persons were arrested there. Besides Rainbow Keepers, many delegates from 3th general meeting of the Autonomous Action which was finished the day before in a secret location in Azov outskirts headed for the Rostov. But due to total control at least 12 anarchists were arrested on the road, and only 5 made it to Rostov – 4 to be arrested later on in Rostov (among them Marina Popova who was sent to Rostov prison to continue his sentence for action of 9th of August), and the single anarchist who made it there could only watch small picket going on from outside a square, completely sealed by police and guarded by 3 busloads of the notorious OMON and SOBR special forces.

Local inhabitants succeeded a bit better than anarchists, since one of them managed to make it to the protest with a bucket of flowers, which was however torn away from him by police on the spot. Some 20 Rostov ecologists were picketing with this single Azov inhabitant, together they posed a horrible danger to the law and order in Rostov oblast. Generally those few lucky ones who managed to make it to the square were not harrassed anymore, since there was a lot of media present.

Of course police had not any legal pretext for arrests, formally they did it for “clearing the identity” of people, for which Russian police has a right to arrest people for 3 hours. But everyone was kept more than 4 hours, and subjected to abuse, searches, harrassments and FSB interrogations. Some of the arrested faced serious trumped up criminal charges. One Finnish participator of the camp was kidnapped to Rostov from Azov, FSB was obviously trying to find a pretext for his deportation from Russia although he had not broken any laws.

Unfortunately in the very same morning mindless terrorist act took place in Krasnodar, only 250 kilometers south from Rostov, so to some extent public attention was directed out from the huge police repression which maybe also got some legitimization due to terrorists. It is sure that blockades around Azov had no connection to Krasnodar bombs, since they were set up hours before explosions in Krasnodar.

End of the camp

Most of the activist have had to leave the camp due to end of the holidays, but some Rainbow Keepers and Autonomous Action militants are planning to stay in the spot until October. In another hand all-out over-reaction by police forces has proven that protest campaign has really succeeded to make political elite afraid, but repression has also gained some results, and many Azov inhabitants are now afraid to continue protests. 21st of August campaigners were told that construction is now halted without a time limit, and a commission to look issue of ecological problems has finally been set up. Decision by oblast authorities to stop construction seem to be a real one, but there is also testimony that construction still continues.

Activists leaving the camp had mixed feelings, in another hand local authorities had effectively managed to clamp down protests, in latest meeting of September 4th only few hundred local inhabitants too part. In another hand, decision to stop construction has legal force, so in the middle of August few remaining camp participators declared a victory, and that they will continue organising protests if the construction will continue.

Local organisers also considerably toned down their rhetorics, as some extracts from the resolution of the meeting of September 4th show:

“Organisers of the meeting, like always, call to tolerance and mutual respect between inhabitants of the city and the authorities. We are childrens of the same city, and we should live in peace! We ask all the inhabitants, who have revealed provocators, to give them to authorities. We are not interested about destabilization. Organisers of the meeting, who are aware of the high level of activity among local inhabitants, notice that vast majority of Azov inhabitants who participate to demonstrations and meetings have announced that in case powers are not willing to take concrete measures to fulfill their demands, they will boycott Duma and presidential elections or

support any oppositional parties, even radical ones, which are ready to fulfill their demands.”

This “support to oppositional parties” was certainly not seen in any of the previous protests! Resolution for sure reflects differences between mostly anarchist organisers of the camp, and self-proclaimed local leaders of the protests, such as editor-in-chief of the journal “Chitay-Telenedelya” Yuri Golubev, and leaders of the local Cossack organisation, all of whom have their own political interests in regards to elections. Although these were the people inviting anarchists in the first place, they apparently were not so happy about some of the things anarchists were doing.

Some young inhabitants of the city decided to organise a local fraction of Autonomous Action, but it is unlikely that group will have lots of influence to upcoming agenda of the movement when most of the anarchists have left. Almost any of the Rainbow Keeper protest camps face the same dilemma, although in Azov local people were definitely inspired by some new forms of protests which anarchist brought around, in the end many of the campaigns just end up being cards in the hands of competing local power groups. Few local people are ready to take similar risks as anarchists, and Azov camp was much smaller than usual protest camps since warning was received so late – due to these two factors it was not too hard for police to harrass participators of the camp. The radical rhetorics of July and August about electionary boycotts and general strikes is mostly gone now, but however yet it is impossible to say was obvious bluffing by local “leaders” of the campaign enough to make final results. It is unlikely, since in the beginning of the methanol production chain one finds Gazprom, corporation controlling more valuable share of the natural resources than any other corporation on earth. From the very beginnings fight was uneven at least.

It will take months until we may see final results (or lack of them) of the summer actions. But achievements this far show that besides the widespread pessimism small local anarchist movement may give valuable help to local people, even when campaign has practically no any funds.

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