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Russia

December 10: A new page in the history of Russia

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Saturday December 10 was really a historic day for Russian society. According to various estimates, the meeting which was held in Moscow mobilised between 50,000 and 80,000 people; it was the biggest street action since the beginning of the 1990s. The same day, similar actions brought together thousands of people in all the big cities of Russia. The movement even reached Western Europe, where the Russian Diaspora organized pickets in front of the embassies.

Only a week ago, the regime would not have imagined that it would have to face serious problems. The electoral campaign for the State Duma (parliament) was held according to rules that are now well-known to everyone, the rules of “guided democracy”, an authoritarian political model whose foundations were laid by President Yeltsin in 1993, at the time of the adoption of the present Constitution. It could have been thought that over the last decade Vladimir Putin and his acolytes had succeeded in turning politics into a tiresome spectacle which nearly all of the population felt to be something completely foreign to them. Scarcely seven unrecognized parties fought to win a place in Parliament, but it was a foregone conclusion that the biggest share of the cake would go to United Russia (Putin’s party). This party has a monopoly of both state structures and those of the country’s big capitalist companies. In order to ensure the victory of this bureaucratic monster, whose popularity is in freefall, thousands (indeed, millions!) of civil servants were mobilized. Every possible mechanism of manipulating the vote and the work of the electoral commission was resorted to.

The growing dissatisfaction with the regime was expressed in a massive vote for parties that were seen as having a critical position with regard to United Russia. Millions of voters applied the principle of voting “for any party, but not for United Russia”. They thus gave their votes to the Communist Party and the centre-left party Fair Russia. On the morning of December 5, when the results of the elections were announced, the country was indignant: United Russia had won 50 per cent of the vote, whereas its real popularity was sharply decreasing, and within the population this party is known as “the party of swindlers and thieves”. The reports published by observers from the opposition revealed that nearly a quarter of the ballot papers had been tampered with to the advantage of the party in power!

Russians have the feeling of having been personally insulted and ridiculed, which comes on top of the increasingly obvious consequences of the economic crisis, with glaring poverty and the privatization of the social sector. On December 5, more than 7,000 people went to the meeting organized in Moscow by political groupings calling for democratization. The demand for “fair elections!” quickly gave way to the slogan “Putin - resign!”, and at the end of the meeting violent confrontations took place between the police and the participants. Within a few days, the conflict spread and grew stronger and young people organized through social networks tried to take unauthorized actions in the city centre; they were followed closely and savagely dispersed by the police.

On Friday, nearly 1,000 people were arrested during such actions in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Finally, on Saturday December 10, the level of discontent reached its highest point. What happened that day can already be considered as a point of rupture in the history of modern Russia. For the first time since the beginning of the 1990s, millions of people were engaged in live political action, which took place in the streets. In this political activity we can already observe a battle of ideas and alternatives being played out between three forces: democrats, militants of the radical Left and nationalists. This battle of ideas has as its backdrop a task that everyone has made theirs: the bringing down of the Putin system and the re-establishment of elementary political liberties.

The perspectives for this newly-born movement are doubtful. But, at all events, nothing is as it was before. We are entering a new period of history where the anticapitalist Left will have a greater role to play than in the past.