

Russian miners work in “bondage-like conditions” says government official

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27 April 2022

A little more than five months after an explosion at the Listvyazhnaya mine in Kemerovo, Russia, took the lives of 51 workers, Russian General Prosecutor Igor Krasnov declared Wednesday that an investigation has revealed that the Listvyazhnaya miners there “were forced to work in bondage-like conditions.” He listed the absence of personal safety gear and a lack of regard for work and time-off schedules as just two of 3,000 violations uncovered at the mine. He said that many thousands more have been identified at other operations across Russia.

Krasnov’s admissions, which feign concern, are a half-hearted attempt to address widespread anger over the ugly reality of life in Russia’s workplaces. The real attitude of the country’s ruling elite is revealed by the fact that a top official found responsible for allowing the gross violations at Listvyazhnaya to continue, Aleksandr Mironenko, was just appointed an adviser to the regional Kuzbass government. He will have special responsibility for consulting on socioeconomic issues.

In December, Listvyazhnaya miners were made to swear an oath of responsibility in which they had to declare their commitment to safety standards. The mine operators were not. Despite promises that rescue workers, five of whom perished in last November’s disaster, would be given awards in recognition of their heroism, none have been forthcoming and news reports indicate that authorities have no plans to do so.

In the days surrounding Krasnov’s statement, there have been multiple deaths in the country’s resource extraction, metallurgy, and construction industries.

On Monday, a water pipe explosion in a mine in Russia’s Kuzbass region left one dead and one injured and forced the evacuation of 200 others. Two days earlier, three workers were killed in an explosion at one of Russia’s largest copper mines in Orenburg, near the

border with Kazakhstan. Another 58 people, working more than a kilometer underground, were pulled out in time. Safety violations appear to be the cause.

Earlier in April a fire at a phosphate mine in Murmansk threatened the lives of 110 miners. Simultaneously, two workers at the Taldinskaya-Zapadnaya mine in Kemerovo became trapped underground when a roof collapsed on them. A few weeks prior, the body of a worker at the Osinnikovskaya mine, which is in the same region, was pulled out from the rubble. He was suffocated and crushed by a combined gas leak and rock fall.

In January, a 33-year-old man in Miass, Russia died at a scrap metal factory after suffering injuries in the process of unloading material. The same month a worker in Moscow fell to his death when the cable on an elevator car that he was repairing gave way. Just this Wednesday, another laborer in Russia’s capital city died in a similar manner when he plunged 33 stories down an elevator shaft at a construction site. On Sunday, a 52-year-old employee at the machine building company Uralvagonzavod also fell to his death. A few days before this, a 26-year-old was crushed by a machine at a materials processing plant in Lipetsk, a city of just over 500,000 in western Russia. On Tuesday, an agricultural worker in his mid-40s was run over by a tractor at a farm in the Tambov region.

The list goes on and on. According to official government statistics, thousands of Russian workers die every year in work-related events. Some research outlets, which likely use different standards to measure the data, place the number in the tens of thousands.

The deaths and disasters in Russian heavy industry come alongside of initial signs of growing working class resistance.

Sanitation workers in Novosibirsk, a major Russian

city with a population of more than 1.5 million and a center of industry, are on strike. Two hundred and eleven garbage collectors walked off the job more than a week ago over the quality of the machinery they are made to use, contract violations, and inadequate wages.

In Sakhalin, which is in Russia's far east, workers at a poultry factory are on strike over the company's failure to pay them their wages and low compensation. Wage arrears are growing in Russia, a manifestation of the economic crisis provoked by anti-Russian sanctions.

Taxi drivers are protesting. In Tver in mid-April 100 refused to work, explaining to the press that they face an impossible situation. "Spare parts are expensive, cars are expensive, gasoline is expensive," they told Tatar-inform. A 15-kilometer trip earns them about 200 rubles, about \$2.70 at current exchange rates.

In Moscow, employees with the courier service Delivery Club are on strike because the company changed the way in which their compensation is calculated, so that the majority of workers have seen their incomes fall by 20 percent. Anger among the workers is high. In February, Delivery Club fired an employee for missing his 14-hour shift in order to attend his mother's funeral. The leader of the Delivery Club workers' protest has just been detained by the police for staging illegal meetings.

In January, doctors, paramedics and ambulance drivers in Ishimbay, a town of about 65,000 in the Russian republic of Bashkortostan, staged a "work to rule" action to protest against poverty wages, gross understaffing, and violations of their work schedules. They say that the best paid among them bring home just 29,000 rubles a month (\$390), with many making far less.

In a public statement addressed to local, regional, and federal officials, including President Vladimir Putin, the medical workers declared, "We conscientiously fulfill our responsibilities, but our professional pride does not allow us to see our fellow citizens be deprived of emergency medical care. We are against dispatching ambulance brigades that are not fully staffed, when instead of the legally required two medics there is only one. We are essentially forced to violate standards of rendering medical care."

In retaliation, the leaders of the labor action were

fired. A number of them received calls telling them that their employment had been terminated because they were sent a letter in the mail telling them they had to work on the weekend but did not show up for their shift. Needless to say, they never received any such letter, which, in addition, could not have been put in the mail in time for them to receive it. After protesting, many have since been reinstated.

The oppressive conditions that face the majority of Russia's workers are intersecting with a growing economic crisis. Inflation, particularly for basic consumer items, is rising sharply, placing many essential items out of workers' reach and threatening millions with destitution. The efforts of Washington and NATO to remove the Putin government by creating an economic catastrophe in the country are taking a toll, intersecting with the brutalization of the population at the hands of its own ruling class.



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