

Over 50,000 join opposition protests in Moscow

Clara Weiss
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An estimated 50,000-60,000 people joined an officially sanctioned rally by the liberal opposition on Saturday in the city center of Moscow. The rally was held under the slogan “Let’s take back our right to vote.” Its main demands were the inclusion of liberal opposition candidates on the ballot for the Moscow City Council elections on September 8 and the release of politicians who have been arrested in the previous week as part of a massive police crackdown on the opposition. Smaller protests took place in St. Petersburg and several other cities.

The call for the protest was supported by all the major figures of the liberal opposition in Russia, including Alexei Navalny, who is still in jail, and Liubov Sobol, who was arrested again just before the beginning of the rally. Several prominent entertainers, TV moderators and musicians also supported the protest, among them the popular YouTube moderator Yuri Dud. The rapper Face and electronic music group IC3PEAK, which count among the most popular musicians in Russia among youth, joined the rally with performances.

According to reports, a substantial portion of those attending were young people, many of whom had never joined an opposition protest before. A significant factor that contributed to the large turnout, beyond the participation of popular music groups, was the violent crackdown on the opposition in recent weeks. At two unsanctioned rallies, on July 27 and August 3, the police and paramilitary organization OMON, which forms part of the National Guard, arrested over 1,000 people, transforming the center of the Russian capital into a virtual state of siege. Hundreds of thousands of people have watched footage of the violent crackdown on social media.

Following the mass arrests, members of Alexei Navalny’s staff have continued to be subject to raids and criminal persecution.

As in previous weeks, there was a heavy presence of police and OMON. According to a report in the liberal *Novaya Gazeta*, OMON troops were brought in from other regions of the country, most notably Tula. By the end of Saturday, around 240 people had been arrested.

Many demonstrators, including prominent figures like Yuri Dud, came to the protest wrapped in or waving Russian flags. Slogans included: “Down with the Tsar [Putin]!” “Putin is a thief” and “Russia will be free.”

Amid growing social and political discontent within the working class, the Kremlin has seized upon the protests by the liberal opposition to both stage exercises of state repression against protests and step up the legal and political framework for the repression of mass protests.

On Friday, the state agency Roskomnadzor, which has overseen a massive extension of internet surveillance in recent years, called upon Google to stop advertising “illegal events” on YouTube. Should Google not comply with the request, the agency warned, the Russian government would consider this foreign interference into its sovereignty. The Stalinist KPRF, a “loyal opposition” of the ruling United Russia party in parliament, is now preparing a bill, scheduled to be introduced to parliament in the fall, which would threaten anyone accused of “virtual interference” in the electoral process with criminal persecution.

While the ongoing crackdown on the opposition must be seen as a serious warning and opposed as an attack on democratic rights, workers and youth must be warned about the extremely right-wing character of the political forces that stand behind the protests.

They range from the liberal opposition, which maintains well-known ties to Washington, to nationalist and pseudo-left forces like the Russian Socialist Movement. The presentation of these forces as proponents of democratic rights by Russian pro-liberal media and the Western bourgeois press is a fraud.

It was not a coincidence that, amid mass social discontent in the working class, the opposition deliberately excluded any kind of social demands from the protests, and did its best to conceal its overall political agenda, instead trying to appeal to vague anti-Putin sentiments and Russian nationalism.

The liberal opposition speaks for sections of the Russian oligarchy and upper-middle class that helped carry out and benefited from the restoration of capitalism in the former Soviet Union, but feel that their careers and social interests are stifled by Putin and the oligarchs around him. Moreover, they see the economic and national interests of the oligarchy endangered by the stand-off between the Putin regime and US imperialism and advocate for a much closer alliance with the United States and European imperialism, as a guarantor of their own social and economic position. While the opposition has recently tried to present itself as interested in social issues, its leaders are well known to have been long-standing proponents of social austerity.

Similar to the line-up of forces in the imperialist-backed Maidan protest movement, which was dominated by sections of the oligarchy and middle class in Ukraine, and culminated in the February 2014 coup of fascist forces against the pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich, the Russian liberal opposition has for years cultivated a conscious alliance with the country's far-right.

In Ukraine, the results of this Western-backed coup by fascist forces, falsely portrayed by the media as a "democratic revolution," were five years of civil war, state-backed fascist terror of workers and minorities, the acute danger of all-out war with Russia and a decline in living standards to those of the poorest African countries. In Russia, the results of any such US-backed movement would be, if anything, even more catastrophic.

Most notoriously, Alexei Navalny, who has been hailed by Western bourgeois media as Russia's foremost "opponent of Putin" and "democrat," has maintained close ties to Russian fascist forces for well over a decade. He participated in several Russian marches, an annual protest by the far right, including in 2010 and 2011, has made violent threats to North Caucasians on YouTube videos and has included anti-immigrant demands in his election platforms. Navalny's line has not been an individual aberration.

In a 2010 commentary for the online newspaper *Gazeta.Ru*, Vladimir Milov, who is among those who were imprisoned by the police in recent weeks, called for the liberal opposition to return to the "national idea" as

the "starting point of politics." In a thinly veiled appeal to the conception of Russians as an "Aryan" people, superior to the peoples of Asia, Milov wrote: "It is time to return to the European home. We Russians are Europeans, don't try to drag us into Asia, Asia is alien to us." He demanded a tough policy toward the North Caucasus and its "culture" of "total corruption" and demanded that liberals concede to nationalists and monarchists that problems with "immigrants" and "interethnic relations" indeed existed and had to be tackled.

At the time, Milov worked closely with Boris Nemtsov, who shared his views and maintained close ties to Washington (Nemtsov was murdered in early 2015 under dubious circumstances). With the support and under the leadership of Milov, Nemtsov and Navalny, the so-called liberal opposition at the time began close collaboration with both the National Bolsheviks of Eduard Limonov, a pro-Stalinist and pro-fascist organization, as well as the openly racist Movement against Illegal Migration (DPNI), which has been involved in the instigation of several anti-immigrant pogroms. Today, Milov is a member of the staff of Navalny's YouTube channel as an expert on economic questions.

The 2011-2013 protest movement of layers of the upper-middle class in Moscow, was based on precisely this reactionary alliance of the liberal opposition and far-right and monarchist forces and were given a "left-wing" fig leaf by the pseudo-left. Similarly, these forces joined hands again to divert mass opposition to the pension reform into nationalist channels and block any broader movement by workers against it. In this endeavor, they also received support from the "loyal opposition" parties in the Russian parliament, the fascistic Liberal Democratic Party and the Stalinist KPRF, as well as the trade unions (see: "Russian Stalinists, pseudo-left close ranks against opposition to pension cuts").

Any movement by the working class against the Putin government, social inequality, poverty, and for the defense of democratic rights will have to proceed independently from and in opposition to these forces.



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