

Russia: At least 64 dead, including many children, in horrific shopping mall fire

By Clara Weiss
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A fire Sunday in the industrial Siberian city of Kemerovo has taken the lives of at least 64 people, many of them children. Dozens were wounded, and dozens are still missing. The fire broke out at 4 p.m. in the afternoon and was not extinguished for over 12 hours. The horrific catastrophe is set to fuel social tensions in Russia as the shopping mall, which disregarded basic fire safety regulations, is owned by the billionaire Denis Shtengelov.

The fire broke out on March 25 on the fourth floor of the shopping mall “Winter Cherry,” near a movie theatre where dozens of children were watching the film *Sherlock Gnomes*. The fire spread rapidly, and heavily toxic smoke filled the building. The firemen arrived late, and it took them hours before they could reach the fourth floor. The fire was localised only after 10 hours, and smaller fires in the building were still raging on Monday (for drone footage of the blaze, [click here](#)).

The shopping mall was a popular destination for children. Among those who perished on Sunday was reportedly an entire school class and their teacher, who travelled there from a nearby town.

The building of the shopping mall has been all but destroyed, and firemen have been risking their lives entering it to search for victims. As of this writing, only 17 victims have been identified. Many bodies were so mutilated that they are unidentifiable without the aid of DNA tests. Several bodies still lie under the debris. Russian media reports on Sunday indicated that over 150 people might have been killed or injured, and that official figures likely understate the magnitude of the disaster.

The fourth floor of the shopping mall also included a small petting zoo; all 200 animals died in the blaze.

The fire was not an “accident.” The Russian liberal newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* reported that basic fire regulations had been violated in the crassest manner, making it only a question of time before such a disaster occurred.

Fire signals did not work. The Russian investigative committee reported on Monday that, when the fire alarm reached him, a guard at the shopping mall had turned it off,

for reasons that remain unclear. Workers at the shopping mall had to personally inform the people inside the building about the fire.

Fire exits, to the extent that they even existed, were blocked. According to the father of three victims of the fire, the children in the movie theatre were unable to exit at all and burned alive. In scenes reminiscent of the Grenfell fire in London last summer, people jumped out of the windows in order to escape the fire and toxic smoke.

It was also reported that the “Winter Cherry” had not been examined for its fire regulations by the authorities for years. A planned inspection in 2016 was cancelled because of “vacation.”

Reporters on the spot described terrible scenes of desperate parents waiting for hours for news about their children. A reporter for the liberal magazine *Meduza* spoke to Alexander and Olga Lilleviali, whose three daughters, aged 11 and 5, were burned alive in the movie theatre.

Alexander described how he had tried to get to his daughters in the theatre after one of them called him in despair after the blaze had started:

“As I was running up the stairs, somebody handed me a wet rag, and I used it to cover my nose. When I reached the fourth floor, I broke a window to send the draft upwards. Then I collapsed. I started crawling, but I realised at this point that I’d lost all strength. I’d inhaled so much carbon monoxide that I was about to faint. My daughter kept calling me and calling me. I just shouted into the phone that she needed to try to get out of the theatre, but there was nothing I could do. In front of me, it was already flames.”

According to *Meduza*, the police and officials would not provide reports before 10 p.m. Sunday night—i.e., six hours after the beginning of the fire. One woman told the reporter, “While the fire burned, we stood outside for six hours, and nobody came out to talk to us even once. At about 5:30 [p.m.], the police cordoned off the shopping centre. The officers were pushy. We ran across the street, back and forth, while the ‘Cherry’ burned. They didn’t let us come near, and they didn’t explain anything. There were plumes

of smoke above the building, our children were burning, and we just watched.”

Olga Lillevyali said: “My husband and I tried to stop one of the police officers at the school, to ask him what to expect, but he waved us away rudely. They didn’t care. Finally, my husband and I couldn’t take it anymore, and we started yelling, ‘Seredyuk [the mayor], get out here!’ We’d heard on the news that he was somewhere there at the school. Think about it: we learned this *from the news!* He didn’t even have the guts to come out and face us. By about 9:30 [p.m.], my husband grabbed a police officer by the shirt and started to scream, ‘Show yourself! Will you tell us how many children died? What should we expect? Where can we get information?’ ”

Local residents volunteered to donate blood just 90 minutes after the fire started, well before there was an official call for blood donations.

When Mayor Ilya Seredyuk and Lieutenant Governor Vladimir Chernov addressed the parents waiting at a nearby school for the first time at 11 p.m., surrounded by bodyguards, they were greeted by an angry crowd, demanding regular updates on the situation—but to no avail.

The anger at the official response and the disastrous death toll in this horrific tragedy are fully justified. Like the Grenfell Tower fire in London, the fire at Kemerovo was not an accident but a social crime, the result of capitalist restoration and decades of systematic underfunding of infrastructure.

The investigation committee has started investigating four individuals, and local authorities have announced tightening fire regulations. However, there is little reason to believe that anything will change.

Russia has seen many such mass fires over the past decades. In 2003, a fire in a student dorm of Moscow University took the lives of 44 people, injuring 156; a fire in a nursing home in Krasnodar in 2007 killed 64 people; a fire in a nightclub in Perm in 2009 killed 154; and, in 2015, a fire at a mall in Kazan killed 19 people, and injured 61. “Smaller” fires are a constant occurrence in Russia, as are deadly accidents at workplaces (see: “Russia: Siberian shoe factory fire kills 10 workers”).

After decades of cutting social spending, Russia, the largest country on earth and home to more than 140 million people, has fewer fire departments than the many-times-smaller Poland, where only 40 million live. Fire regulations are disregarded systematically and on a mass scale by both businesses and the authorities. This is part of a deliberate class policy and an expression of the criminal and callous indifference of the oligarchy and the state apparatus towards the lives of ordinary people.

The Kemerovo fire is a particularly stark expression of the

social relations underlying these catastrophes.

Kemerovo, a city of half a million people, is located in the major coal mining region of the Kuznetsk Basin. In many ways, it is symbolic of the horrific industrial decline, rising unemployment and poverty, and the devastation of the social infrastructure that characterised capitalist restoration and the past two decades in Russia. It is still home to many industrial facilities and a large, but very impoverished, working class population. In 2015, it was named the poorest town in Siberia with 55 percent of its inhabitants counted as “low-income.”

Meanwhile, the “Winter Cherry” is part of a subsidiary of the KDV group, which is owned by the oligarch Denis Shtengelov and ranks among Russia’s 100 biggest private companies. In 2017, Bloomberg reported that Denis Shtengelov’s personal wealth exceeded \$1 billion. He lives with his wife and three children in Australia, where they are enjoying a life in luxury.

A typical representative of the Russian oligarchy, Shtengelov started his business activities in the mid-1990s, while whole industrial cities like Kemerovo and his native Tomsk were plunged into poverty. He managed to massively expand his business during the recession in 2008-2009, by buying off rival companies. Between 2012 and 2016, the profit of the KDV group rose from 32.6 billion rubles (about \$570 million) a year to 95.3 billion rubles (\$1.67 billion). The company has particularly benefitted from a growing demand for cheap candy as prices for cacao rose amid the devaluation of the ruble due to the Western sanctions and the recession of 2014-2016. As of 2017, the KDV group runs 11 producing plants and dozens of logistical centres and employs over 16,000 people.

In a move that indicated Shtengelov’s fear of exploding social tensions, the billionaire has cynically promised to account for all medical and psychological costs for survivors and relatives of the victims and pay every family 3 million rubles (around \$52,500)—a tiny fraction of his own wealth and the annual profits of his company.

There is no question that Shtengelov and the criminal oligarchy that he represents are fully responsible for the deaths of the dozens of working class people and children who perished on Sunday in the most painful way.

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