

Protests, strikes against Lukashenko regime mount in Belarus

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Mass protests and strikes in Belarus triggered by the August 9 presidential election continue to grow. On Sunday, around 200,000 people protested in Minsk against President Alexander Lukashenko, who was declared the winner of the election. The protest in the Belarusian capital, which has about two million inhabitants, was the largest in the country since the Stalinist regime dissolved the Soviet Union in 1991.

Demonstrators carried red-and-white flags, the national flag of Belarus from 1991 to 1995, and the symbol of the anti-Lukashenko opposition headed by Svetlana Tikhonovskaya. Protesters demanded Lukashenko's resignation, shouting "Long live Belarus". Their demands included new elections, ending police violence and the release of political prisoners. They also carried banners saying: "Tikhonovskaya is the president and commander-in-chief of the Republic of Belarus."

Police refrained from repressing the protests, unlike last week, when they killed one protester and arrested over 7,000 in a violent crackdown. Over 80 are still missing, and arrested protesters have reportedly been tortured.

Lukashenko also met the general staff Saturday evening, however, and announced paratroopers would deploy to Grodno, where some of the largest strikes occurred. Today Lukashenko was further humiliated when workers shouted him down and booed him at the Minsk Tractor Factory, demanding his resignation.

According to the Polish press, workers at many key workplaces in Belarus have gone on strike: Minsk transit workers, autoworkers, electrical workers, and workers at truck and machinery plants. Workers at multiple hospitals have also joined protests. Calls are circulating for a general strike starting today. Strikers are reportedly making similar demands as protesters in Minsk, and some reports indicate that individual factory managers supported the walkouts. Anger over social inequality and the response to the coronavirus pandemic are further fueling the strikes.

When the pandemic reached Europe, the Lukashenko regime did not impose even a temporary lockdown, letting

the virus rip through the population. Almost 70,000 out of a population of less than 10 million are now infected. These numbers are almost certainly underestimates, as testing has been very limited. Like his counterparts in Brazil and America, Lukashenko ridiculed the virus as a "flu" and "hoax." He himself fell ill with COVID-19 shortly before the election.

A striker from the Grodno-Azot factory, where 5,000 of 7,000 workers have been on strike since August 13, told Polish online portal Onet.pl that most workers did not believe the election results. He said, "The coronavirus was the straw that broke the camel's back. Lukashenko long said that 'we don't have viruses.' He only acknowledged that it existed when he himself got sick. People began to die, doctors were overwhelmed. This made people even more angry, but they were already angry anyway. And then you had the election."

Economists estimate 21.5 percent of the population lived under the official poverty line in 2019.

The scope of the protests and the involvement of growing layers of workers have panicked both the Lukashenko regime and the opposition. Lukashenko denounced protesters as "unemployed people with criminal pasts," stated that the protests had been instigated by "NATO" and "foreign powers." For her part, Tikhonovskaya has appealed to Lukashenko to begin "dialogue" with the opposition and called on mayors across Belarus to organize the protests.

On Monday, Svetlana Tikhonovskaya published a video statement, proposing to take over the presidency to ensure that the "country returns to calm and normalcy" and "create the legal basis" for new elections. She also appealed to the police and the armed forces for support.

The key question for the working class is to mount a politically independent struggle against both the discredited strongman, Lukashenko, and the official opposition leader, Tikhonovskaya. Both speak for factions of the criminal oligarchy that emerged from the Stalinist bureaucracy's dissolution of the Soviet Union, agreed in a December 1991 treaty signed in Minsk, and its ensuing looting of state assets

amid the restoration of capitalism. Both factions work closely both with the NATO imperialist powers and the Kremlin regime.

Lukashenko has tried to balance between NATO and Moscow for decades. Tensions with Moscow have run high since 2014, when he backed the pro-NATO coup in Kiev. Earlier this year, a prolonged dispute emerged between Russia and Belarus over Russian subsidies for oil deliveries.

After denouncing Russia for weeks before the elections for allegedly trying to “overthrow” him, he has turned to the Kremlin. On Saturday, Lukashenko and Putin spoke over the phone. Putin reportedly made general statements of support but no clear promises of political, let alone military, assistance. However, Lukashenko said, “We agreed that at the first request there will be comprehensive assistance provided to ensure the security of the Republic of Belarus.”

Before the phone call, the regime released 32 Russian military contractors it arrested just before the election, in a signal to the US and EU that it was seeking closer ties. The release infuriated the Zelensky government in Ukraine, which has been working with Lukashenko for years, and encouraged its growing ties to America and NATO.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo travelled to Minsk in February, telling Lukashenko that Washington could supply Belarus with all the oil it needed. “All you have to do is call us,” Pompeo said. Lukashenko also recently offered to hold joint NATO-Belarusian military exercises.

In the US and EU, which have supported the opposition but have also sought closer military and political cooperation with Lukashenko to isolate Russia, the mass protests against the Belarusian government have provoked concern and debate over how to proceed.

The EU denounced the election results and imposed sanctions on top Belarusian state officials on Friday. In Warsaw on Saturday, Pompeo declared his support for the EU sanctions. German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas has called for new elections and German finance minister Olaf Scholz stated that Lukashenko “had to go.”

A *Washington Post* editorial bemoaned what it called a slow US-EU response, writing that Lukashenko “has to go,” and a *New York Times* editorial called for maximum pressure on the regime. The US and EU should declare, it wrote, that “they do not accept the official results and will not recognize him as the winner unless he calls off his thugs and there is a new and credible election. To underscore the point, Washington should hold off sending a new ambassador to Minsk.”

In contrast, the German newspaper *Die Zeit* wrote this weekend that a “weakened Lukashenko” is what the Kremlin wants, worrying that regime change in Minsk might, in fact, serve Moscow’s interests. It pointed out that

in a recent interview, Tikhonovskaya rejected the “union” agreement between Belarus and Russia but failed to clearly denounce Russia’s annexation of Crimea.

It also noted that opposition leader Viktor Babariko had run Belgazprombank, a Belarusian bank owned by Russian state-controlled company Gazprom, until this May. Another leader of the opposition, Valery Tsepkalo, is a businessman who has worked for the Lukashenko regime for decades, including as ambassador to the US. In April, he fled to Russia with his family after being barred from running in the presidential elections.

Whether or not Lukashenko and the opposition work out a deal, and whether or not the regime tilts towards NATO or towards Moscow, workers are heading towards a confrontation with the Belarusian capitalist ruling elite. Neither faction aims to grant democratic rights or treat the COVID-19 pandemic. They are all seeking to get the workers under control and back to work, as in the United States, Europe, and Russia, so that the extraction of profits and the growth of deaths can continue.

The allies of workers and youth opposed to Lukashenko’s response to the pandemic, social inequality, and police crackdowns are their class brothers and sisters in Europe and worldwide. There are growing strikes and protests against the bourgeoisie’s response to the pandemic and decades of social austerity.

Obtaining the resources to deal with the social crisis and the pandemic, and stopping the growing imperialist drive to war in Russia and across the region requires a common, international struggle of the working class, and opposition to the regime that emerged from capitalist restoration in the Soviet Union. The political basis of such an international and socialist orientation the struggle of the Trotskyist movement against Stalinism’s nationalist betrayal of the October 1917 revolution.



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