

Regional governor Tuleev resigns in wake of Kemerovo fire in Russia

Clara Weiss
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A week after the fire at the shopping mall and entertainment center “Winter Cherry” took the lives of at least 64 people, including 41 children, the regional governor of the Kemerovo oblast in southwestern Siberia, Aman Tuleev, announced his resignation on Sunday, April 1.

The fact that Tuleev, one of the major figures of Russian politics of the past 30 years, felt forced to resign is an indication of the extreme political and social instability in Russia, which has been aggravated by the Kemerovo fire. Despite his advanced age and poor health, Tuleev was considered “untouchable” and a major pillar of the Putin-regime in the country as a whole.

Tuleev will be temporarily replaced by his former deputy, Sergei Tsivilev, as acting governor. New elections have been announced for September 9.

Coming just a week after Putin’s reelection as President, the Kemerovo fire has brutally laid bare the class relations in Russia and has triggered an ongoing political crisis.

Most people and the children died because the doors of the cinema on the fourth floor, which showed a cartoon for children, were locked. Many fire exits were blocked as well. The alarm and sprinkling system didn’t work, and about 700 people had to evacuate on their own.

The “Winter Cherry” is part of a subsidiary that is owned by the oligarch Denis Shtengelov who heads one of Russia’s largest producers of cheap candy. (See also: At least 64 dead, including many children, in horrific shopping mall fire). By now, it has emerged that massive violations of construction rules had been allowed. There had been also repeated warnings about problems in the building’s fire safety system, including just a few days before the fire occurred.

Workers in Russia understand the fire to be the result of abysmal safety conditions they confront on a daily basis. Russia has a record number of deadly fires, with about

10,000 people killed every year. Since the Kemerovo fire, people on social media have uploaded pictures of blocked fire exits in schools, stores, hospitals, and other public buildings throughout the country under the hashtag #lockedup (#zaperto). Tens of thousands of people have participated in public commemorations for the victims of the fire, including 12,000 people in Moscow alone in a spontaneous memorial event last Tuesday.

Over the past week, there were angry calls for Tuleev’s resignation, including in a protest by relatives of the victims and local residents last Tuesday, but also on social media and even on state TV. Although he lost his own niece in the fire, Tuleev’s response to the disaster had been marked by a combination of indifference and even hostility toward the victims and their relatives.

Like all other regional and local officials, Tuleev had not visited the scene of the disaster in the 12 hours that the fire was raging. He would also not apologize to the families, but only to Putin when the latter flew to Kemerovo last Tuesday. Both he and Putin refused to address thousands of protesters in the city center that day. In an “off-record” part of his discussion with the president, Tuleev denounced the protesters and declared that he saw his main task in preventing political unrest in the wake of the fire. (See also: Russia: Protests against officials erupt in wake of Kemerovo fire)

The resignation of Tuleev is an expression of fears within the oligarchy of an uncontrollable explosion of working class anger. The Kemerovo oblast, also known as the Kuzbass, is a major center for the coal and steel industry, and accounts for between 54 and 59 percent of all of Russia’s coal production.

It has historically been the main area for the development of working class unrest in the country. In 1989, the union-wide miners’ strike that shook the Stalinist bureaucracy to the core and accelerated its drive to capitalist restoration was started in the coal mining

town of Mezhdurechensk, which is close to the regional capital Kemerovo and home to Russia's largest coal mine, Rapsadskaya.

Tuleev's own political career was closely tied to the restoration of capitalism in the region. A member of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) since 1968, Tuleev started his career as an engineer in the railway system of the Stalinist bureaucracy, and was one of the many middle-rank bureaucrats who recognized in Mikhail Gorbachev's "perestroika" policy of restoring capitalism the path for their own advancement. His personal rise was directly proportional to the destruction of the living standards of the coal miners.

After an unsuccessful candidacy for Soviet deputy in the 1989 elections, he became a member of the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR (Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic) in 1990. He was a vocal supporter of the attempted coup by sections of the military and the bureaucracy against the Gorbachev government in August 1991.

In the crucial years of 1990-1993, which saw the destruction of the Soviet Union and the full reintroduction of private property relations by the Stalinist bureaucracy, he de facto controlled the legislative power of the Kemerovo oblast. Throughout the 1990s, Tuleev, then a member of the Stalinist Communist Party of Russia (KPRF), stood at the center of vicious power struggles within the rising oligarchy and the Yeltsin government with which he clashed repeatedly.

However, in 1997, as the World Bank's proposals for "Restructuring the Russian Coal Industry" were being implemented, Yeltsin eventually named Tuleev governor of the Kemerovo oblast. By that point, dozens of mines in the country had been closed and thousands of jobs had been destroyed. Large sections of the coal industry were under the direct control of the mafia. Miners, like all layers of the working class, were going without pay for months and even years.

Tuleev had a habit of posturing as a defender of working class interests and has been a vocal and crucial supporter of Putin since 2000. Comments in the Russian press about his resignation repeatedly referred to him as a "genuine people's leader". This is, of course, nonsense. Much like Putin, Tuleev managed to publicly denounce companies and the oligarchs, while secretly working with them behind closed doors, and negotiating arrangements that would fully correspond to the interests of the oligarchs while keeping the working class in check. At times, this also included minimal subsidies and social

benefits to the by now impoverished coal miners and their families.

By the end of his over 20-year rule in the Kemerovo oblast, Tuleev, negotiation with whom no company working in the Kuzbass could avoid, had managed to transform the region into a playground for the oligarch-controlled major coal and steel companies. EVRAZ, in particular, now controls the most important mining facilities in the region, including the Rapsadskaya and the facilities of Yuzhkuzbassugol. EVRAZ is owned by several oligarchs, among them Roman Abramovich, who has an estimated net worth of \$11.5 billion, and is known as one of the oligarchs closest to Putin.

Meanwhile, the average salary for miners hovers around 30-35,000 rubles (\$525-612), a salary on which often entire families have to live. In the major cities of the region like Kemerovo or Novokuznetsk, 56 and 55 percent of the population respectively counted themselves as "low-income" in a poll in 2015, meaning that they were able to afford only groceries and items of first necessity. The social situation in smaller mining towns like Mezhdurechensk, which entirely depend on the local mines, is usually even worse.

The past twenty years in the Kuzbass have also seen multiple mine disasters that took the lives of hundreds of workers. Among the biggest were the gas explosion at the Taizhina colliery in 2004 which left 45 miners dead, the Ulyanovskaya mine explosion in 2007 which killed 110 miners, and the Rapsadskaya mine disaster of 2010 which killed 91 men. (See also: Tensions build in wake of Russian mine disaster)

Well aware of the mass social discontent that has been catalyzed by the Kemerovo fire, the "Investigative Committee", something like a Russian FBI, has arrested five people, including one executive of the firm that owns it. Both these arrests and the resignation of Tuleev are ultimately desperate attempts to stem the tide of working class anger and divert it from the real culprits: the oligarchy and the capitalist system it defends.



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