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thing to understand is that, just as you need help, others do too, whether your own case will be resolved positively or not," he underscores. Though Mikhail currently works as a food courier so he can study Swedish on weekdays, he's still a member of Builders in Solidarity and looks forward to returning to construction — and becoming more actively involved in the union again.

Sweden is usually outside of The Beet's purview, but the migrant workers at the heart of its growing shadow economy are not. In the construction sector in particular, many of these migrants hail from the countries that emerged from the Soviet Union's collapse and they still use Russian as their lingua franca. To fight for their rights and combat exploitation, hundreds of these workers have formed Builders in Solidarity (Solidariska Byggare, in Swedish). Freelance journalist Volodya Vagner reports on this rapidly growing Russian-speaking union shaking up the Swedish labor movement.

"I'll happily distribute some of your flyers, but only if they're translated into Ukrainian," proclaims a middle-aged woman sitting in a packed meeting hall in central Stockholm. The man she addresses, 46-year-old construction worker Ivan Semenov, stands on stage in front of the crowd, holding up a Russian-language leaflet with information about labor rights in Sweden. He had just asked the roughly 100 attendees of this Russian-language union meeting to distribute the pamphlet in their neighborhoods.

"Okay, how about this," Semenov suggests calmly. "Anyone who wants to translate it into their preferred language is welcome to do so. And in the meantime, those who want to can start spreading this Russian version." As the meeting ends, several workers from various corners of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia grab copies of the flyer as they shuffle past.

Born in Mariupol, Semenov used to work as a business developer in Donetsk. When war came to Ukraine in 2014, he and his family were forced to flee due to his involvement in pro-Maidan activism. In one traumatic episode early in the conflict, Semenov was almost busted at a separatist checkpoint. Luckily

for him, the 500 Ukrainian flags in the trunk of his car remained undiscovered.

After stopovers in Kyiv, western Ukraine, and Estonia, Semenov moved to Sweden with his wife and daughter in 2021. Now, he works as a roofer in a Swedish construction sector where the exploitation of migrant workers, like himself, is an increasingly rampant problem. "To put it in plain Russian, there's a whole industry of screwing people over," Semenov says.

Builders in Solidarity

In some sectors of the Swedish economy, particularly in construction, what's commonly referred to as "labor market criminality" has become endemic, and the question of how to combat it is near the top of the country's political agenda.

Migrant workers often fall prey to subcontractors who have learned to game the system, exploiting their employees' lack of familiarity with the local language and rules. Often hired under informal arrangements, workers are paid in cash, frequently cheated out of wages entirely, fired on a whim, and denied legally mandated benefits. Migrants from former Soviet countries are frequently found among both the culprits and victims of such exploitation.

A peculiarity of the Swedish system facilitates these schemes: traditionally, the state doesn't oversee labor relations. Instead, the country's labor unions are supposed to collaborate with employer organizations to regulate wages, ensure decent working conditions, and enforce compliance. This so-called "Swedish model" is meant to ensure that organized labor holds the power rather than politicians.

But for migrants who have been cheated or mistreated on the job, it means they can rarely expect support from the police. Instead, the authorities typically refer those seeking help

ogy or identity, but rather with attitudes towards the foundational principle of union organizing — solidarity. In their opinion, much of the problem lies in the individualist ethos most members were socialized into in their home countries.

Both Mikhail and Semenov point to the contrast between the social norms they grew up with and those prevalent in Sweden. "There's this view that what's within my apartment is mine and what's outside my door is not. In Sweden, everything is your home: your city, your street, your sea, your forest, which is why people don't litter. That's not how it works in Russia," Mikhail says.

For Semenov, a traffic analogy best sums up the difference. "Here, drivers respect the turning lane, which means traffic flows smoothly. Where I'm from, that doesn't work, because people squeeze ahead, feeling smart for having cheated the system. But when everyone does it, you get gridlock and everyone loses in the end," he laughs, shaking his head. According to both him and Mikhail, this rationale also colors their countrymen's initial view of unionism.

"For now, most people join the union because they have a concrete problem," Semenov explains. "Once their problem is solved, they say thanks a lot, but I don't want to keep paying dues. They look at the union as a service provider." He says part of his motivation as an activist is the hope that the union's help may trigger reflection and spread courage of conviction among other workers.

For some, this has happened already. "As my case was being fought, I was thankful that, whatever the result, the union was fighting for me to get justice in a world where there is very little of that," recalls Mikhail. "I made a decision that while I wait for the result of my case, I will try and help others win theirs."

In the year it took for the union to win Mikhail's case, securing him roughly $5,000 in unpaid wages, he participated in several blockades in support of other members. "The important

‘Others need help too’

A tragic irony affecting some union members is that Sweden’s pro-Ukrainian foreign policy is not always reflected in its migration policy. On the contrary, it sometimes works hand in glove with both exploitative employers and repressive regimes.

For one undocumented Belarusian member, the Swedish Migration Agency recently added insult to literal injury by sending him back to Aleksandr Lukashenko’s regime. The worker, who had been injured and exploited on the job, was detained while visiting a police station as part of a drawn-out legal battle with his former employer. His appeals to the Swedish authorities to spare him deportation (given that he could face persecution in Belarus for supporting Ukraine’s defense in both word and deed) fell on deaf ears. Though he crossed the border without incident, he now fears the Belarusian security services may yet find evidence of his “treasonous” convictions.

Union members from notoriously remittance-dependent Central Asian countries face problems of their own. With Russia becoming a less attractive option for those hoping to support their families from abroad, increasing numbers of Kyrgyz and Uzbek workers have come to Sweden in recent years. However, many of them lack legal status in the country.

“I don’t want to go to Russia,” Namazbek Botaliev, a tile-layer recently deported from Sweden, told the SAC-affiliated magazine Arbetaren last fall. At the time, despite living on the shores of Kyrgyzstan’s Lake Issyk-Kul, he remained a member of Builders in Solidarity, partly because the union was still fighting for his unpaid wages. “In Russia, they would say, ‘If you want to live here, why won’t you go to war?’ — but why should I fight against Ukrainians?” he said. Botaliev hopes to be able to return to Sweden, one day.

Semenov, Olishevskiy, and Mikhail believe the most pronounced divide among members has nothing to do with ideol-

to labor unions. Sweden’s more well-established and powerful unions, however, have long forgotten how to handle informal, precarious labor and have done little to organize migrants, who, in turn, often don’t see the point of joining a union.

This is especially true of migrants from post-Soviet countries who seldom have had positive experiences of unions helping them achieve justice.

Semenov had never belonged to a labor union before coming to Sweden. Now, he sits on the board of the country’s most rapidly growing and undoubtedly most unique labor union: Builders in Solidarity. Founded in 2021, it unites migrant construction workers, most of whom hail from post-Soviet countries and have no previous labor organizing experience.

The project came about after Russian-speaking Swedish writer and activist Pelle Sunvisson posed as a migrant from Moldova and spent several months working construction while researching for a novel. Appalled by the exploitation he witnessed, Sunvisson turned to the Stockholm chapter of SAC, a small but feisty syndicalist union guided by libertarian socialist ideals, which has been around for more than a century. Aided by Sunvisson’s language skills and contacts among workers, the syndicalists soon attracted a growing number of exploited migrants. And as their cases piled up, Builders in Solidarity was founded as an independent chapter.

By confronting exploitative employers with aggressive litigation and long-forgotten methods of struggle, like blockading the construction sites of contractors with wage debts, the union has managed to redistribute millions of dollars in unpaid wages and damages. With nearly 1,000 members, Swedish labor market experts are celebrating Builders in Solidarity as a model for how to tackle the issue of migrant labor exploitation.

Unity in pragmatism

With its members hailing from practically every single one of the Soviet Union's successor states, Builders in Solidarity has also become a microcosm of post-Soviet labor migration — with all the nuances of language, politics, and identity that entails.

"Personally, I've never seen a problem in the language thing," Semenov says. "The more you know, the better," he adds. Back in Donetsk, Semenov was happy to send his son to a Ukrainian-language school. As part of his activism, he runs popular Russian-language channels on YouTube and TikTok called "Sweden for Dummies," where he explains Swedish labor rights, among other things.

"If a Lithuanian and an Estonian can speak to one another in Russian about their shared hatred for Russia, why shouldn't we use it as a tool?" Semenov laughs. "After all, I want the Uzbeks and the Kyrgyz to understand, too."

It's a pragmatic approach that most of the union's members seem to embrace, including when it comes to other, potentially thorny issues, like the ideology of its parent organization SAC. The organization's offices, which Builders in Solidarity also uses for its meetings, are adorned with posters advocating internationalist class struggle, antifascism, and feminist values. "My sense is that most members either aren't aware of SAC's anarcho-syndicalist orientation or understand little about it," says 53-year-old Nikolay Olishevskiy, a Builders in Solidarity board member from the Riga suburb of Jūrmala.

Like most members, Olishevskiy joined the union to help resolve a workplace conflict. But he happily agreed to join the board because he's long been a convinced anarchist. In contrast, most of his fellow union members don't have such a clear-cut political stance. "When they encounter something reminiscent of the USSR, like the melodies of certain songs or rhetoric of class struggle, they may be puzzled by this. But they quickly brush it aside and accept it as an inevitable quirk, the way anyone from the region has learned to accept the peculiarities of any organization or state structure they may have had to deal with," Olishevskiy explains.

When Builders in Solidarity marched at the front of Stockholm's radical May Day parade this spring, some members had mixed feelings about the rainbow flags other participants waved, Semenov recalls. "What I tell people is, look, that's not our concern, just as we don't have theological discussions over whose religion is most correct," he says with a smirk.

This pragmatism seems to work surprisingly well despite the geopolitical conflicts — hypercharged by questions of culture and identity — raging across the members' home countries. But that's not to say the union shies away from engaging with the most sensitive issue of all — Russia's war in Ukraine.

In the spring of 2022, as Ukraine mobilized several union members who happened to be in the country when Vladimir Putin's tanks rolled in, Builders in Solidarity raised funds to support them and their families.

According to Mikhail, a construction engineer in his thirties who grew up in a Moscow suburb but left Russia out of disgust for the war, most of the union's members are sympathetic to the Ukrainian cause. "The few exceptions that may exist certainly don't voice their views," he says. (Mikhail declined to share his last name for fear of reprisals against his family.)

Mikhail's friend and fellow union member, Artem Siver, who fled his home city of Konotop in Ukraine's northeastern Sumy region in the spring of 2022, shares this view. "As far as I can tell, all the other members, whether from Russia or Belarus, are reasonable guys. They all understand the situation, that people are dying, and just how painful and incomprehensible it all is," the 39-year-old carpenter says.