

# Russian Duma rams through pension reform amid mass opposition

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The lower house of the Russian parliament (Duma) has passed the pension reform, which will raise the retirement age for men and women by five years, in a final reading on Thursday, September 27, in a slightly amended version. The passing of the reform, the most unpopular measure of the Russian government in decades, sets the stage for a sharp escalation of social and political conflicts in Russia.

A second reading of the bill, introduced for the first time in mid-June during the opening of the FIFA World Cup 2018 in Russia, took place on Wednesday, September 26. Over 300 amendments had been submitted to the Duma before the second reading, including nine by President Vladimir Putin, who had endorsed the pension reform in late August (see also: “Putin backs widely hated Russian pension reform”). The amendments by Putin were endorsed by all deputies unanimously.

The amended bill provides for a raising of the retirement age for men from 60 to 65 years and for women from 55 to 60 years. Starting in 2019, the retirement age will be raised gradually, to reach 65 years for men by 2028 and 60 years for women by 2034.

Following a phony debate, which gave opposition deputies from the Stalinist KPRF, the nationalist Just Russia and the fascistic LDPR, the chance to pose as opponents of the reform, the bill was passed in an amended version with 72.4 percent of the Duma (326 deputies) voting for it. All opposition deputies present (59) voted against the bill, without endangering its passage.

On Thursday, a third and final reading of the bill resulted in its adoption with 332 deputies voting for, and 83 against it. Before the bill takes effect, it will have to be reviewed by the upper house of the Russian

Duma on October 2-3, which is widely expected to approve it.

The pension reform is being rammed through in the face of mass opposition with polls indicating that between 85 and 92 percent of the population oppose it. The raising of the retirement age is rightly perceived by the vast majority of the working population as a blatant act of systematized state theft of funds that working Russians have been paying into all their lives.

The state will effectively steal 1 million rubles (US\$16,000) from every working woman and 1.5 million rubles (US\$24,000) from every working man as a result of the reform. In a country where the average salary is 35,900 rubles (\$567) per month, and even less for millions of workers, these are very significant sums.

Following the catastrophic socioeconomic collapse of the 1990s during capitalist restoration, life expectancy in Russia is still significantly lower than in most advanced countries. Over a third of Russian men will not live long enough to receive their pensions at 65 (see also: “Outrage in Russia over pension reform”).

Low pensions are already a source of social and political outrage and disgust. The average pension of 13,300 rubles (\$210) a month barely puts pensioners above the official poverty line. Over a third of Russian pensioners are forced to work to make ends meet.

In a case that is symptomatic of the conditions facing pensioners and workers throughout the country, local news recently reported that thousands of pensioners in Krasnoyarsk, a major industrial city in Siberia, depend on buying groceries beyond their expiration date on a street market because they were not able to buy food in grocery stores on their miserable pensions. According to a local news station, hundreds of pensioners go to the small market every day to buy spoiled milk for 10 rubles (15 cents), or sausages for 70 rubles (\$1.06).

One elderly woman who is forced to buy her food on the market said that this was the only way for her to feed herself on a pension of 12,000 rubles (\$183) a month. “I would ask all major supermarkets [in the area] to somehow organize [the selling] of this kind of groceries that are beyond their expiration date but still entirely eatable for poor devils like myself. And there are many of us. We cannot cope with this life.” Since the news broke about this, a charity organization has started an online collection of expired food items to send to pensioners.

In Russia, more so than in Western Europe or North America, many pensioners live with their children and grandchildren. Millions of families depend on pension payments to add to their meager salaries. Retired family members are often key to enabling both parents or single parents to work one or more jobs to maintain the family, by taking care of the small children. The raising of the retirement age for women in particular will thus place significant financial and logistical burdens on what is already a deeply impoverished working class.

The argument advanced by the defenders of the reform, including Vladimir Putin, that it is necessary to maintain the pension system and raise pensions, is recognized as a transparent lie. Putin speaks for a super-rich oligarchy whose wealth is based on the ruthless plunder of the working class and raw material resources. It is in their hands that the resources necessary to meet the needs of society, including pensions and salaries on which workers can actually live, are concentrated. They include billionaires like Alisher Usmanov with \$12.3 billion, Viktor Vekselberg, who is worth over \$13 billion, Vladimir Potanin (\$14.8 billion), Alexei Mordashov (\$18.4 billion) and Leonid Mikhelson (over \$20 billion).

The recklessness with which the Russian oligarchy has pushed through this reform within just a few months mirrors the ever-more aggressive moves by the bourgeoisie internationally against the working class, such as the massive tax breaks for the super-rich of the Trump administration and the escalation of social austerity in France under Macron.

It is thus no coincidence that the pension reform is widely supported by governments internationally and has indeed been pushed for over more than a decade by the World Bank and imperialist think tanks. In its present form, the reform has been developed above all

by Alexei Kudrin, the former finance minister of Russia and a close ally of Putin, who is regarded as one of the figures in Russian politics with the best connections to Western imperialist governments and business circles.

The mass outrage over this frontal assault on workers’ living standards finds no expression in the existing political system. The protests against the pension reform that were organized by an alliance of right-wing parties, ranging from the Stalinist KPRF and other pseudo-left formations, to Alexei Navalny, a nationalist stooge of US imperialism, and the fascistic LDPR, have drawn only very limited numbers of a few thousand people or less and have eventually all but petered out. As the WSWS warned early on, the aim of these protests was, from the very beginning, to strangle mass opposition by steering it into right-wing, nationalist channels, and thus enable the Kremlin to push through the pension reform.

In contrast to the promotion of nationalism by all bourgeois and petty-bourgeois parties in Russia, the opposition to the pension reform has to be oriented toward linking up the emerging struggles of Russian workers with the struggles of workers throughout Europe and the United States. It has to become part of a socialist counteroffensive by the international working class and a struggle to overthrow capitalism.



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