EU imposes sanctions on Lukashenko as strikes continue in Belarus

Alex Lantier
29 August 2020

After a two-day summit in Berlin, European Union (EU) foreign ministers voted yesterday to impose sanctions on top Belarusian officials. The EU accuses these as-yet unnamed officials of helping incumbent President Aleksandr Lukashenko steal the August 8 presidential election and crack down on protests against the election outcome. Three people died in the crackdown, which provoked an ongoing wave of strikes and protests at factories and schools across Belarus.

EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said around 20 Belarusian officials or perhaps more could be targeted. The EU, wrote the German daily *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, "wants to intensify pressure on the country's leaders and give a sign of solidarity with the people of Belarus."

Conflicts erupted at the summit, however, over the EU decision not to sanction Lukashenko, who is responsible for the policies it is supposedly condemning. Lithuanian Foreign Minister Linas Antanas Linkevi?ius, whose government is offering protection and asylum to Belarusian opposition presidential candidate Svetlana Tikhonovskaya, said the EU reaction is "too symbolic. … This definitely does not go far enough. This is not a serious reaction."

The EU's vote is a clumsy, hypocritical attempt to maximize its influence in Belarus, while dealing with an event that is largely unexpected and unwelcome in EU circles: an initial intervention of the working class into political life in a former Soviet republic.

Yesterday, German Chancellor Angela Merkel said the Belarusian people are fighting for rights to protest "which we take for granted" in Europe. Merkel criticized Russian President Vladimir Putin, who on Thursday offered to send "reserve police" to Belarus to back Lukashenko against protesters.

Putin said this police reserve would "not be used until the situation gets out of control, and until the extremist elements, hiding behind political slogans, cross certain boundaries such as looting, setting fire to cars, seizing administrative buildings and so on. We came to the conclusion that there is no such need now, and, I hope, it will not exist, and therefore we will not use this reserve."

While Merkel said, "I hope that troops won't be deployed," French President Emmanuel Macron told reporters in Paris: "We don't want a repeat of what happened in Ukraine. All external intervention in Belarus, starting with Russian forces, military or police, would breach international rules and internationalize this conflict."

The EU's protestations of outrage at Lukashenko's attack on democratic rights and Putin's threat to intervene in Belarus are utterly false and hypocritical. Macron's security forces detained 10,000 people, killed two bystanders and authorized the French army to open fire on "yellow vest" protests. And ever since the Stalinist regime's dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, NATO has intervened militarily across Eastern Europe, from the 1999 bombing of Serbia to its support for the fascist-led putsch in Kiev that toppled a pro-Russian government in Ukraine in 2014.

Behind lying phrases about democratic rights and non-intervention, however, the most ruthless sections of European capital are working out their political strategy. A key concern, of course, is strengthening the EU's military position in Eastern Europe against Russia, building on the NATO military build-up in neighboring Poland and Lithuania. The EU has backed the Coordination Council set up by right-wing opposition parties around Tikhonovskaya, which is calling for talks with Lukashenko on constitutional change for the post-Soviet capitalist state in Belarus.

The EU has not yet decided to burn its bridges with Lukashenko, however, particularly as mounting workers' militancy and an upsurge of class struggle spread not only in Belarus, but across Europe and internationally. Political

© World Socialist Web Site

grievances driving strikes against Lukashanko—social inequality, low wages and the disastrous official handling of the COVID-19 pandemic—are shared by European workers. The EU senses that Lukashenko, who has threatened to draft protesting youth into the army to crush the "bacchanalia" of protests, could yet serve its interests.

The critical issue for the emerging movement of workers and youth in Belarus is to struggle against both the ex-Stalinist strongman Lukashenko and the corrupt, pro-EU opposition. Like the EU itself, this opposition could under many conditions easily and happily support a crackdown by Lukashenko, if it targeted the working class.

There were continuing reports yesterday of strikes and protests by teachers, as well as planning for more strike and work-to-rule actions by miners and industrial workers in Belarus. After Lukashenko responded to the protests by declaring that all teachers should support the state ideology, many teachers resigned or stopped teaching. Parents joined teachers on picket lines in Minsk, and appeals by teaching staff to broader layers of workers to join in strikes spread on social media.

One such appeal, written by someone claiming to teach at the Belarusian State Technological University in Minsk, declares: "I believe students are full members of civil society, and that student strikes could be an important part of an all-Belarusian general strike. I want to use this platform to tell all Belarusian students: you are the majority, and professors will support you, too!"

Strikes and work-to-rule actions by potash miners against fertilizer export firm Belaruskali have reportedly cut output to only 60 to 70 percent of normal levels, and the company has confirmed it is several days behind in terms of its output. Fitch Ratings reported that a continued strike there could cut Belarusian exports and raise global fertilizer prices on spot markets. The Belarusian ruble has fallen over 10 percent against the euro since the presidential elections.

Political activists linked to Tikhonovskaya's EU-backed opposition are intervening in workplaces that led the strikes against Lukashenko. Activists told news site belzabastovka.org they are meeting with workers at the Minsk Auto Factory (MAZ) and discussing further action: "Our goal is to obtain as many signatures as possible and to launch a big strike... We are certain that we will defend our rights and civic position and that we will contribute to the struggle for liberty!"

As the working class reemerges into struggle in Belarus and across Europe, it faces complex issues of political strategy and perspective. These flow from the false, decades-long identification of Stalinism, the Soviet bureaucracy and its allies and descendants with Marxism and socialism. But long and bitter experience of workers in Eastern Europe has confirmed a central thesis of Leon Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution against Stalinism and Popular Frontism: workers cannot establish or defend democratic rights by supporting one or another faction of the capitalist class.

Against the threats of Lukashenko, the best allies of Belarusian workers are the European and international working class. It is not the pro-imperialist opposition around Tikhonovksaya, which, like the EU itself, is seeking a deal with the Lukashenko regime. Rather, the allies of the Belarusian workers are the millions of workers across Europe and the world who are entering into struggle against the reactionary social order that emerged from the Stalinist restoration of capitalism in Eastern Europe in 1991.

Forces influenced by the Tikhonovskaya opposition who are intervening in workers' struggles are putting forward a political line hostile to the working class. Gleb Sandros, cited in news reports as a Belaruskali strike committee spokesman, explained he hoped the potash strike would provoke a collapse of the Belarusian currency on world markets. "The critical issue here is to punish the government with the ruble," he said.

He told the website *Global Voices*, linked to the New America think tank in Washington, that he hopes an economic collapse will shame workers into backing the Belarusian opposition: "If the economic crisis in Belarus, which we can now justifiably talk about, intensifies, then this will motivate more people—and I mean workers—to wake up and take a sober look at the situation and their conscience."

Plans to exploit workers' struggles to provoke capitalist shock therapy and imperialist-backed regime-change are reactionary and offer nothing to workers. The way forward is an international struggle of revolutionary socialist opposition to Lukashenko, Putin, the EU-backed opposition and the EU itself, based on a common struggle of the working class for the United Socialist States of Europe.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site