

Political crisis in Russia deepens as Navalny protests continue

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Renewed protests in support of jailed opposition leader Alexei Navalny drew several tens of thousands of people on Sunday. Demonstrations took place in at least 80 Russian cities. In an indication of extreme nervousness and concern about the protests, the Kremlin again cracked down violently: over 4,000 people were arrested, and entire Moscow subway stations were shut down for the duration of the protests.

Navalny is set to appear before a court on Tuesday on charges of breaching the terms of probation for an indictment of fraud in 2014. He may be sentenced to up to three and a half years in prison.

Sunday's protests were reportedly smaller than the previous week's. As before, all slogans were confined to demanding the release of Navalny, and calling for Putin to be removed. The protests have drawn support from various political forces, including monarchist tendencies, far-right nationalist formations and pseudo-left tendencies such as the Pabloite Russian Socialist Movement.

The Stalinist Communist Party of Russia (KPRF), which has long been a key prop of the Putin regime, is widely reported to be on the verge of a split because of Navalny. The online outlet Gazeta.Ru has noted that "chaos" was reigning within the party. Its official head, Gennady Zyuganov, continues to support Putin and denounces Navalny as a "foreign agent", while a growing wing around Valery Rashkin is openly rallying behind Navalny. The Stalinist United Communist Party of Russia (OKP) of Daria Mitina, whom the *World Socialist Web Site* has exposed as an agent of the Kremlin several years ago, has also officially endorsed the protests.

The Russian Foreign Ministry has issued a statement on Facebook, accusing the US of fostering these protests as part of a strategy that had been laid out by a

2019 report by the RAND Corporation, a think tank that has historically exerted significant influence on the foreign policy of Washington. The report proposed a combination of a series of foreign, military, economic and domestic political provocations as part of "a campaign designed to unbalance the adversary, leading Russia to compete in domains or regions where the United States has a competitive advantage, and causing Russia to overextend itself militarily or economically or causing the regime to lose domestic and/or international prestige and influence."

There is no question that both US and German imperialism have been bolstering these protests and Navalny, in particular, in an effort to destabilize the Putin regime. Navalny is an extremely right-wing figure with well-documented ties to Washington and Russia's far-right—ties which he never renounced nor tried to hide. The entire story of the "poisoning" of Navalny by the Kremlin, which has been broadly propagated by the bourgeois press in the West, has been shot through with glaring contradictions.

The video that allegedly exposes a palace on the Black Sea owned by Putin was shot while Navalny was in Germany and has now been watched by over 100 million people. With the video, Navalny and his imperialist backers no doubt tried to tap into the enormous anger about staggering levels of social inequality. The Kremlin has tried to contain the fall-out from the video by arguing that Arkadi Rotenberg, a widely hated oligarch and judo partner of Putin, owned the palace.

The political crisis in Russia, the growing divisions within the oligarchy and the state, can only be understood within its broader historical and international context. As across the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has deeply destabilized Russian

society. The Putin regime, which has pursued a policy of “herd immunity” like its counterparts internationally, bears full responsibility for tens of thousands of deaths and the social devastation of tens of millions. Overall, half a million people lost their lives last year in Russia, the most significant population loss in 15 years.

This social and human devastation has come on top of and has been exacerbated by decades of austerity, the destruction of the health care system and other social services, and the general immiseration of the population in the aftermath of the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Health care workers in Russia have died in much larger numbers than in most other countries because of the lack of personal protective equipment and generally poor working conditions.

According to official numbers, 4.4 million people were unemployed last year, a growth of almost 25 percent (or 1 million people) relative to 2019. Over half of these receive no unemployment benefits whatsoever, leaving these millions and their families to their own fate. A pathetic program by the Labor Ministry that was just announced promises to reinstate just 400,000 of these into some form of employment. At least 19.6 million people out of a population of 140 million now officially count as poor.

This number no doubt represents a gross underestimation of the levels of social despair that prevail in the overwhelming majority of the working class. Over a third of workers reported income losses, and 15 percent had income losses of at least 20 percent. Given the poverty wages most workers earned before the pandemic, such income losses have been devastating for millions. A significant number of pensioners and workers are unable to afford to buy food in stores, and are instead forced to provide for their nutrition by collecting mushrooms in the forest and growing vegetables on their own.

At the same time, the richest 1 percent in Russia were able to increase the wealth concentrated in their hands during the pandemic to 50 percent, well above the international average of 44 percent. Even before the pandemic, Russia had become the most unequal large economy in the world: in 2017, the centenary year of the October Revolution, the richest 10 percent of Russians owned 89 percent of the country’s wealth.

The ten richest oligarchs in 2020 owned a combined wealth of \$151.6 billion. There is enormous social and political anger within broad layers of the working population, not just about the Putin regime, but the existing social system as a whole.

Under these conditions, it is no coincidence that the term “capitalism” has been entirely banned from every article and statement on the Navalny protests. The issue of Putin’s personal wealth is portrayed by the bourgeois media and Navalny’s political supporters as the fault of an individual and his “corruption,” not as the outcome of the restoration of capitalism. Meanwhile, the fact that one of the biggest looting operations in history took place last March with the massive bailout of the major corporations—a bailout for which workers have paid with their lives in the “back-to-work-campaign”, while individuals like Elon Musk could accumulate over \$185 billion—is never mentioned. The same objective dynamic—the need to extract surplus value from the working class to ensure the profits of the ruling class—also underlay the back-to-work campaign in Russia and the premature reopening of factories.

What all the political forces which dominate in Russia now have in common, whether they rally around Putin or Navalny, is their unwavering support for capitalism and extreme nationalism. What they fear the most is an intervention of the working class into social and political life on an independent and internationalist basis. Such an intervention, however, is on the agenda and has, in fact, begun to emerge in the US and internationally. The critical question now is to prepare it politically through the assimilation of the record of the Trotskyist movement which opposed the Stalinist betrayal of the October Revolution of 1917, and the fight for a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International in Russia.

For more information on the Trotskyist assessment of Stalinism and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, see the WSWS topic page on the dissolution of the Soviet Union.



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