

Russian Duma plans internet crackdown as 12,000 truckers strike

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Amid a strike of up to 12,000 truckers in southern Russia, the Russian Duma (parliament) voted on January 24 to approve the first reading of two bills that will dramatically escalate the state crackdown on free speech on the internet and websites critical of the Russian state and political establishment.

The two bills provide the legal basis for a far-reaching crackdown on independent news websites, in line with the international censorship campaign against alleged “fake news.” One of them prohibits the publication of what are deemed “unreliable” news stories about “socially significant” issues on the internet and in print media which could cause harm to individuals or social disorder. The term “unreliable” is kept deliberately as vague as possible, making it a transparent pretext to crack down on any coverage that goes against the official narrative of the state-controlled media.

The internet in Russia is already subject to large-scale surveillance by the state with significant limitations imposed on internet users, such as a ban on Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) that hide users’ actual internet IP, allowing them to surf on the internet without being automatically identifiable (see: “Russian government blocks messaging app Telegram”). At the same time, Russia has the highest percentage of internet usage of all European countries, with millions relying almost exclusively on the internet for access to information, communication and entertainment.

Based on the first proposed bill, the Russian prosecutor general will be able to block material extrajudicially and the Roskomnadzor, the Russian government’s censorship agency, can issue warnings to media sources that it believes publish such “unreliable” information. News agencies that receive two warnings within one year can have their license to operate

revoked. Individuals spreading “fake news” may face fines: about 3,000 to 5,000 rubles (US\$45-75) for individuals publishing, for example, on blogs—a significant amount in a country where millions earn less than \$300 a month—and up to 10 times as much for public figures.

The second bill penalizes expressions of “disrespect” to “society,” the Russian president, the government, Russian state symbols such as the national flag, and the Russian Constitution. Those accused under this bill would face fines from between 1,000 to 5,000 rubles (US\$15-75) or up to 15 days under administrative arrest. It is widely expected that both bills will pass the parliament with slight modifications.

These two bills are part of a series of far-reaching assaults on free speech on the internet and a censorship campaign against independent news outlets, in particular anti-war and left-wing websites like the *World Socialist Web Site*. This campaign is the response by the ruling class to growing class tensions, which have found an initial expression in the eruption of open class struggles in the US, Mexico, and Europe, and growing interest in left-wing and socialist politics among workers and youth. Most of these struggles are organized through social media and commented upon only by outlets such as the WSWS, amid blackouts by the official media and attempts by the trade unions to strangle any protests and strikes by workers.

In Russia, the Duma’s approval of the reading of these bills came amidst a now two-week-long strike by up to 12,000 truck drivers in southern Russia and rumors that Ford may close two major Russian auto plants as part of an international offensive against auto workers, potentially laying off up to 3,700 Russian auto workers.

The truckers’ protests started in late December. By

the middle of January, between 9,000 and 12,000 truckers in southern Russia who transport grain to the ports of the Azov and the Black Sea had joined the strike. According to the business daily *Kommersant*, between 70 and 80 percent of all truckers delivering grain are on strike, including in the Rostov, Krasnodar and Stavropolski regions. Grain deliveries have slowed down or have been stopped by companies starting January 21. The truckers, who have protested several times in recent years against increasing taxation, are demanding the introduction of a unified tariff for the delivery of grain that would be fixed depending on the price of gas. Truckers blocking roads have also called upon car drivers to join their protests.

Amid an international eruption of struggles by the working class, there are well-founded fears within the Russian oligarchy that the strike movement could soon spread to Russia. The French “yellow vest” movement, in particular, has been widely discussed on Russian social media. Numerous outlets have speculated how long it would take for a similar movement to emerge in Russia, especially as broad sections of the population face skyrocketing prices for food items and gas.

Several people commented on a YouTube video about the truckers’ strike by referencing the movement in France. One noted that it was “time to wear yellow vests”; another wrote, “Excellent news, the truckers are doing great, finally someone started to strike. It’s high time for everyone to go on strike. Otherwise, they will take the last piece of clothes from the people, we are now seeing the blossoms of the 1990s.”

Russian workers are also hit by the international offensive against the working class in the auto industry. Ford is expected to close two out of its three plants in Russia: the one in Vsevolozhsk, an industrial city close to St. Petersburg where some 2,700 workers are employed, and in Naberezhnye Chelny, a major industrial city in the republic of Tatarstan, where 1,000 workers are employed. Both of these plants have already sent contractors on unpaid holiday leave in December and early January.

The business outlet *offshorereview.ru* recently noted: “In order to avoid a panic, the management of the Russian branch of Ford has already sent out letters in which it calls upon [workers] to work according to the standard scheme and not to succumb to the multiple provocations on the part of journalists and competitors.

However, it was also confirmed that negotiations about the closure of the factories are underway.” The outlet also noted that the Ford layoffs may be only the beginning of a larger wave of plant closures in the Russian auto industry, which has grown significantly in the 2000s.

These layoffs will hit a working-class population that is already deeply impoverished and is seething with hatred for the oligarchy that has emerged out of the destruction of the Soviet Union by the Stalinist bureaucracy. According to the World Inequality Database, wealth inequality in Russia is greater than in any other major economy and has grown steadily since the 2008 crisis. The richest top 10 percent of the country controls about 65 percent of net wealth, while half of the population owns less than 5 percent of the country’s net wealth. The Russian oligarchs have as much wealth stashed outside of the country as is owned by the entire Russian population.

As Russian workers will be increasingly driven into struggle, the critical task for them is to orient toward a strategic alliance with workers in Europe and internationally in a fight against the capitalist system. The fight for this political orientation requires a struggle to build a section of the Trotskyist movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International, in Russia.

The author also recommends:

Fight the Ford layoffs! Build rank-and-file committees to unite autoworkers across Europe!
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