

Belarus: ‘what counts is workplace organisation’

Monday 24 August 2020, by [ANTUSEVICH Sergey](#), [Collective / Multiple signers](#), [Snob](#) (Date first published: 19 August 2020).

The confrontation in Belarus between the Lukashenko regime and the mass movement continues. Strike committees are being formed at state-owned enterprises, and [the strike at Belaruskali](#), one of the country’s strategic conglomerates, has begun. At the giant Minsk Tractor Factory, demonstrators who tried to talk to workers were stopped by police. In Grodno, Belarusian media report that the local authorities have begun a dialogue with the opposition. I am trying to follow the situation, and tell English-language readers about independent socialist and working-class trends in the movement. Here are an interview with an independent trade union activist, and, below, a political statement supported by the largest independent trade union federation. Many thanks to P for help with translations. GL.

“Until workers in the factories begin to organise, this will be so much hot air”

An interview with Sergey Antusevich, deputy chair of the Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions (BCDTU), [published by the Russian magazine Snob on 18 August](#).

Q: Strikes have started in Belarus. Clearly, they are linked with the post-election protests, but they certainly didn’t start straightaway. What has the decision-making process and why did it take time?

SA: I think that people had waited for the outcome of the elections, in the hope that their vote against Lukashenko could influence the situation in the country. But when it turned out that their votes were simply thrown in the bin, the conversation changed. On 10 August people came into work, talked with colleagues and discovered that none of them had voted for Lukashenko. They ended up feeling that something needed to be done. From different factories, activists from trade unions affiliated to BCDTU called us with questions and ideas. We replied that centralised trade union structures could, of course, condemn electoral fraud and demand a vote recount, but that this would be of little use without being supported by action from the workplaces. I said, and I can say it again now, that until workers in the factories begin to organise, begin to oppose the lies, the lack of rights and the degrading treatment, when the authorities have just spat on them and wiped them on the pavement, this will all be just so much hot air.

Q: Did you co-ordinate the workers’ actions

SA: At first we had no means of full-scale coordination: the Internet was cut off nationwide. I spent two days with no connection, basically; I could not set up a working VPN. The workers, some with the help from our activists, some off their own back, realised that they needed to formulate a collective position and organise. Self-organising began with staff meetings or dialogues with the management. In some workplaces, activism is still taking this form; others have already registered

strike committees. Where we have our trade union structures in place, we get involved and help. But we don't have branches everywhere, and not everywhere do they have much power. So things are progressing even without us, spontaneously.

We are calling on people to leave the official union chapels that are affiliated to the Federation of the Trade Unions of Belarus. These unions have already shown their loyalty to Lukashenko's regime in every possible way: they supported him, they gathered signatures for him, they took part in electoral commissions, and they were the state-appointed observers who shut their eyes to electoral fraud. Of course, now, they are trying to change their shoes on the go, and they take up appeals demanding investigations into all detentions and beatings. But, I suspect that everyone has now grasped the situation, and nobody will expect to get an "objective investigation" from the current prosecution or investigations committee. And I doubt that people will take anyone calling for that at face value.

Q: A strike committee has already formed at Belaruskali, where your organisation is influential. Where else, as far as you know, are strike committees active?

SA: There are committees at the Minsk tractor plant and at the MAZ automotive factory; our Independent Union of Metalworkers is helping to organise them. I am not yet sure what is happening at the Minsk Wheeled Tractor Plant, where Lukashenko went to speak. [A film of workers there shouting "Go!" to Lukashenko is all over social media.] Today, on the way to work, I passed the Atlant factory and saw the workers coming out to stand in the road.

So far it's hard to gauge the scale of the movement, but in any case they are unprecedented. It has gripped factories that have never had any experience of strikes, especially politically motivated ones.

Q: How is the work of the trade unions and strike committees being co-ordinated?

SA: In different ways. At Belaruskali our activists joined the strike committee. At the Azot fertiliser plant in Grodno, as far as I am aware, the organisers of the strike committee joined our democratic trade union. So there is no single pattern.

Q: Do all members of the workforce support strike action?

SA: I reckon it varies. In some workplaces not everyone is in favour of the strike, and some of the workforce have kept on working. But in general, if a collective decision is taken in a workplace, most people stick to it.

Q. What makes the difference?

SA: Sometimes only individual workshops go on strike, while the others keep running; some places have more of the active and charismatic leaders who can take people with them, others lack them. The shift pattern matters too. Someone might be on the night shift, for example, who has never taken part in any meetings because they were off work, then they come to work and there is already a strike on that they never got to vote for. There can be cases like that too.

Q: You say the strikes being organised are political. How does the plant management respond?

SA: There are nonpolitical demands too: primarily to abolish the contracted labour system. Right now, almost universally, workers are employed on an annual contract, which makes it easy to get rid of them if any conflict arises. We can see that in some cases the management tries to intimidate the workers, threaten them with registering action days as unauthorised absence, but there has been

practically no attempts to physically stop the strikes.

Q: You can gather from Lukashenko's statements, and those of his supporters, that he considers workers to be entirely in his debt because he has protected their workplaces. And he is warning that, without him, industry in Belarus will die, like it has died in other post-Soviet countries. Are workers worried about this scenario?

SA: I think that right now people are just dead tired of this dictator who has ruled over them for 26 years. The events of the past few days have convinced them that they are a force to be reckoned with, that there are many, that they can change something in their country, and they are not willing to be put back in the stable, so be called "little people" and "sheep".

Of course, many express fears about how this could end, but everyone can see what is happening with the plants, already, under Lukashenko's rule. There are old factories, built back in the Soviet times, many are running on old equipment. Even before the elections, people left these workplaces en-masse – some left for Russia, others for Poland or Lithuania.

Whereas in the past, people went to Poland for any job they could get, now many can find a job in their field, doing the same job they did at home but earning several times more in wages. Many engineers move to Russia. For example, when Anatoly Surba, who had left Grodno Azot, became the manager at a Russian fertilizer factory Schekinazot in Tula region, he brought over many engineers from Grodno. So highly qualified people are leaving the country already, and when they are gone, our factories will stop anyway.

Q: The supporters of the regime, at least in Russia, usually talk about the social aspect of the state built by Lukashenko. What is your view on it, as a trade union activist?

SA: In the index of the International Confederation of Trade Unions, in terms of workers rights, Belarus is in the bottom ten countries. Our laws include a de-facto ban on strikes for economic reasons. I have already mentioned the ubiquitous annual contract system: it keeps a person in a perpetually precarious position and takes away his voice in the workplace, because, should he stick his neck out and speak up, even his legitimate demands could give the management a pretext to not renew his contract.

In practice, we have still had elements of forced labour. For example, a law passed four or five years ago banned workers in the timber industry from voluntarily resigning. For two years it stayed in force and it was only rescinded after a major outcry. That's what I can tell you about labour rights in our socially minded state.

Q: In the first days of the protest, the state propaganda tried to show that the protest is only supported by city elites, by young people, that only they are coming out into the street. What are relations like between factory workers and members of other professions? Is there any solidarity there?

SA: The whole society is united now. That infamous 97% meme. You can see it in the streets. I went to the Sunday demonstration: there were very elderly people there, who could barely make their way through the crowd, and there were young people en masse. There's an IT worker I know. When I told him about the demonstration, the first thing he said was: "What can we do to help the [industrial] workers?" So everyone is united now.

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Svetlana Tikhonovskaya won: Lukashenko must go!

Here is a declaration signed by the chairman of the Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions and the leaders of several opposition political parties, pointed out to me by trade union friends in Russia. The [Belarusian original is here](#), and a Russian version was [published on the Belorussky Partizan site here](#). It repeats the political demands that seem to be dominant in the street protests – but there are no social and economic demands. I think it is fair to say that this comes from an embryonic alliance between independent union activists and pro-European – but not socialist or pro-worker – politicians. I am not embracing or recommending such an alliance, just putting information in front of readers of English. GL.

This declaration is signed by: Chairman of the Belarusian Social Democratic Party (BSDP) Igor Borisov; Chairman of the Belarusian Popular Front party (BPF) Grigory Kostuyev; Chairman of the Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions (BCDTU) Alexander Yaroshuk; Chairman of “For Freedom” Movement, Yuri Gubarevich; Chairman of the organizing committee for the Party of Freedom and Progress (PFP), Vladimir Novosyad; Joint chairman of the organising committee of the Belarusian Christian Democracy party (BCD), Vitaly Rymashevsky.

We, the representatives of democratic forces, state that the presidential elections held on 9 August 2020 were won by Svetlana Tikhonovskaya.

We demand an immediate release of all detained participants of peaceful protest actions and of all political prisoners.

We demand that the post of the president is immediately vacated by Alexander Lukashenko, as a candidate who has not secured the support of the Belarusian people and who has seized and usurped power by force.

We demand the immediate dismissal and arrest of the respective leaders of the State Security Committee (KGB) and the State Control Committee (KGK) Valery Vakulchik and Ivan Tertel, who have blackmailed the elected president of the Belarus Republic, Svetlana Tikhonovskaya, by threatening the lives of her husband and children and have forced her to leave the country.

We demand the immediate dismissal and arrest of the respective heads of the Police and the Special Purpose Police Unit (OMON), Yuri Karayev and Yuri Podobed, for the actions of staff under their command, including wanton cruelty, sadism, unjustified violence and degrading torture with lethal consequences, and the use of traumatic weapons and firearms against peaceful protesters.

We demand the immediate dismissal and arrest of the members of the Central Commission for Elections and Republican Referenda under the leadership of Lydia Yermoshina, for organising large scale fraud during the elections that has led to an armed coup and illegal seizure of power.

We call on citizens, including labour collectives, to not stop, but to step up their active engagement by participating in peaceful protests against electoral fraud and to defend the legitimate result of the presidential elections.

Sergey Antusevich
Snob
Collective

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P.S.

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