

"We came together to solve concrete problems," he said. "But all we heard from the podium was how badly off we are."

Indeed, the essence of the speeches was summarized in the conference resolution: "The socio-economic status of residents of the North indicates that the many years of intensive exploitation of natural resources in that region have been conducted without regard for social and demographic conditions. The economic situation has taken on a dangerous aspect. All of this has led to a radical worsening of living conditions and quality of life for workers, especially aboriginal peoples.

The social development of the regions and the material wellbeing of the workers do not correspond to their contribution to the economy of the republic and of the country. Existing forms of compensation do not cover the additional expense associated with differences in the cost of living, working and climatic conditions, nor does the level of wages and salary correspond to actual labour expenses.

Many of the conference participants with whom we spoke were perplexed:

"We knew all of this before the conference started. Why assemble so many people from such distant regions? Just to listen once more to speeches by the leaders of the oblast trade union councils? But surely the real power is with the workers? Why weren't they allowed to speak from the podium?"

There were also other proposals which, in my view, made good sense.