

Global Issues

Challenges and Prospects of the Independent Labour Movement in Post-Crisis Belarus

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In Belarus there has been an increase in mass arrests of workers in various companies in the past few months of this year. These arrests have been carried out directly in workplaces. Law enforcement agencies have carried out demonstrative special operations in cities such as Gomel, Novopolotsk, Novogrudok, Slutsk and others. The arrests of about ten workers at the Nioman glass factory in the city of Berezovka a month ago stand out for the particular cruelty with which they were carried out. Law enforcement officers took the workers out of the workshops, surrounded by armed special forces, and handcuffed them (Solidarnast Website, 2023).

The arrests of dissidents in Belarus take the form of a veritable public spectacle, as if it were the arrest of members of an extremist network or activists of a terrorist organisation. The workers are beaten, forced to lie face down on the asphalt with their neck and head pressed with a knee. Everything that happens is recorded on video by the special services. Afterwards, these videos are disseminated through the Telegram channels of the relevant authorities, which also show videos of interrogations of detainees, who are usually beaten and humiliated, and badgered to confess.

The authoritarian Belarusian regime has persecuted its opponents before. They were summoned to police interrogation or subjected to individual intimidating talks without witnesses. As a rule, such individuals received warnings or fines, and administrative arrest was considered an exception. However, from August 2020, after falsified presidential elections and the subsequent protests, the situation changed dramatically. Lukashenka's regime demonstrated its power and control over the situation in the country.

The authorities' disregard for the COVID-19 epidemic, economic stagnation in the country, and extreme brutality in suppressing protests against the August 2020 election fraud led to mass protests throughout Belarus. According to some reports, about one million citizens participated in them from August to October 2020.

The protesters were also supported by the workers in large enterprises. Spontaneous gatherings of workers demanding new elections took place in Minsk, Navapolatsk, Hrodna, Zhlobin, Zhodzina and other cities. But despite the mass of labour protests across the country, strikes remained rare. Only workers at Belaruskali – the fourth biggest global producer of potash and one of the biggest state owned companies in Belarus – resorted to drastic measures in the form of a strike. Following an ultimatum to the general director of Belaruskali in Salihorsk, workers at the largest mining and chemical company halted production. Strike committees were formed at all ore-processing plants, and political demands were made of the administration. These included the resignation of the incumbent president and new transparent elections (Solidarnast website, 2023).

The strike in Salihorsk was the only one officially recorded during the protests of August 2020. Many labour collectives and strike committees of Hrodna, Minsk, Zhlobin, Navapolatsk announced their readiness to start strikes, but overestimated their capabilities and underestimated

the steadfastness and endurance of the current regime. Therefore, they did not dare to go from words to deeds.

Only a small number of Belarusian workers had historical experience of stopping production at an enterprise. Those were the workers of Belaruskali, who held a successful forty-four-day strike in the spring of 1992. This state owned company also had the largest organisation of an independent trade union with strike experience. But even experience was not enough to enforce the demands made in 2020. As the only collective to bring the country's largest company to a halt, the miners began to return to their jobs before a chain reaction of follow-on strikes that could have swept the entire country. After Prime Minister Roman Golovchenko threatened to impose financial obligations on the strikers, some 620 Belaruskali demonstrators, with the exception of eighteen members of the strike committee, returned to their workplaces (Interfax website, 2020). The strike in Soligorsk lasted two and a half days.

The call of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya – the president elect in 2020 who was forced to leave Belarus straight after elections, and who started to lead the democratic forces from exile – to the workers of Belarus to start a mass strike on October 26, 2020, as well as the call of the Belarusian Organisation of Workers (BOR), did not improve the situation. They were supported by only hundreds of workers (RBK website 2020). Their courage and self-sacrifice led neither to mass protest nor to closure of enterprises. It was obvious that the workers' protest was already nipped in the bud by the end of 2020.

After clarifying the mechanisms for suppressing protests at production sites, the authorities eventually extinguished protests at other companies and moved on to the phase of large-scale repression.

In the wake of the 2020 street protests by opposition-supporting citizens, government oppression has intensified, and labour collectives that supported the protests have been targeted. Prior to 2020, workers collectives were monitored by special employees – ideologists of the companies. Together with representatives of the government Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus (FPB), they monitored the mood in the labour collectives and resolved labour disputes. It is worth noting that the FPB has lost its independence since 2002, when Leonid Kozik, a former deputy of the presidential administration, was appointed its chairman under pressure. Since then, the FPB has essentially become a state organisation.

In the case of independent trade unions, their task was also to weaken or eliminate organisations alien to the system (Alfer and Kazlou, A, 2012).

Protests in 2020 at dozens of companies weakened government confidence in ideologists, leading to the involvement of security services. Since September 2020, KGB officers have entered the country's main enterprises on Lukashenko's orders. These representatives of the president are not public. Their goal is to keep an eye on the management and employees of strategically important industrial plants such as Belaruskali, Naftan, Mozyr Oil Refinery, Grodno Azot and their stable work. Their special attention is paid to the workers who actively participated in protests and took part in the work of strike committees or in the activities of independent trade unions.

The effects of the repressions were reflected not only in the industrial sector, but in the whole society (Marin, A. 2022). They affected all areas of activity, from the educational system to the banking sector and even areas where there is a shortage of professionals, such as the medical sector. Medical personnel protested vigorously against the violence in 2020. Doctors and medical staff from public and private institutions held dozens of actions across the country. This resulted in "purges" among medical personnel.

An illustration of this is the case of Aliaksei Aliakseychyk, a neurosurgeon-transplant surgeon specialising in bone marrow transplants with twenty years' experience. He was a member of the

Free Trade Union of Belarus (SPB) and was sentenced to two years and six months in prison for allegedly “calling for actions detrimental to national security” (Solidarnast website, 2023). Repression continues against the backdrop of the shortage of medical professionals, which is acutely felt in the country; moreover, the brain drain abroad is increasing.

In the repression, information work is given a special place. The struggle for information space in the workplace has become one of the most important trends in ideological work. In workplaces, the administration distributes video clips aimed at creating the image of an “ideal worker” who supports the state authorities and receives information only from official sources. Information days are organised, using Belarusian and Russian propaganda material about the war in Ukraine and the domestic political situation.

Such efforts underscore the Lukashenko regime’s fear of allowing workers to access alternative information and demonstrate its strategy of total control over the information space. Propaganda materials directly assert that familiarisation with “extremist” information can lead to charges of terrorist activity and inevitable arrest. Given the reality of everyday arrests, these videos do not exaggerate the potential consequences.

This shows how unstable the situation is in the country and how concerned the Lukashenko regime is about the availability of popular alternative sources of information on the Internet. In this area, the authorities suffered a defeat in 2020 and are now trying to change the situation in their favour. Mass protests and possible unionisation of workers pose a serious threat to the official authorities, which is why the regime is trying to control the direction of information.

After dealing with the political activists and strike committees in 2021, the regime took on the democratic unions. Over the past twenty years, the regime did not consider the weakened and small BKDP unions as serious opponents (Alfer and Kazlou, 2012). However, most of the protests in the factories took place exactly where the main branches of these unions were active. Their offices and resources were actively used by strike committees, even if the unions did not openly call for strikes.

From 2020 to 2022, hundreds of activists and members of democratic unions were dismissed, and many of them became targets of administrative and criminal arrests. Legislation was amended to allow employers to fire workers who were detained or arrested for protesting. An employment characterisation system was also introduced. Now, when issuing a characterisation for employment in a state-owned enterprise (which is the major form of property in the country, whether a factory or a kindergarten), former managers must indicate the worker’s level of loyalty to the regime (NEG website, 2023). Therefore, a former independent union activist, if not imprisoned, is unlikely to obtain a job in a state enterprise.

Even in 2022, democratic unions continued to function despite their weakening and declining numbers. As a result of pressure on activists and members, the Belarusian Independent Trade Union (BNP) lost about half of its membership, from 5 000 to 2 600 members. Local authorities and courts refused to register new trade union organisations, using “slow strangulation” tactics.

The situation worsened with the beginning of Russia’s all-out war against Ukraine. The Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions (BKDP) openly condemned the Belarusian authorities for their support of the aggressor:

The fact that the Russian government today started a war against Ukraine cannot be understood, justified or forgiven. How inexcusable and unforgivable is the fact that the aggressor invaded Ukraine from the territory of Belarus with the consent of the Belarusian authorities... We ask your forgiveness for the shame, the disgrace that the Belarusian authorities have imposed on all Belarusians by becoming allies of the aggressor and opening the border with Ukraine to him. (BKDP website, 2022)

In response, special services conducted arrests and searches in all offices of the democratic trade unions in April and May 2022. More than twenty trade union leaders and activists were arrested. Prosecutor General Schved initiated proceedings to close the unions. In July 2022, the Supreme Court of the Republic of Belarus decided in closed session to liquidate all democratic trade unions and the BKDP within a few days (Marin, 2022). Some grassroots organisations and workers' associations were classified as extremist and their imprisoned leaders were put on the list of extremists and even terrorists.

The labour movement in the country today has been weakened as much as possible, if not completely defeated. The activity of unregistered unions has been banned by law (NPIP RB, 2023). The only legal trade union federation is the Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus, which is controlled by the Lukashenka regime.

The liquidation of the labour movement in Belarus is just one part of the authoritarian regime's large-scale measures to purge the country's entire civil sector. By 2023, more than 700 nongovernmental organisations and associations had been liquidated, and hundreds of organisations had liquidated themselves. In two years, more than 5 000 criminal cases and 35 000 administrative cases were brought against protesters. More than 2 000 people have been recognised as political prisoners by human rights organisations, including dozens of trade union leaders and activists (Viasna website, 2023). To date, more than 100 000 people have left the country for political reasons and are in forced emigration in Poland, Lithuania, Ukraine, Georgia, and other countries (UN website, 2023).

This reaction of the authorities can be explained by the fact that Lukashenka did not expect protests in profitable enterprises, where the income level of employees is far above the national average. He considered workers to be his constituency. Confronting political activists and breaking up mass protests has become a well-mastered tactic for law enforcement agencies in Belarus over the past thirty years. This was demonstrated during the mass protests in 2006, 2010 and 2020. However, they had much less experience in dealing with the mass strike movement. During Lukashenko's rule, there was not a single serious or prolonged strike in Belarus. As the collectives were constantly controlled by the administration, the independent trade unions struggled to survive due to constant pressure (ILO, 2004). The only exception was a small but significant strike at the Minsk Metro in 1995, which was suppressed by Lukashenka (Golubeu and Hadyka, 2003).

Having reaped the consequences of its misjudgements, the regime today, with the help of terror and state propaganda, tries to impose on Belarusian society the image of an independent workers' movement as nonconformist, situational and alien to Belarusian workers. It is compared with analogies to "colour revolutions," "Occupy Wall Street," "BLM," and "yellow vests".

Despite all the efforts of the authorities to destroy independent trade unions and suppress the labor movement, the idea of democratic trade unions will not disappear in Belarus. The difference between permanent ideas and event protests is that they do not lose their relevance regardless of the degree of terror and intensity of propaganda. This is confirmed by the revival of the democratic labour movement during the collapse of USSR in 1989-1990 (Dounar and Yerashenia, 2011).

In addition, some trade union leaders and activists have managed to escape prison and continue their activities outside Belarus to gain trade union experience and support the information agenda of the labour movement.

One of those is the Rabochy Rukh platform, an association of Belarusian workers and employees, former participants of the strike committees of 2020, based on the goal of consolidating society in order to overthrow the authoritarian regime. The main task of the organisation is ... "to inspire people to resist the regime in order to restore democratic rights and

freedoms in the country, including through a nationwide strike”. The organisation’s main activity today is limited to informational, humanitarian and advisory activities (Rabochy Rukh website, 2023).

After the dissolution of the democratic unions in 2022, some activists from the BKDP unions in Germany founded the Solidarnast association. It is essentially the international wing of the BKDP. With international trade union support, it engages in informational, educational, humanitarian and international activities. The main goal of the association is the release of trade union political prisoners in Belarus and the revival of the labour movement in the country (Solidarnast website, 2023).

At the international level, the violation of workers’ rights in Belarus is a constant issue. It is particularly significant that the International Labour Organisation has also responded to the situation and called on member governments to take measures to influence the regime in Belarus to respect the workers’ rights.

Although the democratic, independent trade union movement organisations in Belarus has been all but crushed, the idea lives on. The Belarusian authorities suppress and discredit it through propaganda, but historical experience shows that such ideas can sprout at the right time and under certain circumstances. And the idea of struggle for justice and equal working conditions remains relevant regardless of the political conjuncture. Solidarnast and Rabochy Rukh, for their part, become the guardians of these ideas and a source of hope for the future, when this idea is needed again in Belarus.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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