Russian authorities continue crackdown on opposition protests

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At a new protest by the bourgeois liberal opposition in Moscow on Saturday, the Russian authorities continued their violent crackdown, arresting at least 600 people. Led by pro-US opponents of President Vladimir Putin, the protesters are demanding that opposition candidates who have been barred from participating in the Moscow City Council elections on September 8 be placed on the ballot.

Russian news outlets suggested that the turnout at the protest on Saturday was similar to that of the previous week, when between 3,000 and 5,000 people marched through the city center. The protest was met with a military-style presence of the Russian national guard and its subdivision, the OMON paramilitary forces, resulting in the arrest of over 1,300 people.

Like the previous protest, the one on Saturday had not been authorized. Organizers officially called it a "stroll." Many of the protesters carried Russian flags. The presence of police and paramilitary forces was similar to the previous week, with at least as many OMON and police forces as there were protesters. Planes belonging either to the Russian national guard or the police flew over the city center.

OMON and the police used teargas at Pushkin Square, shut down several central subway stations, and beat protesters with cudgels. There were multiple reports of passersby being violently arrested. Among them was Alexander Svidersky, a deputy of the ruling United Russia party and member of the district electoral commission, who was arrested while walking his dog in the city center. According to eyewitnesses, OMON even stormed a local McDonalds restaurant to arrest several protesters who were trying to hide there.

The *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* reported that many of the arrested had their fingerprints and mug shots taken. The newspaper said that in the lead-up to the protests, there were threats from the authorities that young men participating would run the danger of being drafted into the military. The official number of arrested is 600, but Russian newspapers suggest that approximately the same number were detained as at the previous week's demonstration, that is, well over 1,000.

Most leading figures of the liberal opposition, including the right-winger Alexei Navalny, and most election candidates who were barred from the ballot, among them Ilya Yashin and Lyubov Sobol, are now in prison, serving sentences of up to 30 days (in the case of Navalny). Sobol was dragged out of a cab on Saturday and arrested while on her way to the rally. One of her aides was arrested on Friday and charged with instigating "mass unrest," a charge that carries up to 15 years in jail.

The continuation of the violent crackdown on opposition protests is a sign of deep political and social crisis in Russia. Predictably, the pro-imperialist media in the West has hailed the protests as a welcome challenge to the authoritarian presidency of Putin. The EU condemned the crackdown on the protests, and the US embassy in Moscow declared that Saturday's response by the Russian authorities "undermines the rights of citizens to participate fully in the democratic process."

Such statements are thoroughly hypocritical. The governments in both the EU and the US are responsible for violent crackdowns on protests in their own countries, including against supporters of Catalonian separatism in Spain and the yellow vest protests in France. They have set up concentration camps for immigrants and refugees. US President Donald Trump has been inciting fascist violence through his tweets and rallies, resulting in a series of mass shootings just over the past two weeks that have claimed the lives of

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dozens of people.

The imperialist powers support the opposition protests not out of any concern for democratic rights, but because, of all the fractions of the Russian oligarchy, the liberal opposition's program aligns most closely with the interests of Western imperialism.

Contrary to what outlets like the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* would like their readers to believe, the so-called liberal opposition in Russia has nothing to do with the defense of democratic rights. It speaks for a section of the oligarchy that emerged out of the restoration of capitalism in the USSR as well as layers of the upper-middle class that seek a closer alliance with US imperialism and a change of personnel in the Kremlin.

Figures like Navalny, who has for years been groomed and trained by Washington, have made no secret of their support for the right-wing Maidan protest movement in Ukraine in 2013-2014, which culminated in the imperialist-backed fascist-led coup of February 2014 that ousted the pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovych. Alliances with both pseudo-left and fascist forces have for years been a stock-in-trade of the Russian liberal opposition.

While the liberal opposition has recently tried to appeal to mass social discontent within the working population, it is deeply hostile to the interests of the working class and has failed to attract any broader support in the population.

The crackdown on the opposition stems in part from extreme nervousness within the Kremlin about the escalating US war drive, especially in the Middle East. A US-led war against Iran would destabilize vast regions on the borders of Russia and could spark a new world war, drawing in Russia and other major powers.

An initial indication of the destabilizing impact of the latest US provocations in the region was the anti-Russia protest movement that broke out in Georgia in July, with the not-so-subtle backing of the US. The protests caused an escalation of tensions between Russia and Georgia, resulting in one of the most serious crises in their relations since the two countries fought a brief war in the summer of 2008 (see: "Russian-Georgian tensions escalate amid Iran war crisis").

However, by far the biggest fear in the Kremlin is that the resurgence of the class struggle internationally, a process that has already seen mass protests in Puerto Rico and Hong Kong and large strikes in Mexico and throughout Europe, will soon spread to Russia. Approval ratings for Putin and the ruling United Russia party have been plummeting over the past year. Millions are seething with anger about the government's raising of the retirement age, the most far-reaching assault on the living standards of the population in decades.

Just last week, the official statistical agency Rosstat released new figures testifying to an ongoing growth of extreme poverty in Russia. Those classified as "extremely poor," meaning that they have to live on less than 9,828 rubles a month (about $150), now number 21 million, or 14.3 percent of the population, up from 19.6 million in 2018.

Meanwhile, as of 2016, the country's top decile owned 89 percent of all household wealth, making Russia one of the most unequal countries in the world. Some 122,000 individuals in Russia belong to the world's wealthiest 1 percent, and there are over 79,000 US dollar millionaires living in the country.

With the violent crackdown on the protests by the liberal opposition, the Kremlin seeks not only to intimidate opposition to social inequality and other issues, but also to prepare the state forces for a crackdown against the emergence of mass opposition in the working class.

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