

# Vladimir Putin inaugurated as Russian president

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On Monday, Vladimir Putin was inaugurated as president of the Russian Federation for the next six years.

The Kremlin ceremony marked by tsarist-style pomp, had been preceded the day before by brutal attacks by riot police on demonstrators who had joined a Moscow rally of some 20,000 supporters of the anti-Putin opposition. At least 400 people, among them opposition leaders Sergey Udaltsov, Boris Nemtsov, and Alexey Navalny, were arrested.

However, six months since the beginning of the protests it is clear that the predominantly middle class protest movement has failed to gain any support from the Russian working class, mainly due to the opposition's right-wing, pro-capitalist program.

Putin's third term as president will be marked by a deepening economic crisis and geopolitical tensions that threaten to escalate into a war between the major powers.

The world economic crisis has plunged Russia into a deep and prolonged recession, fully revealing the rotten nature of post-Soviet capitalism. Despite record high prices for oil and gas, the main sources of state revenues, the economy has failed to recover.

Real wages, which had seen a steady increase from 2000 to 2007, have stagnated for the past three years while the inflation rate remains very high. According to official estimates, the absolute number of unemployed has risen by 9 percent since 2008. Given that a significant number of the jobless fail to register, however, this number barely reflects that real situation.

Some economists correctly compare the period Russia is entering with the social and economic crisis that started in 1991. But it is not only the economic slump they have in mind when evoking this comparison. The restoration of capitalism led to the

worst decline in living standards seen anywhere in peacetime. Now, the government is preparing drastic austerity measures aimed at further undermining living standards following the social counterrevolution of the 1990s.

The first moves to implement these far reaching cuts were made during the infamous "modernization" campaign of former President Dmitry Medvedev, who has now become prime minister. The alleged struggle against corruption translated into a pro-business program with vicious attacks on the social and democratic rights of working people. However, these measures, as catastrophic as they were for working people, were not sufficient to satisfy the needs of the financial elites.

If Russian and Western commentators now point out that Medvedev fell short of their expectations, they in fact mean that his government failed to provide for the massive attacks on the working class they deem necessary for a "favorable investment climate" and a competitive economy. In their eyes, every social right is a superfluous burden, and any labor force is too expensive as long as it is unable to compete with the sweatshop conditions of Chinese and Vietnamese workers.

While a good deal of suspicion toward Putin and his clique remains, the ruling elites in Russia and the West hope that he will accomplish what his predecessor failed to do: to push through unprecedented attacks on the living standards of broad layers of the population in the face of all opposition from the working class.

In his programmatic articles for 2012, Putin emphasized that he will continue Medvedev's policy of "modernizing" the economy. Leading Kremlin officials have already voiced their commitment to "Strategy 2020", an austerity agenda that includes the increase of

the retirement age to 63 years by 2030, comprehensive privatizations in 2012-2015 and the slashing of wages.

While social tensions are rising at home, the Kremlin sees its geostrategic and economic interests abroad increasingly undermined by the escalating aggression of US imperialism and its allies in the oil-rich Middle East. The war against Libya and the plans for military interventions against Syria and Iran by a US-led Western alliance are a direct attack on the interests of the Russian and Chinese ruling elites in these regions.

The extent of the geopolitical tensions between the major powers was once more underscored by the threat of the Russian chief of the armed forces, Nikolay Makarov, to launch a pre-emptive attack on sites of the US missile defense system in Eastern Europe. (See “Russian general threatens pre-emptive attack on US missile defence system in Europe”)

The inauguration of Putin, who has traditionally been less compromising towards the West than Medvedev and who relies on nationalist circles in the secret services and armed forces, will lead to a further intensification of tensions with Washington.

Under these conditions, the Putin regime is highly unstable. There are deep divisions within the ruling elite over how to implement the austerity measures and how to respond to the wars waged by US imperialism. At the same time, Putin and the ruling party “United Russia” are growing increasingly unpopular among the population, while the opposition parties are largely discredited.

If Putin received 64.6 percent at the presidential elections in March, it was largely due to the widespread hostility of the working class toward the right-wing opposition parties that have led the protest movement, which erupted after the rigged parliamentary elections of December 2011. Shortly after the parliamentary elections, Putin’s approval ratings, which had been plummeting for a year, fell to an eight-year record low of 44 percent. The ruling party “United Russia” had suffered a major setback at the elections, losing over 15 percent of the vote despite heavy ballot rigging.

In the face of a social counterrevolution, which will inevitably lead to an explosion of social tensions, and the growing threat of a major war, workers are left without any political representation.

The parliamentary opposition—the Stalinists from the KPRF, the Liberal-Democrats and “Just Russia”—have

given their support to the austerity and anti-democratic policies of “United Russia” in the past. The non-parliamentary opposition is thoroughly right-wing and often sponsored by the US government.

The trade unions are fully integrated into the state structure. The official Federation of Independent Trade Unions in Russia (FNPR) demonstrated its support for the Kremlin regime on May 1, when it organized a rally in Moscow attended by Putin, Medvedev and several other senior government officials. Other so-called independent unions, such as the MPRA, differ only in that they deem it necessary to criticize the FNPR “from the left” from time to time.

Pseudo-leftist groups such as the Russian Socialist Movement (RSM) and the Russian section of the Committee for a Workers’ International cling to the coattails of the Stalinists, liberals and trade unions. On May Day, a grinning Boris Kagarlitsky, one of the leading figures in the RSM, shared a platform with Stalinists, liberals and National Bolsheviks at the misnamed “Left Forum”. What unites these reactionary forces is their fear of an independent movement of the working class against social austerity and war.

The coming period is rife with dangers for the working class, which it will be only able to face if it is armed with a socialist and international program and a revolutionary leadership. The critical task in the coming period will therefore consist in reviving the great socialist traditions of the working class in Russia, by building a section of the ICFI, the Trotskyist world party of revolution.



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