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# **“It Felt like a Strike Was in the Air at the Beginning of the Invasion.” A Conversation with Sasha Talaver (Feminist Antiwar Resistance)**

## **« Cela donnait l'impression que la grève était envisagée au début de l'invasion. » Entretien avec Sasha Talaver (Résistance féministe antiguerre)**

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Volume 44, numéro 2, 2023

Formations of Feminist Strike

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1109378ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1109378ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Mount Saint Vincent University

ISSN

1715-0698 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Robbe, K. & Talaver, S. (2023). “It Felt like a Strike Was in the Air at the Beginning of the Invasion.” A Conversation with Sasha Talaver (Feminist Antiwar Resistance). *Atlantis*, 44(2), 90–94. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1109378ar>

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# “It Felt Like a Strike Was in the Air at the Beginning of the Invasion.” A Conversation with Sasha Talaver (Feminist Antiwar Resistance)

by Ksenia Robbe and Sasha Talaver

**Keywords:** Feminist Antiwar Resistance; International Women’s Day; Labour Day; labour rights; mothers against war; reproductive labour; Russia’s war against Ukraine

**Authors:** Ksenia Robbe’s research engages with postcolonial and postsocialist transitions and develops critical perspectives on these processes through the studies of memory, time, and feminist practices in East European and Southern African literature, film and visual art. She is a Senior lecturer at the University of Groningen, the Netherlands.

Alexandra (Sasha) Talaver is a PhD candidate in Gender Studies at the Central European University, Vienna. She explores the opportunities, limitations, and tactics of women members of the Soviet Women’s Committee in advocating for reproductive justice. She is co-editor of the book *Feminist Samizdat: 40 Years After* (Moscow: Commonplace, 2020). Aside from her academic work, Sasha is involved in feminist activism and is one of the coordinators of the Feminist Anti-War Resistance, which was founded in Russia on the day after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

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This conversation with Sasha Talaver, one of the organizers of Feminist Antiwar Resistance (FAR) took place in August 2023. FAR is a movement founded by Russian feminists on February 25, 2022, the day after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and it has since been at the forefront of antiwar activism. In late 2022, FAR was included in the list of foreign agents in Russia. In 2023, the movement was awarded the Aachen Peace Prize.

At the beginning of the interview, Sasha confessed that after a year and a half of daily activist work, she as well as many of her colleagues feel burnt out and exhausted. She warned me that she might sound quite pessimistic and disappointed. Given this, I was especially grateful that she shared her reflections on the idea and tactic of strikes in feminist movements in Russia, and as we spoke I learned that she connects the future of antiwar and feminist activism with practices of strike action.

**Ksenia Robbe:** Employing strike as a conceptual metaphor or a way of organizing has been one of the FAR’s tactics since the beginning of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. For instance, on May 1, 2022, Labour Day, the movement organized an action called “Antiwar May 1: Feed pigeons, not war.” Participants were called to come to places in the city that have the word “peace” in their names and to feed pigeons. The idea was to withdraw from the war economy to which they contribute through productive or reproductive labour, and that they gather and meet like-minded people. But before talking about this and similar actions, I wanted to ask if this was the first time that the concept of strike was invoked as part of feminist events in Russia, for instance those that took place on March 8th or May 1st.

**Sasha Talaver:** As far as I know, feminist strike was invoked before, on March 8. It was undertaken by particular leftist initiatives—rather small groups. This is as much as I know about that. I might have missed something, and I have not undertaken research on this topic.

The Socialist Feminist Alternative organized a strike on International Women's Day in 2020, and later. It was definitely inspired by the international women's strikes that took place in 2016 and 2017, but of course the scope of the strike was pretty small. Also, in Russia, a feminist strike has additional obstacles which are connected to the fact that March 8 is a day-off, which makes it difficult to make your absence visible at a workplace. So the Socialist Feminist Alternative organized a strike, I think, on March 5 and March 6, and that was a feminist strike. This and later strikes around March 8 were probably mostly student strikes. I remember that I was teaching Foundations of Gender Studies back then at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow. The course took place on Saturdays, and it was held online, and there was a strike on March 6. It took place only during particular hours and mostly at universities such as the HSE and Moscow State University. Some of my students asked me whether I would support the strike. "Of course," I said, "but let's reschedule our class because it's also kind of weird to miss a gender-studies class in Russia because you are doing a feminist strike." I think a similar strike took place in 2021, but I don't think it had any substantial message, at any rate, I cannot remember it now. So, that is my experience of feminist strikes in Russia. Earlier, I had personal encounters with feminist strikes at, for example, the Central European University in Budapest on March 8. There, it was not a day off, so there was a real strike. There was also an opportunity for gathering in spaces outside the classrooms. That was in 2018.



**Figure 1:** A poster for the FAR action, *Antiwar May 1: Feed pigeons, not war*, organized in 2022.

**KR:** And what about using strike as a metaphor? I'm thinking about the instances of framing feminist activism in terms of work—of refusal to work as a type of protest.

**ST:** I think that we all have some problems with metaphorical meanings of "strike" because it risks devaluing the strike as an actual political tool. If we call any type of public protest a strike without implying that it has to include the refusal to work, I think this can really turn a strike into another fancy pop-feminist word that would lose its political potential completely. But at the same time, to be honest, the strike that the FAR organized on May 1, that called on people to refuse work that reproduces a society which reproduces the war, was also metaphorical in a sense. We did not pay enough attention to organizing local communities that would go on strike, yet it was really quite successful, that people met each other and that they found new comrades. At the same time, when I think it over, it had nearly nothing to do with a real strike. For me it was still important that it was so explicitly connected to labour. And we did our best, moreover, to contextualize it within a history of both feminist and labour movements, not to lose this focus that it is our labour, productive and reproductive, that allows this society to operate. We actively used the book *A Dangerous Unselfishness: Learning from Strike Actions* [Sheill 2019]. We translated some cases from this book which were relevant. The idea was to really set a foundation for thinking seriously about strikes. After this first experience we thought that it was worth working more with this format and topic, and to develop them further. But then, as often happens in activism, we ran out of energy, capacity, and time, and lots of other things happened along the way.

**KR:** Thank you for elaborating on this dilemma between the physical and metaphorical in feminist strikes. It's one of the questions we've been continually thinking about when preparing this special issue. Now, I'd like to talk about the labour rights support which FAR was providing to workers, especially to those workers who were expressing antiwar opinions, or who refused to participate in the war in one way or another. For this purpose, you started the Antifund that provides legal and psychological support and that also collaborates with the projects Antijob and Antiwar Sick Leave, which have similar agendas. How important has this type of work been for FAR?

**ST:** Actually, I think Antifund is in the process of restructuring and rethinking itself. If I remember correctly, it is currently on hold. It is a project that brought together FAR, Antijob, and Antiwar Sick Leave. It unites three different initiatives that are concerned with labour rights, women's rights, and the antiwar process. The idea was for it to provide legal help and support to people who were fired for their antiwar stance. The idea was also to accumulate data about strikes, to circulate different types of useful manuals, to establish connections with local activists or workers' groups, and so on. However, I think that the most important part of it was the legal advice. The number of applications for consultation was quite high at some point. It worked as a kind of trade union for people without trade unions or without trade-union experience.

**KR:** I know that this seems to be a time of exhaustion, but it's also important to reflect on what has been done and could be done in the future. If we can return to the beginning of the war, I remember, at that point many professional associations issued antiwar statements—teachers, students, doctors, etc. How important, in your opinion, are such professional communities, especially those of them that involve care work, in terms of generating resistance to patriarchal (bio)politics? Can attempts at organizing mothers' resistance against the war—if you consider that a possibility at all—use the methods or rhetoric of strike?



**Figure 2:** A photo from the action *Antiwar May 1: Feed pigeons, not war*, with the word **MIP** (which translates from Russian as both 'peace' and 'world') formed using grains.

**ST:** That's a great question. As for professional communities, I think that they play one of the most important roles for antiwar mobilization. We speak about different types of professional communities who have the opportunity to create small, invisible antiwar networks through the workplace. And as far as I know, they still exist, maybe not *en masse*, but definitely there are different groups connected with each other. Of course, my knowledge mostly concerns universities. That's definitely where it's happening. I can also see it, as anecdotal evidence, in schools. For example, many people sent us official letters by state authorities addressed to their company concerning the war. Sharing such letters plays an important role. It doesn't mean, of course, that they are organized at their workplace, but, nevertheless, they use their workplace, and access to the information that their workplace provides, for antiwar resistance. Of course, at the beginning, when all these letters appeared, that's what also inspired our strike. It felt like a strike was in the air at the beginning of the invasion. Everyone was talking about different types of strikes. Antiwar Sick Leave developed this idea of antiwar sick leave which people can take to go on a kind of invisible and safe strike. There were Students Against War who also called for a strike. There are numerous leftist organizations who also tried to organize and participate in strikes. I think many hoped that it would end soon. I was also one of those who was absolutely charmed by the idea of a strike. And I also believed in it.

I was familiar with research by Stephen Crowley [2021] who argues that labour protest is the only protest which has ever been able to achieve any results in Russia; it's the only type of protest that is taken seriously. Basically, the subject of labour is the only political subject in Russia. Crowley compared the state's reaction to labour protest and to political protest and showed that if the former grows large, then the president, or at least the mayor of the city, will go and talk to these people and try to do something for them. Whereas political protest is always framed as being organized by enemies of the state. Crowley says that if protest has a future in Russia, then it is definitely protest that is organized around labour because this is respected. But often such protests do not get politicized. In contemporary Russia, they do not get further than a salary raise, or a change to the working conditions. And that's why I was really impressed by all these letters from professional communities because it was incredible how people were able to self-organize immediately to react to this war. I think in the end it turned into some meaningful collaborations for certain

professions that have the potential for collaboration: for example, Animation Artists against the War are making cartoons against the war. However, most of these letters were just dismissed.

**KR:** That's very interesting. And what about the mothers?

**ST:** Yes, we tried to work with them as well, a lot, also through the idea of reproductive labour rights. And the fact that mothers know the price of a person's life and that's why they are the ones who are the most sensitive to the changing circumstances of life, but also to the situation when this life is taken away, because they know how much it costs, in a sense. So, we try to also promote this narrative about reproductive labour, which I would say is also a kind of trap. It's not easy to promote simultaneously two things: a pretty radical reconsideration of your life in terms of care as labour *and* the idea of a strike... But it was important that these groups of mothers often appeared by themselves. As I said, FAR organized a support group for mothers and other relatives of those who were mobilized. FAR also organized our own group of mothers within the movement, those activists who have motherhood experience. We invited them to write a petition—"Mothers Against the War"—that we launched, which actually garnered about 110,000 signatures—people clearly stating that they are against the war. That was quite impressive. And that was already in late 2022 when there was no illusion regarding the level of repression against those who stood against the war.

**KR:** That was quite powerful.

**ST:** Yes, it was. And then also some of our activists decided to participate because many mothers' groups opened online chat groups. They participated in these groups, and they would share some useful links, but they would also specifically support those women who said something against the war as such, because, certainly, not all the women in these groups were against the war, and sometimes even those who articulated antiwar positions were bullied by their chat-mates. So, our activists would support these women. As you know perfectly well, in Russia there is a long tradition of mothers' or wives' protests. But these protests have always been framed in a sentimental way: it's about women's hearts and their caring natures. A woman has a special place, a special heart, but it has never been framed in the context of labour. I would say that's for a reason, because it's really difficult to see these revolutionary ideas. And I think

that in this petition one can see how our language changed dramatically from the one that we used for May 1, where we had a clear focus on reproductive labour strikes. We see a potential in this type of mobilization. Probably we interpret it in our own way, while women who participate in this mobilization interpret it in another way, and they should go ahead with their own interpretation. The goal is, of course, not to educate them but actually to create a platform for them to organize and grieve.

**KR:** Under the current conditions in Russia, a feminist strike is, of course, impossible. And it's very difficult to think about the future now. But I'd still like to ask: how do you see the future of strike as method? Does it have a future?

**ST:** I still think that a strike is probably our main hope, to be honest. And I think that even though our experience was not that successful, it was good for the beginning, and it was also educational in any case. Also, throughout these years we accumulated a good number of different materials and manuals and ideas on how strikes can be organized. Now the task for all of us is to get over our burnout and to maybe develop new visions of working with these different communities, mainly supporting them. It's also important that we don't co-opt their agenda but rather, establish contact and trust, which can also perhaps strengthen some of the movements and protests that are already happening. There is an independent centre called Monitoring Labour Protest, and they regularly count the number of labour protests in Russia. According to their data, in 2022, 358 labour protests were registered, which means more than one protest a day. Seventy-two of these labour protests involved a complete or partial work stoppage. And most often these were strikes.

**KR:** That's impressive.

**ST:** Yes, this surprises everyone when they learn it. And then there is an amazing Telegram channel called Zabast.com (Забастком), which, again, one rarely knows about and which accumulates all the info. And it's also barely visible on social media. Of course, this type of perspective normally comes from underground leftist movements in Russia. I think that's why it's also not that popular yet. Also, not everyone in feminist antiwar resistance identifies themselves as left feminists or social or Marxist feminists. There are people with different political perspectives, so I don't represent some consensus po-

sition. But I personally believe we should invest more effort in working with this type of strike and thinking about a care strike or reproductive strike. However, this is not facile because care is moralized, and Russian hospitality, openness, and mutual support are seen as part of the national identity, so it's a challenging task to reclaim it as labour. Now I came up with an idea. I decided to ask this question in public as often as I can: why are all pregnant women not paid the same while they are doing the same job—being pregnant and giving birth? So maybe through these types of questions, there is a chance to raise the issues of reproductive labour in Russia, at least within the feminist community because, unlike, for example, the US, Argentinian, or Polish feminists, many Russian feminists have been very focused on domestic violence and much less on issues of reproduction. Of course, *Feminism for the 99%* [Arruzza, Bhattacharya and Fraser 2019] was translated, but this type of feminism was not that present in Russian academic and activist circles. However, for many years Anna Temkina and Elena Zdravomyslova have been running a research project on motherhood and birth culture in Russia which can inform feminist struggles in the sphere of reproduction too. Yet, to combine such a feminist perspective with antiwar activism and social mobilization under an authoritarian state seems to be a really hard job. But I believe it's needed.

**KR:** Thanks so much for this conversation.

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