

Russia's workers sent back to factories as coronavirus continues to spread

By Andrea Peters
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Workers in industries across Russia are being sent back to their factories, even as the country reports record increases in the number of coronavirus infections, the total number of which now exceed 10,000, distributed across 50 different regions.

With the support of the federal government, local officials have already allowed dozens of enterprises to reopen this week, with more expected to come back online starting April 13. Some plants that produce non-essential products were never shuttered, despite the fact that President Vladimir Putin declared the entire month of April to be a paid national holiday and ordered the shutdown of businesses.

In Moscow oblast, the region encompassing the capital city, which has the majority of COVID-19 infections and saw a jump of 859 in just one day, enterprises run by international giants Mars, Campina, Kimberly-Clark, Wilo, and PepsiCo, to name a few, never closed their doors. Luxury carmaker Mercedes will restart operations on April 13 at its facility in the area, where more than 1,000 employees work.

Seven hundred miles to the south, in Rostov oblast, Guardian, PepsiCo, Coca-Cola, Mars, Tekhnonikol, a producer of industrial and consumer building materials, and the Segezha Group, an international holding company that makes packaging materials, have continued their operations uninterrupted. They are running at full capacity. PepsiCo, for instance, is producing 230 tons of product every 24 hours.

After concerns erupted at the Rostov-area NEVZ plant, a factory that produces transportation and rolling-stock materials, over the violation of social distancing measures because crowds formed at checkpoints to enter the facility, production is now back online. According to the company, this week 1,500 workers have been recalled to their jobs, with

another 1,500 to 3,000 expected to join them shortly.

Auto plants in Kaliningrad and Ulyanovsk oblasts will restart beginning Monday of next week. In the region of Novosibirsk, an area in southern Siberia with a population of 1.5 million where there are dozens of COVID-19 cases and thousands of people are under medical observation, the governor authorized all enterprises associated with manufacturing, mineral extraction, construction and education to start work again. In Pskov oblast, a western region that borders Latvia, the government announced that salons and hairdressers can reopen.

In every case, local officials insist that the conditions inside Russia's factories are safe for workers and that necessary precautions are being taken to protect employees. In Yaroslavl oblast, for instance, where there are a dozen known cases and hundreds of people under isolation orders, officials report that four enterprises are being closely monitored for compliance with workplace safety laws. One government representative told the media that even in the case of "a single infection," monitoring is so tight that they would "discover and localize the spread" immediately.

However, according to a 2010 article published in the *Journal of International Circumpolar Health*, "The occupational safety system in Russia has severely deteriorated in the last 2 decades, with legislators tending to promote the interests of industry and business, resulting in the neglect of occupational safety and violation of workers' rights. The majority of workers are employed in conditions that do not meet rules of safety and hygiene. More than 60 percent of [occupational accidents] can be attributed to management practices—violation of safety regulations, poor organization of work, deficiency of certified occupational safety specialists and inadequate

personnel training.”

In the country’s far eastern Primorskiy region, two workers at a factory that produces military helicopters have fallen ill with COVID-19. One person has died, and another two are under observation for the infection at a hospital in Vladivostok. Despite testing negative for coronavirus, imaging of the patients’ lungs indicates they have contracted the disease.

According to official Russian estimates, fully 30 percent of COVID-19 tests produce false negatives, such that hospitals in Moscow are now treating known coronavirus patients and those simply diagnosed with pneumonia on the same ward, based on the assumption that the latter are really unrecorded COVID-19 victims.

Dependent on their paychecks for survival, Russian workers are under immense pressure to continue in or return to their jobs, regardless of the dangers posed by the coronavirus and the questionable assurances of management and state officials.

In Moscow, the wealthiest city in the country, officials have announced additional unemployment benefits of up to 7370 rubles (US\$100). When combined with the maximum amount granted by the federal government, this could bring the total amount a laid-off worker receives to 19,500 rubles (\$264), which is barely above the subsistence minimum set by the federal government itself.

Prices for food and medicine are skyrocketing around the country. According to Rosstat, the official statistical agency, the cost of tomatoes, onions, garlic, lemons and buckwheat increased between 6 and 14 percent in March alone. This week, the Federal Antimonopoly Service (FAS) reported being deluged with complaints by consumers of price gouging for fruit, vegetables, buckwheat and sugar. Experts estimate that prices could rise by a further 20 percent in the coming weeks.

Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin proposed on Thursday a price freeze that would limit increases in the cost of medicine, food and other basic necessities to 10 percent. Even if implemented, this would still leave Russian families in dire straits. With the value of the country’s currency having fallen to 74 rubles to the US dollar, down from about 60 before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, households are confronting a substantial drop in real income, as layoffs grip the country.

The Kremlin continues to announce various social measures to offset the impact of the health crisis,

including one-time payments to families with children and medical personnel involved in combatting coronavirus. These range from 5,000 (\$100) to 50,000 (\$1,000) rubles. However, the main promise of the government—that workers will continue to receive their April wages during the “national holiday” mandated by the government—is false, as businesses have been left to their own devices to determine how to fund those payments. In addition, thousands in Russia work “off the books” and therefore have no formal employer, should the government provide some means to finance April’s supposedly paid time off.

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