

Lukashenko threatens military crackdown in Belarus as US initiates discussions with opposition leader

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Amid ongoing strikes and protests, the regime of Alexander Lukashenko, who claims to have won the August 9 presidential elections with 80 percent of the votes, has threatened an all-out military crackdown on protesters.

On Sunday, mass protests again took place in several cities. In Minsk, protests were said to be about as large as the Sunday before, when an estimated 100,000 protesters were out in the streets. In Grodno, a city in the west of the country, about 20,000 people demonstrated against Lukashenko, demanding that he resign. The Grodno region, along with Minsk, has been the main center of the strike movement that has swept the country for two weeks now.

Protesters called for new elections, and many chanted slogans in support of striking miners in Soligorsk and tractor factory workers in Minsk. There was a heavy police and military presence during the protest in Minsk, with soldiers surrounding World War II monuments in the city center. The Ministry of Defense had earlier published a statement “strictly warning” that “In case of disruption of the order and peace in these places—you will have to deal not with the police but with the Army.” The Ministry of Defense also denounced protesters as “fascists.”

After the protest ended, extraordinary scenes showed Lukashenko flying over the empty streets of Minsk, saying “they’ve dispersed like rats.” He descended from the helicopter at the presidential residence with an automatic rifle in hand, and was cheered by heavily armed security personnel.

The mass rallies and strikes were triggered by the initial brutal response by the regime to protests against the election results on August 9 and 10. Over 7,000 people were arrested in the first week of the demonstrations, and 80 people are still unaccounted for. There have been

reports of torture and the rape of prisoners with objects, leaving women unable to bear children. As mass protests and strikes continued to grow, the regime initially toned down its use of violence against the protesters. However, now it has decided to go into a full-blown confrontation against demonstrators, and especially striking workers.

On Monday, the leader of a strike committee in Soligorsk, where thousands of potash miners have been on strike since August 11, was arrested. Two members of the opposition’s Coordination Council, including Olga Kovalkova, the representative of opposition leader Svetlana Tikhonovskaya, were also arrested on Monday morning by police while they were trying to talk to striking workers at the Minsk Tractor Factory.

Above all, the regime has escalated its crackdown on striking workers, who have been threatened with layoffs, and have been paid no wages. On Monday, Lukashenko declared that all state-owned enterprises where strikes are taking place should shut down, and then decide whom they want to hire again.

Lukashenko had earlier also threatened to bring in miners from the Ukrainian Donbass to replace striking miners in Soligorsk. There were reports of Russian workers being driven into Belarus to replace striking workers. While no concrete new numbers of strikes and striking workers have been reported in the press, the website belzabastovka.org indicates that there are still 150 strikes going on in the country.

The German financial newspaper *Handelsblatt* noted yesterday that the Belarusian economy is on the brink of collapse because of the strike movement. The state-owned companies where workers are on strike, according to the *Handelsblatt*, accounted for \$10 billion out of a GDP of less than \$60 billion. Lukashenko’s economic adviser stated that “billions of dollars” had already been lost to

the strikes. The Belarusian ruble, the *Handelsblatt* noted, has been “in free fall” since the beginning of the protests.

There is no question that enormous social and economic discontent, along with opposition to the authoritarian regime in Belarus, are major driving factors behind the ongoing protests and strikes. Workers in Belarus enjoy close to no labor rights. Companies can fire their entire workforces with just seven-days notice, and the vast majority of labor contracts are temporary. The average monthly wage in 2019 was just \$500.

This brutal repression and exploitation of the working class has been enabled by the state-sanctioned unions, which have implemented a brutal regime of surveillance and terror in workplaces. The rival so-called “independent” unions, which now posture as defenders of the rights of workers, in fact supported the restoration of capitalism, which has created the conditions for the Lukashenko regime to emerge. They now support the pro-EU opposition and have ties to various international union organizations, including the AFL-CIO, which functions as an arm of US imperialism both at home and abroad.

The crackdown by the Lukashenko regime on the strike movement is being facilitated by the right-wing politics of the opposition and the unions. Leading opposition figures are associated with the restoration of capitalism in Belarus and the destruction of the USSR. No less than the Lukashenko regime, they are opponents of the social and democratic rights of the working class, and are, above all, concerned with bringing the strike movement to an end.

While declaring no desire to break ties with Russia, the opposition under Tikhonovskaya is oriented toward closer cooperation with the EU and NATO. Several opposition leaders are notorious Belarusian nationalists who seek to end the status of Russian as an official language in the country.

Last week, an extraordinary EU summit called upon the Lukashenko regime to initiate negotiations with the opposition’s Coordination Council. The EU is not recognizing the August 9 elections. This weekend, US Under Secretary of State Stephen Biegun initiated Washington’s first direct discussions with Tikhonovskaya in Lithuania.

Tikhonovskaya later declared that she was “grateful to the US for their support for the Belarusian people.” According to the Russian Gazeta.Ru, this meeting was the first official contact between the State Department and the opposition leader since the mass protests in Belarus began. Biegun is now traveling on to Moscow and Kiev to discuss the crisis in Belarus with the Russian and

Ukrainian governments.

Last Thursday, another opposition leader, Valery Tsepkalo, had stated that he was trying to get the West to recognize Tikhonovskaya as the “president” of Belarus. He pointed to Venezuela, where the Trump administration has unsuccessfully been trying to topple the government of Nicolás Maduro through right-wing forces around Juan Guaidó, and said, “such a precedent has been created and it’s, in principle, possible to do the same thing [in Belarus].”

Amid ongoing negotiations with the EU and the US, the opposition has been thrown into a profound crisis by the escalating strikes and protests. Even as she is calling for new elections and insisting on negotiations with the Lukashenko regime, and after weeks in which the opposition declared her the winner of the last election, Tikhonovskaya herself declared this weekend that neither she nor her husband, a jailed opposition blogger, would run in a new presidential election. The opposition has yet to nominate a presidential candidate.

In response to the ever more open backing by the EU and NATO for the opposition, the Kremlin has moved closer to supporting Lukashenko, and especially his repression of the strike movement. The Kremlin has refused so far to enter into negotiations with the opposition’s Coordination Council and has denounced the interference of “foreign powers” in the Belarus crisis.

The strike movement in Belarus has demonstrated the enormous social and political power of the working class. However, workers are faced with an extraordinarily dangerous situation. A way forward can only be found through a complete break with all factions of the capitalist class and the trade unions, and a turn to socialist and internationalist politics on the basis of the lessons of the struggle by the Trotskyist movement against Stalinism.



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