

Russia: Protests against officials erupt in wake of Kemerovo fire

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The horrific fire at the Kemerovo “Winter Cherry” shopping mall and entertainment center on Sunday, March 25, has brought social and political tensions in Russia to a boiling point.

On Tuesday, March 27, several thousand people in Kemerovo protested in the city center, calling for the resignation of local authorities. Throughout the country, people are outraged over the obvious criminality that lay behind the total disregard of fire regulations at the mall, and the attempts by officials to cover-up the magnitude of the disaster.

The mall, which is co-owned by the billionaire Denis Shtengelov, had no functioning fire alarm and sprinkling system. Exits were blocked as fire and toxic smoke were filling the building. People had to evacuate on their own, with some jumping out of the windows to escape (see also: “At least 64 dead, including many children, in horrific shopping mall fire”).

The fire spread to over 1,000 square meters and was not extinguished for well over 12 hours. Not a single major local official appeared at the scene of the tragedy as it was evolving. Parents had to wait for over six hours before receiving any information from the police. Residents have also reported that the police seized phones from eyewitnesses trying to record footage and take pictures of the fire.

There has been an enormous outpouring of solidarity from local residents, with hundreds volunteering to donate blood, groceries or otherwise help the families of the victims.

The causes of the fire remain unclear. The TV channel Rossiya 24 reported the most likely cause was an electrical fault, as is the case in the majority of deadly fires in Russia. Five officials have been arrested, including the director of the mall, and might be charged with involuntary homicide by the Investigation Committee.

So far, 64 dead have been confirmed, among them 41 children. Only 25 of them have been identified. According to officials, 69 people were hospitalized and 38 are reported missing. About two thirds of these are youth and children under 18—dozens were under 10 and several were under 5.

However, local residents suggest that as many as 200 or even 300 people, the majority of them children, have perished. At least one school class and several larger groups of children reportedly went to the entertainment center to see the premiere of a new cartoon on the theater’s fourth floor where the fire started. The doors of the cinema were locked, trapping everyone inside when the fire started.

On Tuesday, relatives reported that 85 people remain missing, 70 percent of them children. Several are from nearby towns and villages.

There are also other indicators of an ongoing cover-up by the state. Thus, on Monday, the Investigative Committee, Russia’s main federal investigating authority, confirmed that relatives of the dead are being asked to sign nondisclosure agreements.

On Tuesday, Putin flew to Kemerovo to visit some of the victims, lay flowers at the memorial, and publicly discipline and chide the regional authorities—his usual procedure in every emergency that threatens an eruption of social tensions in Russia. In a televised meeting with local ministers, Putin, forced to state the obvious, grumbled that the fire was due to “some criminal negligence”. He declared Wednesday, March 28, a national day of mourning, and urged people to only trust official information about the fire.

The regional governor Aman Tuleev apologized to Putin for the tragedy “on our territory,” but not to any of the victims or their relatives. In parts that were cut from the official Kremlin transcript, he reportedly went on to state that he saw his main task as preventing demonstrations and protests provoked by the fire.

Meanwhile, up to 3,000 people, including many relatives of victims, gathered in the city center on the Square of Soviets before the city administration, just a few yards from where Putin and Tuleev were meeting. The demonstration had apparently been organized mostly by relatives of victims of the fire.

Igor Vostrikov, who lost his wife, his sister and three children aged 2, 5 and 7, on Sunday, had advertised the meeting on vkontakte, a Russian version of Facebook, writing: “My family is dead. The regime that is ruling my country is to blame. Every official dreams of stealing like Putin. Every state official treats people like dirt.”

Protesters carried pictures of those who had died or were missing, and signs saying: “Corruption kills!”, “Resign”, “Who is to blame?” and “Tell the truth”. The crowd was soon surrounded by police and members of the OMON, special forces of the Interior Ministry that are notorious for their violent crackdowns on protesters.

Neither Putin nor the governor Tuleev dared address the crowd. There were calls for both to appear, and also to resign. Only Kemerovo mayor, Ilya Seredyuk, and eventually deputy governors Sergei Tsviliev and Vladimir Chernov, addressed the protesters.

Media reports paint a picture of an extraordinarily tense

situation, with people repeatedly swearing, shouting and booing at the local officials who wavered between denouncing the protesters—Tsviliev at one point accused Vostrikov of exploiting the tragedy for “PR”—and desperate attempts to appease them.

Mayor Seredyuk agreed to go to the morgue with a number of protesters so that they could see for themselves the number of bodies which turned out to be less than 64. Nevertheless, both media reports and local residents continue to suggest that the officially reported death toll is a vast understatement.

One relative of victims of the fire said: “We know for sure that there are more victims... Have you seen how the fire was extinguished? They didn’t extinguish it. ...Why were there no helicopters?... All of this because of negligence and corruption... I want the truth!”

The demonstration, which had not been allowed by the authorities, lasted for over ten hours. Toward the end, deputy governor Tsviliev got on his knees to beg the crowd for forgiveness.

Other spontaneous memorial gatherings, attracting thousands of people, took place on Tuesday in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Smaller memorial meetings have taken place throughout the world.

The memorial meeting in Moscow proceeded largely in silence, but here too calls for the resignation of Tuleev as well as Putin were voiced. In a cynical maneuver, the right-wing liberal politician Alexei Navalny, who, despite his social-Darwinist, anti-immigrant and far-right nationalist views, has been heavily promoted by the Western media over the past years, joined the meeting with his wife.

For Navalny and other liberal oppositionists to denounce the government over the Kemerovo fire and decry “corruption” is entirely hypocritical. It is the kind of predatory capitalist policies that the liberal opposition advocates and helped implement in the 1990s that have created the conditions for disasters like the Kemerovo fire. Their response is shaped by a mixture of fear of a broader movement by the working class outside their control, on the one hand, and, on the other, the hope to exploit popular dissatisfaction to advance their own reactionary agenda and pressure the Kremlin.

The situation in Kemerovo and Russia as a whole remains extremely tense. YouTube videos about the protest in Kemerovo reached up to two and a half million viewers within just a few hours. In hundreds of commentaries on video and news reports, people are voicing their outrage at local officials and the Kremlin.

Anger about the Kemerovo Tragedy is so great not least because the fire, while particularly horrific, was not unique. Workers in Kemerovo and throughout the country understand the fire to be symptomatic of the disastrous and life-threatening state of the country’s infrastructure that they and their families face on a daily basis.

Multiple fires have taken the lives of hundreds of people over the past two decades. According to data by the International Association of Fire and Rescue Services from 2014, 10,069 people a year die in fires in Russia, which has a population of 140 million. By contrast, in the United States, which has a population of 320 million, the annual death toll for fires is 3,275.

Workers are also faced with dangerous conditions at their work

places, with the annual death toll in workplace accidents estimated to be at least 15,000. One particularly deadly disaster occurred near Kemerovo, which is a major industrial and coal mining center in Siberia, in 2010 when at least 66 workers were killed and 99 injured in an explosion at the Rospadskaya mine.

These conditions are not just the result of corruption. Rather, the all-pervasive corruption is itself only a symptom of the degenerate and criminal state of capitalism as it was restored by the Stalinist bureaucracy in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The restoration of capitalism not only did not bring “democracy”, it was also accompanied by the systematic destruction of the productive relations and forces created by the October Revolution and decades of work by the Soviet working class. This process was accompanied by the dismantling of the cultural and social infrastructure, including cultural palaces, hospitals, kindergartens, schools, etc.

In industrial cities like Kemerovo, which was a center of the USSR-wide miners’ strike in the late 1980s, the social devastation has been particularly severe.

The oligarchy, which has emerged out of this orgy of plunder and social devastation, as well as aspiring smaller businessmen, have been allowed to run loose. Safety regulations in factories, schools and public spaces are constantly and systematically disregarded, with the “businessmen” working hand in glove with local authorities.

While Russia is a particularly stark example, similar conditions exist and endanger the lives of workers throughout the world, as the deadly Grenfell Fire in the middle of London last summer, and factory fires in Bangladesh in recent years have shown. Everywhere, the lives and interests of working people are subordinated to an ever-more reckless and criminal bourgeoisie in pursuit of private profit. Only a united struggle by workers internationally against the capitalist system can prevent the reoccurrence of deadly disasters like the Kemerovo fire.



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