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Russia: 98 arrested in opposition-led protests in Yekaterinburg

Since May 13, when protests began against the construction of an Orthodox church on a city square in Yekaterinburg in the Urals in Russia, 98 people have been arrested by Russian riot police.

Reflecting the incestuous relationship between the oligarchy, the state and the Orthodox Church that has emerged with the restoration of capitalism in Russia, the construction of the church is supported by the local authorities and funded in large measure by the two oligarchs Igor Altushkin (net worth \$3.8 billion) and Andrei Kozitsyn (net worth \$1.2 billion). Both of them made their fortunes in the Ural mining industry and maintain close ties to Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The protests began on Monday, drawing a crowd up of up to 2,000 people who occupied the park where the church is set to be built. The protests escalated into a violent clash overnight between demonstrators and the Russian riot police OMON, which is subordinated to the interior ministry. The OMON launched a brutal crackdown, arresting dozens that night. Several protesters were injured, including a 17-year-old boy. Since the protests began, 98 people have been arrested, among them several figures from the staff of the right-wing opposition politician Alexei Navalny.

On Thursday, President Putin intervened, calling for a city referendum on the construction of the church. The referendum is scheduled to be held on Saturday, May 18. Online polls have showed a majority of the city population opposing the construction of the church.

Since the beginning of the protests in Yekaterinburg, similar, smaller protests against the construction of buildings in parks and squares have been held throughout the country. Leaders of the protests in Yekaterinburg are now in the process of negotiating for a compromise with the local authorities.

The protests were immediately endorsed by the Western bourgeois media, which were quick to hypocritically denounce the violent police crackdown.

However, as reactionary as the planned construction of the church by the oligarchs and the state is, workers must be warned about the political forces that are leading the protests. They are closely aligned with the right-wing, imperialist-backed opposition of Alexei Navalny, whose local campaign staff were involved in organizing the protests.

One of the main figures behind the protests, Fedor Krasheninnikov, has a long record of right-wing political alliances in the region and is a member of the US-supported liberal opposition.

While still a student in 1994–1998, he was a member of the far-right nationalist Liberal National Democratic Party (LDPR) in Yekaterinburg, and the party's local city representative. The head of the LDPR, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, is notorious for his violent outbursts denouncing Jews, Sinti and Roma and immigrants in fascistic language and has, for the past two decades, functioned as a loyal opposition to Putin.

In the 2000s, Krasheninnikov founded a business consulting agency in Yekaterinburg and was part of various nationalist outfits, including the Party for the Resurrection of Russia (Partiia Vozrozhdeniia Rossii) which had close ties to the Stalinist and far-right nationalist Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF). He participated, in various capacities, in several gubernatorial and city дума elections.

In 2011, he co-founded the People's Freedom Party (Partiia Narodnoi Svobody), or PARNAS. The party was led by Boris Nemtsov until his murder under dubious circumstances in 2015. Nemtsov, as well as PARNAS as a whole, have long-held and well-known ties to the US State Department and the CIA. Also in 2011, Krasheninnikov co-wrote a book on “transparent democracy” with Leonid Volkov, one of Alexei Navalny's closest advisers. Krasheninnikov became a leading figure in the 2011–2012 anti-Putin protest movement by layers of the upper-middle class and has publicly attacked Putin's foreign policy in Ukraine since 2014, denouncing the annexation of Crimea and the “Russian invasion” in the east of the country.

Krasheninnikov is one of the most influential political figures in the Urals, arguing for greater independence from Moscow, through a decentralization of the entire Russian Federation and regional autonomy for the Urals. At the protests this week, slogans like “The Urals are ours,” associated with this perspective, were reportedly shouted as well.

The business daily *Kommersant* in 2012 noted that Krasheninnikov was among the “local businessmen who feel squeezed by Moscow [businessmen],” fueling local separatist tendencies in the elites. In 2003, Krasheninnikov was on the campaign staff of Anton Bakov, the leader of the Monarchist Party of Russia, and considered the “grey cardinal” of the separatist tendency fighting for a “Ural Republic.” In 1993, a “Ural Republic” was very briefly proclaimed in parts of the Sverdlovsk region, of which Yekaterinburg forms part, but lacking any major base of support it was quickly disbanded by then-president Boris Yeltsin.

Under Putin, in particular, the Kremlin has pushed for strong centralized control by Moscow over the regions, following numerous major conflicts with regional elites in the 1990s. However, recent years have seen growing tensions between the oligarchs in Moscow and regional businessmen.

The protests in Yekaterinburg are part of the overall strategy of the imperialist-backed liberal opposition in Russia, which has a history of fomenting and supporting protests supposedly aimed at protecting the environment or “green spaces,” as well as secessionist and regionalist movements.

Historically, protests to defend parks, squares and environmental sites have formed the basis for alliances of the liberal opposition and the pseudo-left with extreme nationalist and monarchist forces. Such protests have also been supported by US imperialism. Among the most recent example were the protests over the Khimki forest near Moscow, which started in 2010. The leader of these protests, Yevgeniya Chirikova, a local businesswoman, was awarded a “Women of Courage” award by US Vice President Joe Biden in 2012.

The support of regionalist and separatist tendencies within sections of the local bourgeoisie in regions like the Urals, which is rich in energy resources and has a strong industrial base, has also been a major focus of the program of the liberal opposition, especially under Navalny. In his election programs and other statements, Navalny has repeatedly emphasized the need for greater regional autonomy, i.e., greater power for regional elites. Navalny also participated in several of the fascist Russian marches, where

he shouted slogans like “Stop feeding the Caucasus,” a slogan that is not only racist, but also a code word for various separatist tendencies advocating the break-up of the Russian Federation in its current form.

US imperialism grants support to such forces and programs as part of its efforts to prepare regime change in Moscow and carve up the Russian Federation, to bring the resources of the former Soviet Union under its direct control.

Under conditions of a massive economic and social crisis, the promotion of these types of right-wing middle-class protests is also aimed at diverting attention from the major issues confronting the working class, above all the danger of a US-led war against Russia and the devastating social crisis. Russia has been hit extremely hard by the economic sanctions by the US and European Union following the beginning of the Ukraine crisis in 2014. Due to the Russian economy’s high dependence on oil prices, Russia is also set to suffer significant economic setbacks from the escalating US-China trade war.

In the Russian auto industry, **hundreds of thousands of jobs are threatened**, with the American company Ford laying off thousands of workers this summer. In the first quarter of this year, real wages, which have been declining for years, fell by another 2.9 percent, and consumer confidence measures fell to a historic low. In a poll, 79 percent said that they considered Russia to already be in a recession. Another poll earlier this year indicated that 80 percent of Russian households are struggling to buy even basic necessities.

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[9 January 2018]