

Russian court sentences Alexei Navalny to prison

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2 February 2021

A Moscow court has sentenced Russian oppositionist Alexei Navalny to a prison sentence of three-and-a-half years. He was found guilty of violating terms of his probation, which stems from 2014 fraud-related charges. The court counted several months that Navalny has already spent under house arrest towards his latest sentence, so that his imprisonment term was reduced to two years and eight months in a penal colony. His defense team will appeal the sentence.

Navalny returned to Russia in January, after having spent five months in Germany, to which he was flown after falling ill on a flight from Siberia to Moscow in August 2020. Navalny, along with the United States and European Union, insists that he was poisoned with Novichok on behalf of the Kremlin. These claims have been riddled with contradictions from the start. Navalny, who was warned by the Kremlin that he would be arrested upon returning to Russia, was detained by the police on January 17 upon his arrival in Moscow.

In the courtroom, Navalny argued that the charges against him were illegitimate. He denounced Putin as “the poisoner of underpants,” referring to one of the latest versions of the story according to which he was nearly killed by the Russian government. Navalny claims an elite FSB unit planted Novichok in his underwear.

The courthouse where the trial was held was surrounded by a massive police cordon, and at least three hundred protesters were arrested. There was also a heavy police presence in other parts of the country, where pro-Navalny demonstrations took place.

The previous two weekends have seen tens of thousands of people in Moscow, Petersburg and dozens of other cities take to the streets in defense of Navalny. The Kremlin has responded with violent crackdowns and thousands of arrests. Several of Navalny’s main allies are now under house arrest.

After the verdict was announced, the National Guard

was mobilized in Moscow and the square in front of the Kremlin was shut down for visitors and tourists. The US-backed liberal opposition parties PARNAS and Yabloko announced that they would organize protests in support of Navalny this weekend.

The oppositionist also enjoys the support of broad sections of the pseudo-left in Russia. According to press reports, the Stalinist Communist Party of Russia (KPRF), long a key prop of the Putin government, is on the verge of a split over Navalny, as a substantial wing of the party is now backing him.

The verdict prompted an immediate outcry by the imperialist powers. French President Emmanuel Macron, whose government has brutally suppressed social protests in recent years, declared the verdict “unacceptable” because “political disagreement is never a crime.”

German Defense Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken both called for the immediate release of Navalny. British foreign minister Dominic Raab denounced his sentencing as “perverse.”

The political tensions erupting domestically and internationally around Navalny are an expression of a broader crisis. The coronavirus pandemic has profoundly destabilized society in Russia and around the world. It has claimed tens of thousands of lives in the country, and thrown over one million people into unemployment and many millions more into destitution. The Russian economy contracted by 3.1 percent last year.

This follows years of economic slump, triggered by the conflict over Ukraine and sanctions imposed by the US and EU. The Russian oligarchy has shifted the full burden of this conflict onto the working class. Real wages had been in steady decline for six years even before the pandemic hit. Incomes fell again by 3.5 percent last year, while inflation stands at 4.9 percent.

Three decades after the dissolution of the Soviet Union,

social inequality in Russia is among the highest of any major economy. In 2017, the top 10 percent owned 89 percent of the country's wealth. The vast majority of workers have to survive on a few hundred dollars a month, while the ten richest Russian oligarchs own a combined wealth of \$151.6 billion.

Navalny has sought to tap into this social discontent with a video exposing what is allegedly a palace built for Putin on the Black Sea. The video has been watched over 100 million times. The Kremlin is now arguing that the palace is owned by a close ally of Putin, the oligarch Arkadi Rotenberg. A 24-year old protester told *Al Jazeera* on January 23 that she was shocked by the video, given the poverty wages medical workers receive who have been on the frontlines of the coronavirus pandemic, noting sarcastically, "I can imagine what kind of bonus doctors get: about 17,000 roubles (\$223)."

The political crisis gripping Russia and manifesting itself in the tensions erupting around Navalny is a symptom of the breakdown of world capitalism more broadly. The bitter internecine conflicts within the Russian oligarchy are fueled, above all, by escalating class tensions.

Terrified of mounting class anger in Russia, Navalny and his backers are seeking to channel such sentiments behind a reactionary agenda. Navalny, who maintains well-documented ties to the far-right, speaks for a layer of the oligarchy that is oriented toward more direct cooperation with the US. Sections of the American ruling class view the fueling of separatist sentiments within Russia as a means to extend US domination over the region.

It is for this reason that the issue of Putin's wealth has been presented as one of personal corruption, a basis upon which the most reactionary forces, including monarchists and ultra-nationalists, can be mobilized. Meanwhile, any mention of the term "capitalism" has been banned by the political forces dominating the protests, from Navalny himself to his backers in the Pabloite Russian Socialist Movement.

The conflicts within the Russian ruling class are also driven by the geopolitical tensions which it confronts and the failure of its foreign policy. Having emerged out of the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, which was carried out hand-in-glove with US imperialism and the German ruling class, Russia's oligarchy is highly dependent on world imperialism both politically and economically.

For many years, the Putin regime sought to

counterbalance Russia's growing encirclement by US imperialism by deepening its ties with a substantial section of the German ruling class. Economic ties between the two countries, especially in the energy sector, have remained close, despite the fact that Germany backed the 2014 anti-Russia coup in Ukraine, supported anti-Russia sanctions and escalated the military build-up against Russia.

With the Biden administration packed with figures associated with an aggressive policy toward Russia, German-Russian relations have now become a central focal point of the growing tensions between the US and Germany. The starkest expression of this is the conflict over the Nord Stream 2 pipeline. The pipeline is set to deliver more Russian gas directly to Germany, circumventing Ukraine.

The US, which has historically opposed all German-Russian pipeline initiatives, has sanctioned Nord Stream 2 with bi-partisan support in Congress, effectively blocking its construction for the past year. Several major companies, including the Zurich Insurance Group and the German construction and engineering group Bilfinger SE, have now pulled back from the project.

Clément Beaune, the French minister for European affairs, called on Germany to end the project on Tuesday, the first time that Paris has raised such a demand. However, the German government so far insists on its support for Nord Stream 2. In the German press, there is heated debate about the project in the context of the Navalny case.

For the working class, the critical question is to respond to the crisis of world capitalism by advancing its own interests, based on a socialist program, and independent of the warring factions of the oligarchy and the imperialist powers. This requires a thorough study of the history of the October Revolution of 1917, and the Trotskyist struggle against the Stalinist bureaucracy, which betrayed the revolution in Russia and internationally and ultimately moved to liquidate the USSR, creating the conditions for the disaster that has now been unfolding for decades.

For more on the dissolution of the USSR, see the WSWS topic page .



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