

Massive fire in Rostov, Russia destroys 123 houses

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On Monday, August 21, a massive fire erupted in the historic centre of the southern Russian city Rostov-On-Don. It quickly spread to 10,000 square metres and destroyed 123 residential houses. One pensioner died in the fire, and dozens of people were injured. Survivors of the fire and Rostov residents widely believe that the fire was started intentionally by construction companies that have sought for months to buy the houses in this very district.

The outbreak of the fire was reported at 12:52 p.m. It reportedly started in an abandoned house on the Theatre Square in the city centre, and quickly spread to other houses and streets, partially due to a strong wind. Dozens of people immediately had to leave their houses, with many of the young helping elderly people to flee. Numerous gas pipelines exploded (For footage of the fire [click here](#)). One hundred twenty-three residential houses, many of which were made of wood, burned down before the fire was extinguished by firefighters.

One pensioner who was not able to leave his house in time, died in the fire. According to local officials, 58 people were injured. At least 218 families were affected by the fire, many of which lost all of their property and belongings (For footage of the devastation in the aftermath of the fire [click here](#)). In total, some 1,500 people are expected to ask for government support in the wake of the fire.

The Kremlin has promised some 600 million roubles (a little over US\$10 million) to help the victims of the fire, but has a poor record in terms of providing the material help promised in cases of disasters. Moreover, the local administration and the Kremlin in Moscow have a sinister record in covering up the real causes and consequences of disasters such as this fire (See: “Flooding in Krymsk: Kremlin covers up causes and consequences”). So far, the Investigative Committee, a federal body, has only levelled charges of negligence at local services over the fire.

Even though issues such as the massive cutbacks in fire fighting stations in Russia in the past quarter century and the extremely decrepit housing infrastructure have contributed to this disaster, evidence strongly suggests that the fire was in fact instigated with the aim of making the houses and their residents disappear from this area.

The district is one of the poorest in the city, with many streets going without pavement, sewerage and running water. The slum-like district was separated from the rest of the centre by a large fence. However, the land here is the most valuable in the city and, according to local online news source [donnews.ru](#), has been hotly contested among construction companies. Just 200 metres away, the Teatralny Square in the city centre will be used in 2018 for a fan zone and live screening of the 2018 FIFA World Cup which will take place in the nearby city of Sochi. High-ranking government officials and FIFA representatives are expected to come to Rostov for this occasion.

Just two weeks before the fire, [donnews.ru](#) published an investigative report, detailing how numerous local residents had received visits from murky representatives of construction companies who were eager to buy their property and threatened to torch their houses.

Valentina Livshits, 62, who lived in a house on the Teatralny Prospekt before the fire, told the newspaper that two men in sun glasses appeared at her house on August 4, declaring that she would have to soon leave it. “They resembled the gangsters of the ’90s,” Livshits said. One of them told her that he had to report to the head of Rostov’s city administration, Kushnaryov, that she was ready to leave her house on their conditions. He then told her: “I’ve already bought everything else in this area and will build something here.” The two men reportedly declined to name the company they were working for and offered her 2.4 million roubles for her property (approximately US\$41,000).

“I told them that the property was worth twice as much and that I would never be able to buy something in the centre for 2.4 million roubles,” Livshits continued. In response, the men threatened her that a court would rule to have her thrown out.

Another resident, who was also visited by “men in black,” was told: “If you won’t give it to us for the price we offer, the property will be confiscated by the mayor’s office for the needs of the city.”

Another resident, Nina Reshetnik, indicated that some 70 percent of the people previously living here have already left the district. Reshetnik told donnews.ru: “A month ago some people came to those who live in the most dilapidated houses of the district. They offered the inhabitants between 100 and 600,000 roubles for one-hundredth of a hectare of land. But when they were told that you can’t buy anything on this kind of money, they responded: ‘Then it’s easier to torch you than to pay anything.’”

After this, a series of fires started in the neighbourhood. One resident told donnews.ru that he witnessed two fires at his house within two months. “The second time I was sleeping and my landlady managed to wake me up in time, otherwise everything would have ended in tragedy. Before this, there were never fires at my house, even though I have been living here for a very long time and have already seen hotter summers.”

No less than five houses went up in flames on August 5. On August 7, three houses started burning at the Chuvashsky corner. The residents of one of the affected houses had been previously told to leave their home, and neighbours reportedly spotted someone who set the fire. All of these houses were also all affected by the latest massive fire on August 21.

The fire in Rostov has sparked enormous outrage throughout the country, some of which is reflected in angry comments on social media and in articles such as the one quoted above. In an indication of extreme hostility and distrust among the working class and broader sections of the population toward the state and corporations, almost no one believes that this fire was an accident.

A petition started in the wake of the fire, which urges the city administration to cancel a celebration in the city center for a local holiday, just near the site of the disaster, and to instead use these funds for the needs of the hundreds of displaced families, has gathered over 120,000 signatures within just a few days.

It is significant that many residents and commentators on the internet felt reminded of the 1990s, a period which

most Russians remember as deeply traumatic, as the most thuggish and criminal methods were employed to plunder the population and whatever had remained of the Soviet economy.

For millions of workers, intellectuals, and youth, it becomes ever more clear that the restoration of capitalism in the USSR has resulted in a seemingly unending nightmare. Social inequality in Russia is higher than in any other major economy of the world. The top decile of the population now owns a stunning 89 percent of total wealth in Russia, more even than in the United States where the top decile of the populations owns 78 percent of all wealth (See: “Report documents record levels of social inequality in Russia”). Russia has the third-highest number of billionaires in the world (96) and some 79,000 US-dollar millionaires. Meanwhile, some 56 percent of Russian workers make less than 31,000 rubles (\$531) a month.

The economic and social crisis has further been aggravated by the sanctions of the US and EU against Russia. With all the anti-Putin propaganda in the Western media, the truth is that the brunt of the sanctions is borne not by Putin and his cronies, but by the Russian working class which has seen its living standards further decline as the government has cut social spending while safeguarding and increasing the fortunes of the oligarchs as much as it could.

In the final analysis, the extreme criminality of the ruling class that has emerged out of capitalist restoration in the USSR is only a particularly acute expression of the decay of the world capitalist system. As the Grenfell Fire in London earlier this summer has shown, workers throughout the world are increasingly confronted with an ever more criminal ruling class, and ever more open assaults on their very social and physical existence. It is in them that workers in Russia will find their allies in fighting their own deeply corrupt and degenerate bourgeoisie.



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