

Sweeping attacks on migrant workers in Russia amid COVID-19 pandemic

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A tidal wave of anti-immigrant measures is under preparation in Russia, as the Kremlin and its nominal political opponents in other parties attempt to divert mass discontent over the government's handling of the coronavirus pandemic and skyrocketing poverty by promoting xenophobia and Russian chauvinism.

There are currently 11 million foreign workers in Russia, of which nearly half are from the former Soviet republics in Central Asia. Official unemployment in the country has doubled since March and now stands at nearly 1.7 million. It is expected to reach 5 to 6 million by the end of the year. According to a recent poll by the Levada Center, 28 percent of the Russian population said they would join street protests over collapsing incomes and living standards.

Under these conditions, the federal news agency *RIA Novosti* reported last Friday that the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) is considering the creation of a vast database that contains foreign workers' biometric information, health histories, details of their legal and "social" status, and criminal records. These laborers would be required to put the app "Migrant" onto their smartphones, which would track their movements and activities and link to the database. The entire system would assign each individual a "migrant social trust rating," which would automatically decrease if the person refused to download the software.

In order to facilitate the rollout of "Migrant," the government is considering a mass amnesty for undocumented workers. The aim is to induce undocumented immigrants to register with the state.

The government would simultaneously unveil a labor exchange for migrants, where workers would receive job placements in a narrow range of specific, low-wage industries. "Women could be sent to work in old-age homes or places that serve invalids, and the rest to

workplaces in city infrastructure, utilities, or transportation," a government source told *RIA Novosti*. Incentives will be given to employers to participate, and laborers might receive "a grocery bag of food, some basic necessities, or a cash payment."

In short, the aim is to create a government-run caste system in the Russian labor force, with migrants funneled into the worst-paid jobs and subject to constant surveillance. *RIA Novosti*'s source told the press outlet that the coronavirus pandemic has created a "force-majeure" situation, the implication being that the government now has the right to dispense with whatever minimal legal limits are in place in order to address "the possible aggravation of the migration situation."

The Stalinist Communist Party of Russia (KPRF) is playing a central role in the campaign against immigrants. The KPRF was founded in 1993 by a section of the apparatus of the former Stalinist bureaucracy, which had destroyed the conquests of the Russian revolution of 1917 and dissolved the USSR in 1991. It now trades in Russian nationalism, right-wing chauvinism, and phony semi-opposition to Putin. The party is pushing to enact permanent federal limits on migration, targeting primarily workers that come from Central Asia.

The KPRF is also calling for raising wages for migrants, for the purpose of increasing the cost of employing them, such that native-born Russians are more competitive in the labor market. In essence, they wish to make Russian citizens—for whom the legal minimum wage is about 1200 rubles (\$196) a month--the preferred low-wage labor force.

Anti-immigrant policies are also taking hold at the local level. Saint Petersburg, the country's second largest city, just passed a measure that requires native-

born Russians to be hired over migrant workers in construction, warehousing, the service sector and other industries. A businessman from the region was just fined 200,000 rubles (\$2900) for hiring a foreign laborer.

Currently a petition put out by a representative of the far-right National Democratic Party, “Protecting the labor market and security for Russian citizens,” is circulating online. Blackguarding migrants as criminals, religious radicals and terrorists, it calls for mass deportation of unemployed migrants to Central Asia. The newspaper *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* notes, “political scientists, professors of sociological sciences, regional deputies and political activists of different orientations are seen among the signatories.”

The intensified anti-immigrant policies come as Russia’s migrant workers face an economic and social catastrophe. Millions, laid off due to the COVID-19 pandemic, are stranded in the country and unable to return home because of the closure of borders and suspension of rail and air links. The International Organization for Migration, a branch of the UN, estimates that 60 percent of Russia’s foreign laborers cannot pay their rent and 40 percent cannot buy food. The Migration Development Fund, a Russian charity organization, received 30,000 appeals for help in just one week in May.

Living in squalid, overcrowded apartments, this population has faced the spread of the coronavirus. The sick are forced into strictly monitored, at-home quarantine, where they may infect their roommates. Every time another person in a household gets ill, local authorities restart the quarantine clock for everyone in the home, such that thousands are locked in their apartments for weeks on end. *ABC News* carried the story of one migrant worker in Moscow, who explained that there were only a few kilos of flour and some oil left to feed the 10 people with whom she lived. They have been stuck inside for more than 20 days.

Although President Vladimir Putin announced a temporary suspension of paperwork and payments required of migrants to maintain their legal work status due to the coronavirus, workers report that employers continue to demand money from them for their so-called “labor patent”—a work license renewed by the employee each month. In Saint Petersburg and Moscow, the patents cost 4,000 (\$58) and 5350 rubles

(\$78), respectively.

Local governments are simply ignoring other aspects of the presidential decree, with courts continuing to detain migrant workers on the basis of the claim that federal statutes on migration are still in force and supersede directives issued from the Kremlin.

The crisis in Russia is spilling into migrants’ home countries, whose economies are highly dependent on the remittances sent by workers back to their families. According to the World Bank, transfers from citizens working abroad constitute 31.3 percent of Tajikistan’s and 32.9 percent of Kyrgyzstan’s gross domestic product. When the borders reopen and millions are able to return home, the Central Asian states to which they return will see a mass influx of young and impoverished returnees.

The political attack on migrants coming from all quarters of the Russian political establishment overwhelmingly targets those from Central Asia. It is sustained by a subservient media, which never fails to carry a news story about a crime allegedly committed by a migrant and almost always features photographs of individuals who appear to be Central Asian.

The campaign against people from this region is particularly grotesque and tragic because the workers from these areas were, like those in what today is the Russian Federation, all once citizens of the Soviet Union. Based on the program of internationalism, the Russian revolution sought to unite the disparate peoples of the former Russian empire on the basis of the principle of equality. This effort was brutally betrayed by Stalinism, culminating ultimately in the restoration of capitalism in a dismembered former Soviet Union, where workers of all ethnicities are exploited.



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