



Russia: Putin launches vicious crackdown on dissent

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Protests by the anti-Putin coalition 'Other Russia' have met with harsh state repression. The government itself, now in total control of the mass media, continues to hold approval ratings of some 80% - despite the terrible poverty of the working class. These are truly dark days in Russia. However, in the last year the working class has formed new independent trade unions and is beginning to fightback. In this article, Natalie Sedley and Luke Cooper argue that only the working class fighting on the political and economic terrain can lead the Russian masses to a brighter future. The 'Other Russia', an unholy alliance of the rich oligarchy, free marketers, leftists and even the fascist 'National Bolsheviks' offers no solution.

On April 14th the 'March of the Discontented' was held in Moscow and attended by around 3,000 demonstrators, followed by a protest the next day in St Petersburg with similar attendance. The protestors were united in opposition to the current government headed by Putin but the grounds for this opposition varied significantly. While liberal participants limited their calls to purely democratic demands, workers at the march were angry about rising prices for housing, transport and communication, brought about by a liberal economic programme. Despite their relatively small size, the protests were violently attacked by some 9,000 riot police and hundreds of people were detained.

The protesters were opposing the new authoritarianism in Putin's Russia. When Putin came to power in 1999 he sought to re-establish the power of the state and put an end to the cowboy capitalism that had marked much of the Yeltsin era. The big businessmen close to the west with no loyalty to Putin, such as Boris Berezovsky, found themselves under investigation and later exile abroad. Putin demagogically presented himself as an anti-oligarch champion but in truth has established an extensive network of patronage in the Russian oligarchy. For example, the billionaire Chelsea owner Roman Abramovich is one of his closest political allies.

Putin's 'reforms' of the state have included the abolition of elections for the powerful regional governorships, which are now centrally appointed at the discretion of the Kremlin typically, Putin has packed these enormously powerful positions with his cronies. He has re-established complete state control of the country's television networks, which now report a 100% pro-Kremlin line. Add to this accusations of creating a 'stage managed election process', the passing of new legislation to ban 'extremist' parties, i.e. those that oppose the Kremlin, and the beating and jailing of opposition activists by the state and the true scale of the new authoritarianism in Russia becomes clear.

In economic terms Putin's policies have sought to re-establish a strong state hold on the country's vast oil and gas reserves, expanding the control of the state energy giant Gazprom, and seizing the assets of anti-Putin sectors of the Russian super rich. In his most high profile so-called 'anti-corruption' drive the billionaire boss of Yukos, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, has had his assets seized by the state and been thrown into jail for nine years. Far from using the energy wealth to lift the some 120 million Russian's out of poverty, Putin has accumulated vast sums in the Kremlin's treasury to stabilise the capitalist economy and used energy resources as a weapon to re-establish Russia's geopolitical influence, particularly amongst its Eastern European neighbours dependent on its energy supplies.

To send a message to oppositional elements in the Russian state itself he sacked the entire cabinet in February 2004 and a year later one his leading economic advisers resigned in protest at the 'end of political liberty' in Russia. This year has seen what many allege to be state-sponsored murders of Anna Politkovskaya & Alexander Litvinenko, two of the Kremlin's most fervent opponents. Putin is anxious to ensure that when he steps down next year (as required by the Russian constitution) he will be followed by his own chosen and politically identical successor. Those being touted are

close to the FSB, the Federal Security Service, and direct successor of the Soviet era KGB in which Putin made his career. Under Putin its power has grown. In addition his near total control of the media means that his successor will be enthusiastically supported by all three major television channels.

The 'Other Russia' coalition that called the protests this month was set up during the G8 summits with the aim of putting a candidate to the 2008 elections to form a counterweight to the Kremlin's choice. This is also the main purpose of one of its main component groups, the former chess grand master Gary Kasparov's United Civil Front. This right wing liberal movement was set up in 2005 with the stated aim: 'to dismantle the currently existing system and create a free political floor on which free elections can be held in 2007-2008. The bottom line is to preserve the Russians' right to elect a responsible government, both in presidential and parliamentary elections.' In the protests of April 14th Kasparov was held for 10 hours and fined on suspicion of violating Russia's new 'anti-extremism laws'.

The crackdown was similar to the situation last summer when protests against the G8 in Russia were subject to a crackdown on dissent by security services. Similarly, before the protest in March, the St Petersburg governor Valentina Matvienko appeared on television warning people not to join 'the extremists'. As one young activist pointed out, 'I live in a country where the city governor calls civil protest an act of extremism. This is a scary sign.'

Other key liberal players in Other Russia are the People's Patriotic Union led by Mikhail Kasyanov (who is closely associated with Yeltsin, who re-introduced capitalism to Russia) and the Republican Party 'recently banned under the new 'extremism' laws. The coalition also includes the fascist National Bolshevik party 'one of the most peculiar and disgusting legacies of 20th century Stalinism, an organization that voices support for Hitler and Stalin, and is ferociously racist and anti-Semitic. Another of the supposedly 'leftist' forces in the coalition, the Communist Workers' Party led by Viktor Tyulkin, is also essentially a reactionary right-wing party based on Great Russian chauvinism and anti-semitism. At the same time more genuine leftists have supported the coalition, like the Stalinist Red Youth Vanguard and the social movements activist and academic Boris Kagarlitsky, who both took part in the small anti-G8 protests of 2006.

The weaknesses of a movement assembling such forces are all too obvious. In his article on the movement, Kagarlitsky argued that 'even though they have different goals and motivation, all discrepancies are insignificant in comparison with the common goal - to resist the regime' (Kagarlitsky, ZNET, March 19th 2007). He also said it was positive that, despite their hesitation, the new independent trade unions agreed to participate in the protests 'under their own banner and with their own slogans' (ibid).

Given the fiercely pro-rich leadership of the coalition it is no surprise that it entirely fails to address poverty and economic chaos that capitalism has created for the majority of Russian society. 20% of Russians are currently living below the poverty line with the average pension only £50 per month. Workers' wages cannot keep up with massive inflation in the cost of basic goods such as food and utilities 'in some sectors, such as postal work, they have even decreased. Inequality is intensified by the fact that taxes are charged at the same rate across all levels of income, so that billionaire tycoons pay the same proportion as street cleaners.

However, workers' poor conditions have been met with a wave of strikes over the past few months, particularly in St Petersburg and central Russia, in industries including car, rubber and food manufacturing and the postal service. There have also been unionisation drives and union recognition campaigns at several workplaces, such as the Heineken factory. These have been led by the new independent unions, which have broken with the state controlled unions inherited from the Soviet era. But it is an uphill struggle, as trade unionists are often physically threatened, intimidated by managers, transferred to lower paying jobs and threatened with firing.

In addition to attacks on democratic rights by the state and the terrible economic plight of the masses, there has been a worrying sharp increase in racist, xenophobic and anti-semitic attacks. On April 16th, Khairullo Sadykov, a street cleaner from Tajikistan, was stabbed 35 times by skinheads and died immediately. This kind of violence against immigrants, particularly from former USSR countries, is a common occurrence. In fact the situation is so severe that on April 20th 'Hitler's birthday' all foreign students at the Medical School in Moscow were told to stay inside their

dormitories for fears of skinhead attacks.

Given the composition of the Other Russia coalition it is no surprise that the independent trade unionists would only hesitantly join its protests. The coalition purports to want a return to the relatively liberal system of the Yeltsin era ? but this was also an era of terrible corruption, patronage and disgusting economic inequality and injustice. No gangster capitalists ? whether of the Yeltsin or Putin era ? offer any political alternative to the Russian working class. For the working class movement to strike an alliance with multi-millionaires is to strike an alliance with its most bitter enemies. The liberal anti-Putin oligarchy will never accept the necessary measures to tackle inequality, such as steeply progressive taxation on income and business transactions, and nationalisation of industry under workers? control.

In his article on the current protests, Kagarlitsky recognises all the intrinsic dangers in such an alliance but argues that there must be some unity against the regime. But unity on what basis? Unity around what goals? The last thing the Russian workers need is to be rallied around the demands of the liberal, anti-Putin bourgeoisie?s election campaign. Other Russia is, in that sense, a classic popular front, seeking to build support amongst the masses for the so-called democratic bourgeoisie. But for many Russians who remember the cowboy mafia capitalism of the Yeltsin era, calls for a return to this period of more classical liberal democracy will ring hollow.

It is only the working class combining the fight for workplace rights, economic and social justice, and for democracy, that can show any way out of Russia?s new midnight hour. Workers must break with the multi-millionaires and fascists in Other Russia, and build a mass campaign in defence of democratic rights, including the right to demonstrate, an end to control over the media by either the Kremlin or super-rich oligarchs. This should include a call for free and fair elections, monitored by the workers? movement. It should link these democratic demands with ones for measures to meet the urgent social and economic needs of workers, pensioners, the victims of racism and young people.

It should demand the withdrawal of all Russian forces from Chechnya, so that its inhabitants can decide for themselves without coercion whether they want complete independence or self-government within a federation. Such a campaign must organise workers? self-defence against the state and fascist attacks. Faced with Putin?s ever more dictatorial bonapartist regime the working class should demand a sovereign Constituent Assembly with full powers to sweep away the presidency, the provincial governors, the secret police, and expropriate the corrupt crony capitalists opening the way to a democratic planned economy.

To fight for such a programme of action the new unions should support the creation of a new working class party and revolutionaries should try to win it to an anti-capitalist, revolutionary communist programme free of Stalinism.

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