

COVID-19 IN RUSSIA

International Labour Working Group of Russia

The coronavirus pandemic that hit the world in the beginning of 2020 was not taken seriously by the Russian government until the end of March, when the state announced a self-isolation regime throughout Russia which continues up to this day. In his presidential announcement of May 11th, Vladimir Putin announced the re-opening of some businesses depending on the region and his address was met with a lot of confusion because it lacked any specificity. It stated that “all sectors of economy” are to be reopened starting on May 12th. There are more than 309,000 people infected with COVID-19 in Russia as of May 20th, and nearly half of these cases are in Moscow only. The death rate which was previously well below 2% is also increasing and becoming closer to the world average.

The Russian government issued several statements promising full payment of salaries, tax deferral and reduction. But the reality is very different, the measures announced are far from protecting workers. Although the other big capitalist governments declared some hundreds of billion dollars for “anti-crisis” measures, Russia has been quite moderate about the size of such economic measures. Despite federal reserves of more than 300 billion dollars, the Russian government decided to spend only a few billion dollars of it in order to confront one of the biggest economic crises of decades. Furthermore, the share of the workers and pensioners are even smaller in this package providing them with not even a month’s daily bread.

The president announces every other week some new measures taken to “protect” the people against the impact of the economic situation. However, these measures do not involve any effective protection for the people whose only option is to sell their labour. Lay-offs, while forbidden by law, still occur as expected, when employers’ first step is to protect their business is to sack as many people as they can. According to the statistics as of March 2020, the unemployment rate was doubled as a result of the virus, with a significant amount of which are unregistered workers. The government promised a gratuity of 12,000 Roubles (19,500 Roubles in Moscow), which is 150-200 US dollars, to those who lost their jobs after 1 March 2020 and worked no less than 60 calendar days in this year. The average housing expenses in Moscow is around 8-9 thousand Roubles and many people also have to pay their rents in order to be sheltered. In addition, this gratuity is only for those who are Russian citizens (in Moscow - for those who are not Muscovites). Unemployed people have no other compensation. This means that they have to take care of themselves, in whichever way they may. They are basically left to poverty while the government is keeping their federal reserve money for “rainy days”! This is one of the absurdities of the Russian government. It hides behind its new world “democracy” but who is this democracy for? The ruling elite made sure to centre the entire state apparatus around its own interests, throwing scraps of such notions as “freedom” to people, feeding them state

propaganda about the nightmares of the USSR, just so that Russian people can forget their everyday horrors. This capitalist government has good teachers of “democracy”!

Taking the most “democratic” and “free” countries as an example, the Russian government as well didn’t miss the opportunity to increase surveillance over people with the pretext of suppressing the COVID-19. New regulations have been imposed over people to watch almost every step they take. Meanwhile, it is worth noting that even one month after imposing these regulations the number of cases continues to increase with great pace, which makes the efficiency of the whole policy of the government extremely controversial. There is a wide concern that these regulations, or at least part of them may become permanent after the pandemic. This, for sure, gives the government a big tool to control the mass movements, atomizing them into the individuals and following and blocking their every step. Therefore, complete removal of all these restricting regulations after the “self-isolation regime” should be one of the key demands within the political freedom context.

We are facing an impending economic crisis. In contrast to quarantine, ‘self-isolation regime’ means that the state is not required to announce an emergency situation in the country and, thus, become a responsible agent in covering people’s living expenses. Little to no government assistance means that people are left without any savings and jobs. There are some rent breaks for businesses but regular people renting apartments still have to pay rent according to many reports. Moreover, those laws do not provide resources for migrant workers, the backbone of Russian production. Thousands of workers from Central Asia are left without pay or state protection. With continuing production and people’s inability to buy any goods, the country, along with the rest of state ‘market’ economy countries, are being plunged into an economic crisis. Much of Russian economy rotates around oil extraction and exportation. The sharp drop in oil prices and the devaluation of the Rouble has its cause in the overproduction of commodities and fall of rate of profit. Capitalism has a chaotic nature with its repeating crises cycles which accumulate to recession and depression. COVID-19 is not the cause of the economic crisis, as bourgeois economists would like us to think, but is one of its exacerbating factors affecting commodity exchanges due to closures of borders, among other factors.

Under socialism, such epidemiological issues were taken seriously and were resolved promptly. The capitalist states knew very well of the upcoming pandemic (as early as in November 2019) but resolved not to take any preventative measures to battle it in order not to halt any market operations. That led to the death of hundreds of thousands and the endangering of millions more. Moreover, a privatized healthcare system means that those who cannot afford insurance would be charged 200,000 Roubles for treatment (3,000 US Dollars), not to mention the incapability of hospitals to host patients. On the other hand, under the socialist USSR, treatment and prevention measures and public health were the priority. While in Czarist Russia mortality rates from epidemic diseases were 291 per 1000 population, under socialism some diseases ceased *completely*. Clear organization and implementation of preventative measures averted the incidence of many serious diseases, including plague in the 1930’s. The entire healthcare system was restructured after the victory of socialism and healthcare issues were

directed by people's councils locally while all the healthcare resources were mobilized and centralized to work efficiently. Thus we can make scientific and historical conclusions in favour of a socialist economic system which does not put profits over people.

Unfortunately, the weak trade union movement in Russia means that unorganized labour is not guaranteed any protection. Little and unorganized popular opposition to the Russian government is unpromising for the workers. We need to make it known that we will not stand in which we are constantly fearful for our economic lives. We will put our destiny back into our hands and fight for the political and economic rights of the citizens and immigrants!

21st May 2020