

Russian workers protest animal-like conditions at oil field as prime minister hospitalized with COVID-19

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A coronavirus outbreak among workers at a Siberian oil field owned by the Russian energy giant Gazprom sparked angry protests this week, with employees demanding safe working conditions and proper care for those who have fallen ill. “Where are the masks?! Where is the quarantine?! We are not pigs!” yelled workers, as they demanded that management appear and answer their charges.

The demonstrations took place as the country’s official number of COVID-19 infections rose to more than 106,000 on Thursday (after the country’s highest single-day increase, 7,099 new infections) and Russia’s prime minister, Mikhail Mishustin, was hospitalized with the illness. Medical workers in the country are struggling to treat patients and contain the virus without adequate equipment.

On Monday, hundreds at the Chayandinsky oil field in Yakutia gathered to denounce Gazprom for quarantining them en masse without separating the healthy from the ill, giving them any protective gear, or reporting data on the actual number of infections. They give us “animal feed” and “keep us like pigs,” workers can be heard yelling on the video that has now spread widely over the Internet. The same day, protesters used logs to block the road to a nearby town, refusing to reopen it to traffic until the company responded to their demands.

Operations at the oil field, which employs 10,500, have been shut down since mid-April, when the company claims the first coronavirus cases were uncovered. Relatives of the workers insist that infections first appeared in late March. Once it shuttered operations, Gazprom refused to let anyone leave the location and to isolate the sick. Oil workers

describe being held “captive” for weeks on end without any information about the results of COVID-19 tests administered by the company or indication as to when or how they might be sent home.

By mid-week, Gazprom authorities announced they had made arrangements to begin transferring workers off the field and back to their home cities, where they will be either placed under observation in self-isolation or sent to hospitals for treatment. Bashkiria, a western Siberian region with the capital city Ufa, announced 1,800 residents would be returning there from the Gazprom operations.

However, despite official proclamations welcoming the workers back home, returning COVID-19 patients will find themselves in overstretched hospitals unable to provide proper medical care. A doctor at Ufa’s main regional hospital issued a video appeal on Thursday to President Vladimir Putin and Kremlin leaders asking for an investigation into the hospital’s top administrator. For weeks he and his colleagues have been without adequate personal protective equipment (PPE) or any means to wash themselves. Conditions at the hospital were nightmarish even before the pandemic. Now they work essentially without sleep.

Across Russia, reports are surfacing of medical workers becoming ill and dying from coronavirus. In Saint Petersburg, officials report that 250 health care personnel are being treated for COVID-19. At the Botkinsky Hospital in Moscow, 121 have become infected. According to the Ministry of Health, 70 health care personnel across the country have died thus far from the disease. The Russian news media carried stories this week of two separate incidences of medical workers involved in battling coronavirus falling from

windows, one resulting in death. Some regional governments have promised families of the dead that they will receive 1 million rubles (US\$13,430) as compensation for their loss.

A major driver of high rates of infection among health care personnel is the widespread shortage of PPE. At Kommunarka hospital in Moscow, one of the capital city's centers for treating the infectious disease, the entire nursing staff quit this week over poor working conditions and low wages. In addition to not having PPE, they said they had been denied adequate food and accommodations. They had yet to receive bonuses promised to doctors and nurses involved in the fight against COVID-19. Hospital administrators told them that since Putin made the promise, the nurses should "call and write him."

Tensions over the virus and its impact are spreading, with Russian social media flooded with commentary protesting the miserable state of the country's health care system and the government's response. On Tuesday, the leader of the political party Just Russia, Sergei Mironov, warned the Duma that the country would soon be facing "hunger protests" if measures were not taken to provide more aid to the population.

Two days later, however, Kremlin spokesman Dmitri Peskov noted that a recent remark he made indicating that the government could issue payments to citizens to help offset the economic effects of the crisis had been misinterpreted. There are no plans to provide any sort of direct support. Meanwhile, unemployment and wage arrears continue to grow in Russia, where the official "stay-at-home" order has been extended through May 11.



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