

Amid mass strikes in Belarus, Lukashenko regime teeters on brink

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As workers across Belarus take strike action after disputed August 9 presidential elections, President Aleksandr Lukashenko's government is on the brink of collapse. Factories across the country were on strike yesterday, after hundreds of thousands of people demonstrated in the capital, Minsk. Lukashenko was booed as he spoke at a Minsk tractor factory, combining threats and apparent attempts to reach out to the right-wing, NATO-backed opposition parties supporting candidate Svetlana Tikhonovskaya.

Amid calls for a nationwide general strike, workers at dozens of industrial firms walked off the job yesterday. These firms included the Minsk Tractor Plant, the Minsk Wheel Tractor Plant, the Belarusian Metallurgical Plant, Naftan (chemical and petroleum products), GrodnoAzot (chemical goods), the Belarusian Railways, the Minsk Metro, the Belarusian Automobile Plant, the Minsk Automobile Factory, the Minsk Electrotechnical Factory, Terrazut (windows and doors), Belaruskali (fertilizers, mining and processing), Belteleradiokompania (telecoms).

They were joined by striking healthcare workers, teachers, miners, state television employees, oil workers, textile workers, and others from key industries. Social anger is mounting at Lukashenko's handling of the coronavirus, which he previously dismissed as a "psychosis." It has infected nearly 70,000 people so far in Belarus. Lukashenko blithely told Belarusians to drink vodka and "stay positive."

Strikers are demanding Lukashenko's ouster and the holding of new elections. Trying to address strikers at the tractor factory yesterday, Lukashenko faced cries of, "Get out!"—the slogan that now predominates in the country's large, socially-disparate demonstrations.

Lukashenko, who raised this weekend the deployment of paratroopers against strikers, replied that for his opponents to remove him, "they would have to kill me." In a nationalist tone, he claimed his authoritarian rule and his disastrous handling of the COVID-19 pandemic were all a defense of the Belarusian nation: "You know my harshness. You know that if I had not been harsh, there would be no country."

Lukashenko also signaled, however, that he might consider

Tikhonovskaya's calls, earlier that day, for him to conduct "dialogue" with the opposition, adopt a new constitution and hold new elections. Tikhonovskaya hoped this would ensure that the "country returns to calm and normalcy."

At the Minsk tractor factory, Lukashenko declared, "We need to adopt a new constitution. You would need to ratify it at a referendum, and then, under the new constitution, if you want, have parliamentary elections, presidential elections, and elections for the local officials."

The NATO powers are intervening in an effort to ensure the eruption of working class anger remains under the control of the right-wing opposition, which currently dominates the protests with promises of "free and fair elections," democracy, and an end to state violence to Belarus.

Tikhonovskaya, who fled Belarus after denouncing the election result, is now under the protection of the government of Lithuania. Along with the other Baltic states, it is demanding that Lukashenko subordinate himself to a national council of reconciliation that would negotiate terms for the holding of new elections.

Lukashenko's concessions to the opposition come amid signs of collapsing support for his rule within the state machine. The Interior Ministry apologized late last week for violent attacks on protesters and began releasing some imprisoned demonstrators. There are reports that members of the OMON, Belarus' paramilitary internal security forces, dropped their weapons in response to appeals from protesters.

The latest NATO head of state to speak on Belarus was French President Emmanuel Macron, who is despised at home and internationally for his brutal police repression of the "yellow vests". He declared, "The European Union must continue to mobilize itself alongside hundreds of thousands of Belarusians who are peacefully protesting for their rights, liberty and sovereignty."

The EU, having announced that it will not recognize Lukashenko's claimed election landslide and condemned the Belarusian government for its violent attacks on peaceful

protesters, is pushing forward Svetlana Tikhanovskaya as the winner. She declared Monday that she is prepared to return to Belarus to serve as a “national leader.” The same day, the German government confirmed that it is in regular communication with Tikhanovskaya.

Press reports indicate that the US government, which in a staggering display of hypocrisy has condemned Lukashenko for police violence, is deciding whether to push for a deal between him and the opposition and press them to break with Russia; or whether to bring down Lukashenko and orchestrate regime change in Minsk as part of the ongoing NATO military build-up across Eastern Europe aimed at Russia.

According to an August 12 story in *Foreign Policy*, disagreements within Congress over US policy on Belarus center on whether to continue with its pre-crisis plans to continue restoring diplomatic relations with the country.

One reason for the confusion in Washington is doubtless that several leaders in the Belarusian opposition have close ties with Moscow. Viktor Babariko ran Belgazprombank, a bank owned by Russian state-controlled firm Gazprom, until last May. Valery Tsepkalo, a businessman who had longstanding ties to the Belarusian regime before becoming an opposition politician, fled this April to Russia after he was barred from running for the presidency.

The critical question facing workers in Belarus is to struggle independently of and against all the factions of the post-Soviet capitalist kleptocracy, and their international allies. Lukashenko took power in 1994 amid the economic collapse triggered by the Stalinist regime’s restoration of capitalism and its dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. However, the opposition speaks for a dissident faction of the same corrupt oligarchy that emerged from the Stalinist bureaucracy’s theft and plundering of state assets during capitalist restoration.

Despite being commonly portrayed in anti-Russian media as Putin’s unswerving ally, Lukashenko has a long history of trying to balance between Russia and Western imperialism. In 1996, he started creating free-market economic zones across the country, ensuring private foreign companies tax-free access to its low-wage workforce. As of 2020, 270 corporations had set up shop in these areas. In the mid-2000s, Lukashenko’s government implemented budget cuts and privatizations in order to secure an International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan.

The average monthly wage is just \$500, among the lowest in Europe. A “freeloaders tax” introduced in 2015 fines those without jobs for more than six months. If the fine is unpaid and the person continues to be unemployed, the individual faces a six-month jail sentence. Experts estimate that the poverty rate, which the government claims stands at

just 5 percent, is actually closer to 20 percent.

In mid-April, Belarus Finance Minister Maxim Yermolovich announced that Belarus had turned to the IMF to cope with the Covid-19 pandemic and would receive a \$500-900 million loan. Major budget cuts are to follow, amid a raging pandemic.

The various bankers, businessmen and political operatives in the anti-Lukashenko opposition do not represent the grievances of the working class, but the continuation of the same policies that led to the disastrous handling of the pandemic and the upsurge of working class anger.

All the political forces operating in Belarus—the official opposition, the EU, the United States, Ukraine, and the Russian regime—are terrified by the eruption of the longstanding economic and social grievances of the Belarusian working class. Mass strikes in Belarus are all the more alarming to the bourgeoisie, as the same causes are driving growing strikes and protests across Europe and beyond. The NATO countries, including above all the United States, have also responded to the pandemic with naked contempt for workers’ lives.

Obtaining the necessary resources to fight COVID-19, stopping the NATO war drive against Russia and establishing a regime that safeguards democratic rights, require a common, international struggle of the working class for power, based on opposition to the political settlement that emerged from capitalist restoration in the Soviet Union. This means a turn towards the Trotskyist movement’s socialist and internationalist struggle against Stalinism’s nationalist and counter-revolutionary legacy in the former Soviet Union and internationally.



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