

Russian doctors, nurses protest against horrifying conditions in hospitals

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4 April 2020

Nurses and doctors across Russia have walked out of their jobs and issued desperate appeals to the public, pleading for medical and personal protective equipment, and renovations of dilapidated hospital buildings.

The number of confirmed coronavirus cases in Russia has now climbed to 4,149, and 34 have died. Cases have been registered in 78 out of 85 regions. A nationwide lockdown with regional modifications that was imposed in the last week of March has been prolonged until April 30. So far, Moscow and its surrounding area has been the center of the outbreak with 448 confirmed cases in the capital as of Friday evening.

Thirty years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and after decades of cuts in the health care system, Russian hospitals are in no position to deal with the rapidly rising number of cases. While Russia has a relatively large number of hospital beds per capita compared to countries like the US, the hospitals barely have modern equipment or even sanitary conditions. Most medical workers are also grossly underpaid, with doctors and nurses often earning just a few hundred dollars a month.

In Kamensk-Shakhtinsk in the Rostov region in southern Russia, 11 doctors and nurses have publicly stepped down from their work in a desperate attempt to draw attention to the catastrophic conditions prevailing in their hospital.

One of the nurses told the newspaper *Argumenty i fakty*: “We have taken this step because we fear for our health and for the health of the patients of the unit.” She said that the infectious disease unit of her hospital was “not prepared to take in patients that have been infected with COVID-19.” Another medical worker said: “In the division where patients do the COVID-19 test we don’t even have surgical masks. They pay only

70 rubles (90 cents) for the night shift, we insist that the pay be increased.”

The workers also demand setting up a special department or building to process people that have been infected under sanitary conditions and a renovation of the entire building. One described the horrifying conditions in the hospital: “There is linoleum all over the rooms, the ceilings are stripped, the pipes are leaking, the flush in the toilets is not working.”

Another nurse told the newspaper: “We entered the room with isolated patients in anti-plague suits which had been lying for 40 years in our cellar. We used the same suits a few years ago to treat patients amid a cholera outbreak in the village Chistoozernyi.”

The situation in Kamensk-Shakhtinsk is not unique. Across the country, hundreds of hospitals are in dire need of renovation, there is a dramatic shortage of personnel and basic medical equipment.

In St. Petersburg, the second largest city in the country, doctors of the Pokrovskaya hospital issued a video appeal on Friday, pleading for personal protective equipment. They said: “We don’t have any protective equipment. What we are wearing now is not equipment that is designed to protect from viral infections. We don’t refuse to work. We love our patients and want them all to recover. But we find it impossible to conceive of working under conditions where we are completely unprotected... We want to return to work healthy, and we want that our families and those close to us remain healthy.”

So far, three hospitals in St. Petersburg that have treated COVID-19 patients have been closed down entirely since the risk of infection has been deemed too high. The entire medical personnel have been sent home and asked to self-isolate.

The conditions facing medical workers are a direct

result of the restoration of capitalism. While shortages are very acute in Russia, medical workers internationally are confronting a dramatic shortfall of PPE and medical equipment such as ventilators. They are forced to put their own lives and those of their families at risk when no adequate measures are taken to protect them. In the US, the richest capitalist country, hospital workers are forced to wear bandannas and other do-it-yourself masks to protect themselves, while there are already not enough ventilators to treat all patients who need them. Last Saturday, nurses at the Jacobi Medical Center in New York City protested against the lack of medical staff and PPE. Similar protests are taking place across the US.

The mounting anger and social opposition among medical workers in Russia come as the surge of coronavirus cases is expected to escalate significantly in April. Amid a global disruption of supply chains which the head of the Russian Central Bank Elvira Nabiullina called “unprecedented,” the economy is widely expected to enter a recession.

Russia relies for almost half of its budget revenues on the export of oil and gas and is hard hit by the massive decline in oil prices. Experts now calculate that Russia will have to reckon with a global oil price of just \$20 per barrel for the rest of the year—a historic low.

The Kremlin has ordered a closure of non-essential businesses across the country but gave regions significant freedom of maneuver. Some like Moscow are considering even stricter restrictions, including the introduction of access permits and the closure of some essential businesses.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has promised that all workers must receive their full income through the quarantine period. However, it is unclear whether all businesses will be willing or in a position to actually grant that.

The Russian government has allocated only the equivalent of about 2 percent of GDP for economic relief measures. By contrast, during the crisis of 2008–2009, the government spent about 10 percent of the GDP, much of which was directed toward bailing out oligarchs that faced bankruptcy.

In a recent poll, 60 percent said that they did not have enough money to make it until the next monthly salary payment. Of the 33.3 percent who said that they could make it, most have savings that will last for only 2 to 6

months. In some regions, less than 10 percent had enough savings to make it for more than a month. About 20 million people in Russia, almost 20 percent of the population, count officially as “extremely” poor and have to live on less than \$165 a month.

Through the destruction of the Soviet Union by the Stalinist bureaucracy and the rise of a criminal oligarchy, Russia has become one of the most unequal countries in the world. Half of the population own less than five percent of the country’s net wealth. Meanwhile, the top ten percent of the country controls 65 percent of the wealth, and the top 1 percent controls more than a third of total wealth. The top 100 billionaires control a staggering 6–10 percent of all wealth. The combined wealth of the ten richest Russians in 2019 was about \$178.5 billion.

The personal wealth of these oligarchs would be more than enough to pay for the building of new hospitals and renovation of all existing hospitals, to buy all new equipment that is necessary in the hospitals and to pay for decent wages for all health care workers and other sections of the working class.



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