

Kremlin changes conscription laws to increase army without a general mobilization

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In late July, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed into law a change in the conscription age for Russian men. Previously, those 18 to 27 were eligible for mandatory military service. Now, from 2024 onward, those 18 to 30 years old will be eligible. The new legislation also bans conscripts who have been sent a draft notice from leaving the country.

The measure is a means of expanding the reserve without a general mobilization, which has long been called for by ultra-nationalist sections of the state apparatus and ruling class that have been routinely attacking the Putin regime for not waging the war in Ukraine against NATO proxy forces with sufficient consistency and rigor.

Although the nominal age bracket for military service remains the same—nine years—the changes will result in a significant expansion of the pool of reservists from which the government can draft recruits. Russian legislation allows for workers employed at enterprises that are considered strategically important, as well as college students, to be exempt from the draft. On average, college students in Russia are between 17 and 22 years old. The overwhelming majority of Russian youth receive a higher secondary education. This means that of those 18 to 22 years old, a large portion have in the past claimed exemption from the draft. With the elevation of the conscription age to 30, the pool of reservists will be significantly larger.

Rostislav Ishchenko, a Russian political scientist, explained that the changes to the conscription age were bound up with the need to expand the Russian army in light of the threats posed by developments such as NATO's expansion to Finland. With about 200,000 conscripts each year, the Russian army would be able to create a reserve of about 1 million men. "Raising the age of conscription," he said, "allows for the replenishment of the Armed Forces in an unobtrusive way."

The Russian army is based on a combination of contract servicemen and conscripts. Last September, following the debacle of the Russian army in the Kharkiv region, President Vladimir Putin introduced a partial mobilization of 300,000

men. Those mobilized were conscripted from the pool of reservists—that is current or former servicemen.

The vast majority of Russian soldiers come from the working class. Even before the war, mandatory military service was widely considered to be extremely harmful to both the physical and mental health of young men as the Russian army has a sordid record of serious abuse. Families who can afford it—in privileged layers of the middle and upper classes—have a tradition of buying their sons out of military service.

In a stark demonstration of the class dynamics unleashed by the war, wealthy layers of the middle class have responded to the war, and especially the partial mobilization order in September, by leaving the country in droves to avoid being conscripted. It is estimated that between 900,000 and 1 million people have left the country since February 2022, the vast majority of them highly educated and with substantial financial resources and connections abroad.

The new legislation on conscription comes as the Ukrainian counter-offensive is now in its second month. So far, it has above all been a bloody debacle for Ukraine, with an estimated 1,000 troops lost every single day. However, Russian losses in the war, while no doubt lower than those of Ukraine—which may now be well above 200,000 dead—are also significant and there are indications that the Russian army is suffering a significant shortage of personnel.

Speaking with the WSWWS on conditions of anonymity, a former Russian soldier said that there were "mass deaths" at the front even among the most experienced layers of the army. He explained:

This is due to a number of reasons. The top leadership treats soldiers with contempt and regards them as a mere resource. The conduct of the war is often incompetent, and there is a shortage of supplies of food and military equipment. Already, the war has caused an acute shortage of personnel. Therefore,

officers often conduct agitation among conscripted servicemen in order to convince them to enter contract service. Officers will hold conversations with each serviceman, using various methods of manipulation, agitation, as well as pamphlets and propaganda to convince servicemen to sign a contract. In some cases, psychological pressure or punitive measures are applied. Many previously dismissed contract servicemen are also re-entering military service: their contracts were extended for an indefinite period.

The former conscript noted, moreover, that the class divisions of Russian society are sharply reflected in the army. He said:

Most conscript soldiers in Russia, except for those serving in the Chechen Republic, receive a monthly salary of only 2,319 rubles (less than \$26), which is enough to buy a couple of cans of energy drinks and a couple of packs of cigarettes. Contract servicemen receive a salary of 20 to 30,000 rubles (between \$221 and \$331). Once promoted to a higher position and security clearance can add a certain additional percentage to the salary. Veterans of combat operations also receive a certain added percentage to the salary. In total, the average salary of experienced contract servicemen reaches a maximum of 60 to 70,000 rubles (\$663 to \$774). Sergeants, low-level officers and junior officers live in the same impoverished conditions as the working class of Russia. This includes even those who receive benefits after combat operations. Junior officers receive a salary slightly above the average. The pay of senior officers will put them on a par with layers of the small and middle classes.

There is little question that a central reason why the Kremlin seeks to avoid a general mobilization is the fear that it would trigger large-scale unrest in the working class. Torn by internal infighting and crisis, the Putin regime is also trying to somehow avoid a further escalation of the war, an ever more desperate and hopeless endeavor, given the relentless provocations by NATO and the Kiev regime, including regular drone strikes on the Russian capital.

By virtue of its historical origins and social position, the Russian oligarchy is organically incapable of conducting a consistent, let alone progressive, policy in the face of the

onslaught of imperialism and fears nothing more but a movement by the working class. Throughout the war, there have been only two consistent elements to the Putin regime's erratic conduct of the war: First, the promotion of Russian nationalism with the aim of dividing and confusing the working class, and preempting a unified movement against the war and capitalism more broadly.

Second, the delusional hope that, at some point, the imperialist powers will "come to their senses" and initiate negotiations with the oligarchs. However, the reality is that, from the standpoint of the imperialist powers, the war against Russia in Ukraine is but the first stage in an emerging new imperialist redivision of the world.

The war in Ukraine has exploded the entire justification of the restoration of capitalism by the Stalinist bureaucracy between 1985 and 1991. At the time, the Soviet bureaucrats, who had usurped political power from the working class after the 1917 revolution and murdered their revolutionary opponents in the 1930s, proclaimed that imperialism was nothing but a "myth" and an invention of Marxism. This has been proven a delusional lie by the 30 years that followed.

The destruction of the Soviet Union and the restoration of capitalism, carried out hand in glove with the imperialist powers by the former bureaucrats turned oligarchs, not only opened up the entire region to the criminal plunder by the oligarchs. It also marked the beginning of a series of ever more aggressive imperialist interventions and provocations that have now culminated in the eruption of the catastrophic war in Ukraine, with its hundreds of thousands of dead and millions maimed and wounded. The fratricidal war in Ukraine is ultimately the outcome of this process of historical reaction. It can only be ended based on a unification of the Russian, Ukrainian and international working class.



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