Coal production in Russia has seen a resurgence in recent years with Russia ranking as the world’s sixth largest producer. The coal industry employs around 151,000 people, with another 500,000 working in related industries. Coal is the fifth most important export product for Russia.

In 2016, Russia produced 385.7 million tons of coal, of which 171.4 million tons were exported. The Kuzbass has produced between 54 and 60 percent of all coal that is mined in Russia, and up to 76 percent of Russia’s coal exports. Coal companies account for well over half of the region’s budget.

With a record low of only 70 mines as of 2016, this increase in output has been achieved above all by a massive increase in productivity—that is, a ruthless intensification of the exploitation of the working class.

The profits of the coal companies have risen even more significantly than the output. In 2017, when output rose by 13 million tons to 270 million tons a year, the profits of coal companies rose by 2.8 times, according to official statistics.

Coal extraction in Russia, like all extraction of raw materials, has proceeded in the most reckless and environmentally destructive manner. While this was always an issue in the Soviet period, and the subject of one of the demands raised by striking miners in late 1980s, it has gone from bad to worse since 1991 as the ruling oligarchy has been pursuing the exploitation of the working class and the raw material resources in total disregard of the consequences for the lives of ordinary people.

According to a report by the NGO Ecodefense, the average life expectancy of the Kuzbass population is three to four years shorter than the average in Russia. No less than 93.8 percent of the drinking water sources in the region are polluted. The region is experiencing black snowfall, with snow containing sulphur compounds, nitrites, chlorides, potassium and manganese.

Many diseases are more widespread here than in the rest of the country. The rate of tuberculosis, which made a “comeback” in the 1990s after having been virtually eliminated in the Soviet Union, is 1.7 times higher there than on average in the country. The Kuzbass had the highest rate of child cerebral palsy in Russia in 2011 and the second highest in 2012. Fifteen types of cancer are more common in the region than in the rest of the country.

Infant circulatory system anomalies are 1.6 times higher, and female reproductive system anomalies are 3.3 times higher. Infectious and parasitic diseases among children are two to three times higher than the national average of 988 per 100,000 children.

The poor state of health is a result of a combination of serious environmental pollution, poor infrastructure and extreme poverty. In a poll from 2015, several of the major mining centers in the Kuzbass were counted among the poorest cities in Siberia with a population of more than half a million. Kemerovo was the worst off, with 56 percent of the population describing themselves as “low-income,” meaning that they had enough money “only for groceries and items of first necessity.” Barnaul and Novokuznetsk, both also major centers of the mining industry, each had 55 percent.

Miners’ salaries depend to what extent the “plan is fulfilled.” The average salary for a “fulfilled plan” (i.e., meeting a set quota for the extraction of coal), is usually around 25,000 rubles ($437) a month. Since this is a salary impossible to live on—and many workers have to feed families of three to five on their wages—miners are forced to take significant security risks to overfulfill the plan. Even then, however, miners receive an average salary of 35,000 rubles ($603). In other words, while performing highly difficult and dangerous work, the miners and their families live in severe poverty.

Deadly accidents at Russian mines are extremely common. Between 2004 and 2012, there were 10 major mine explosions, which took the lives of 391 miners. Among the biggest were the explosion at the Ulyanovskaya mine in 2007, which killed 110 miners, the Raspadskaya mine disaster of 2010, which killed 91 men, and the Severnaya disaster that same year, which killed another 36.

According to a 2016 report by the business daily Vedomosti, only 8 out of the 70 mines in Russia were considered “not
dangerous.” Thirty-eight of them, which produce a total of 18 million tons of coal a year, were deemed “highly dangerous” by the heads of Russia’s largest coal companies, and 12 were deemed “critically dangerous.”

In one of the all-too-rare social reports about the situation of the Russian working class, a reporter for the journal Takie dela visited Mezhdurechesk in 2017 and spoke to a family of miners. One young miner, Vova, told her it was a regular occurrence for their employers to withhold substantial parts of their salary: “They might cheat you a little. Say you go 200 meters down, they are supposed to pay you 100,000 [rubles, or $1,748], but they pay you 80,000 [rubles, or $1,398]. But you will not get this money back, because you’re a simple worker and no one will listen to you.”

Virtually the entire town of 50,000 people depends on the mines, which are run by the Raspadskaya Coal Company. Its headquarters are in the same building that used to house the regional committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The workers told her: “Just like you previously couldn’t write anything bad about the party, now you cannot write anything bad about the mining companies!”

The Raspadskaya Coal Company is one of Russia’s leading coal producers and runs the Raspadskaya mine, the largest coal and largest underground mine in the country. It is notorious for disregarding basic safety measures, with dozens of accidents over the past decades. The worst, in 2010, killed 91 miners.

In 2013, large shares in the company were sold to the owners of EVRAZ, a major international coal and steel company: Roman Abramovich (net worth $11.5 billion), Alexander Frolov ($2.4 billion) and Alexander Abramov ($5.8 billion). Abramovich in particular counts among the oligarchs closest to Putin. EVRAZ also owns Yuzhkuzbassugol, another major coal-producing company in the Kuzbass, and six other mining facilities in the Kemerovo oblast. Overall, EVRAZ controls some of the most important mines in Russia and East Ukraine.

The family that the reporter of Takie Delsa spoke to was so desperately poor that they couldn’t even offer anything to eat while housing her—something that is standard in Russian culture, even in the poorest families. The reporter noted at the end of her piece:

“A few days later, I talk to Yekaterina, the wife of the miner Yura. She is very emotional and loudly screams into the receiver: ‘You know, I’ve been thinking a lot. A working person should live with dignity [dostoino]! Precisely this word—with dignity!' Then she sharply lowers her voice and adds, quiet and tired: ‘Because the workers hold the earth on their shoulders [zemlya derzhitsia na rabochikh]. We go to work, we pay taxes. But when you came I didn’t even have anything to put on the table.’”

Covering about a fifth of the earth’s landmass, Russia contains some of the world’s largest raw material resources, including about 22 percent of the forests, 20 percent of fresh water and 16 percent of the mineral reserves. These include about 6 percent of the world’s oil deposits, a third of the world’s natural gas deposits, the second largest coal reserves, between 25 and 40 percent of the world’s unmined gold reserves and 10 percent of the world’s uranium reserves.

At this point, almost all of these resources are controlled by a handful of oligarchs—much to the chagrin of Western companies and especially US imperialism, which have been virtually barred from owning and extracting raw material resources. Almost all of Russia’s 30 richest businessmen, who have combined wealth of over $200 billion, are involved, to a greater or lesser extent, in oil, gas, aluminum, steel and coal, and it is no coincidence that several of them are now the target of US sanctions.

Their control over significant sections of the world’s resources and the exploitation of the Russian working class—resources that imperialism thought it could begin exploiting without impediment after the dissolution of the USSR—is a major economic motive for the relentless campaign by the Western media and especially the US government against Putin and the oligarchs closest to him.

To the extent that imperialism fails to achieve its aims by means of economic warfare and “regime change operations” in countries allied to Russia, it will resort to—and is already actively preparing to resort to—direct military aggression, which would have the most catastrophic consequences for the working class in the former Soviet Union and internationally.

Fundamentally, the tragedy in Kemerovo and the danger of imperialist world war have the same historical and economic roots: the betrayal of the October Revolution by Stalinism, which culminated in the massacre of generations of Marxists and Trotskyists in the 1930s, and the dissolution of the USSR and restoration of capitalism a half-century later.

A way out of this social devastation and the threat of imperialist war can be found only through an assimilation of the lessons of the crimes of Stalinism, and on the basis of a program that seeks to unify the working class internationally on a socialist basis. This requires a break from the trade unions and all existing bourgeois forces in Russia, all of which were implicated in the counterrevolution of 1985-1991 and horrendous crimes against the working class, and a building of a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement, in Russia and throughout the former USSR.

Concluded