

1,300 arrested in police crackdown on liberal opposition in Russia

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In a massive police crackdown in Moscow on Saturday, over 1,300 people were arrested at a rally of the liberal opposition. The protesters demanded that 57 candidates, most of them associated with the right-wing opposition politician Alexey Navalny and his party, “Russia’s Future,” be allowed to participate in the Moscow city дума elections on September 8. Along with the Moscow elections, some 30 regional and municipal elections will be held on that day.

The city authorities had declared the demonstration illegal and Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin had denounced them as a “security threat,” vowing that “order will be ensured.” The ensuing crack-down on the protest, which involved between three and five thousand people, in Moscow’s city center was unprecedented in its scope, even by the standards of the frequent police crackdowns on opposition protests in Russia. Video footage shows scenes that resemble a military occupation or a civil war.

Several heavily armored vehicles were stationed on Tverskaya Street. Along with Moscow city police, the state mobilized the OMON, a paramilitary formation of the Interior Ministry that forms part of the Russian National Guard. There were at least as many policemen and OMON on the streets as there were protesters. At several points during the protests, which lasted almost all day, hundreds of OMON men formed chains, surrounding large groups of protesters, before storming into the crowd, beating people up and carrying them away to arrest them.

Chants by the protesters included: “There will be freedom in Russia,” “Russia without Putin,” “Putin get out,” as well as “Russia” and “occupiers.” Banners held up by protesters said: “We will take Russia back,” and “Stop lying to us.”

Among the arrested were several of the candidates

that had been barred from running in the election, among them Ilya Yashin, Liubov’ Sobol and Ivan Zhdanov. They are all involved with Alexey Navalny’s “Fund to Fight Corruption.” According to unconfirmed reports, passers-by were also arrested.

The crackdown on Saturday followed over a week of demonstrations by the liberal opposition, which were attended by several thousand people, demanding that its candidates be placed on the ballots. Alexei Navalny had been arrested at one of these protests last Wednesday and is still in prison. Overall, the authorities accepted over 200 candidates who are competing for 45 seats.

Most of them, including several who run as “independent” candidates, are affiliated with the ruling United Russia party, or with the main opposition parties in the Duma which for some two decades have functioned as the “loyal opposition” to the Putin regime – the ultra-nationalist and Stalinist Communist Party of Russia (KPRF), the fascistic Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR), and the nationalist Just Russia party.

The only other organization that was allowed to run candidates are the Stalinist “Communists of Russia,” an organization that is widely considered to be a Kremlin project set up to divert votes from other candidates. Among their candidates is the right-wing Stalinist Darya Mitina from the United Communist Party (OKP) whose ties to the Kremlin and far-right in Russia and internationally the WWSW has exposed in the past. Boris Kagarlitsky, another important figure in the Stalinist and pseudo-left scene of Russia, is running as a candidate for the nationalist “Just Russia” party. Like Mitina, Kagarlitsky has supported the East Ukrainian separatists during the Civil War that began in Ukraine after the US-backed fascist coup in Kiev in February 2014.

Over a dozen candidates that were affiliated with the

liberal opposition of Alexei Navalny were barred from participation despite having collected the necessary 5,000 signatures.

The program of the liberal opposition is thoroughly reactionary: orienting toward a closer alliance with US imperialism, figures like Alexei Navalny and Ilya Yashin, speak for sections of the Russian oligarchy and the upper-middle class that feel like their economic interests are being overruled by the oligarchs around Putin and have disagreements with the Kremlin about foreign policy (see: “What does Russian “opposition leader” Alexei Navalny represent?).

They have been built up for years by Washington as potential leaders of a movement by discontented sections of the upper middle class and the oligarchy. Similar to the Maidan movement in Kiev which culminated in the ousting of the pro-Russian Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovych in a fascist coup in February 2014, such a movement would be aimed at ousting Putin through the mobilization of extremely right-wing forces and establishing of an oligarchic regime that would be more directly subservient to the foreign policy and economic interests of US imperialism.

Like Navalny, with whom he has worked for almost two decades, Yashin has been a long-standing advocate of a close alliance of the so called liberals with far-right forces in Russia. Yashin was also a close collaborator of the late Boris Nemtsov, who was killed under dubious circumstances in early 2015, and was one of the most important Russian politicians with close affiliations to Washington.

Support for the liberal opposition is largely limited to layers of professionals and the upper middle class, as well as sections of the oligarchy, that are centered in Moscow and, to a lesser extent, in St. Petersburg.

However, workers must understand the massive crack-down on the opposition protest on Saturday as a serious warning. It testifies to the extreme nervousness of the Kremlin under conditions of an escalation of the US war drive against Iran, the resurgence of the class struggle internationally, and growing anger and social discontent within the Russian working class. It was meant as a show of force and a demonstration of the state’s readiness to violently repress any opposition, above all opposition coming from the working class.

With the ruling United Russia party already deeply

unpopular, ratings for Putin have also recently dropped significantly, above all in response to his backing of the widely hated raising of the retirement age. This “pension reform” was pushed through against mass opposition last year, and signifies a frontal assault on the already impoverished living standards of the overwhelming majority of the working population. In addition, recent months have seen the layoff of thousands of Ford workers with miserable compensations amid fears that Russia’s biggest auto company GAZ might shut down, threatening hundreds of thousands of jobs.

The liberal opposition, the Putin-regime, its “loyal opposition” of the LDPR, KPRF and Just Russia, as well as the Stalinist and pseudo-left forces are united in their hostility to any movement by the working class and determination to implement an agenda of social austerity. All of these parties are supported the dissolution of the USSR and are hostile to Trotskysim.

This was demonstrated clearly by last year’s bogus protests against the pension reform, in which Darya Mitina’s OKP marched alongside supporters of Navalny, the fascistic LDPR, the KPRF and the Russian Pabloites, and openly fascist forces. Their common aim was to disorient the mass discontent about the pension reform and prevent a movement by workers in opposition to the government (see: “Russian Stalinists, pseudo-left close ranks against opposition to pension cuts”).

There is no question that any protests and strikes involving broad sections of the working class would be met with even greater violence and ferocity by the state than the protests on Saturday. This makes it all the more urgent for workers and intellectuals who are seriously concerned about the danger of war, social austerity and the attacks on democratic rights, to establish their complete political independence from the prevailing reactionary political forces in Russia by turning to a socialist and internationalist program.



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