

Belarus opposition declares general strike against Lukashenko government

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27 October 2020

The stand-off between the pro-EU, pro-NATO opposition and the regime of Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus has entered a new phase with a general strike that was declared by the opposition on Monday. On Sunday, more than 100,000 protesters had demanded again that Lukashenko, who claims to have won the August 9 presidential elections, step down. They were met by riot police who threw stun grenades into the crowds and arrested at least 500 people.

That same night, Lukashenko ignored an “ultimatum” to leave office issued by opposition leader Svetlana Tikhonovskaya, who claims to have won the presidential election and has been living in exile in Lithuania since August. The opposition claims that tens of thousands of workers and students joined its call for a general strike on Monday. However, it seems that walk-outs and demonstrations were centered among college and high school students.

In the capital Minsk, a large crowd of college students gathered in front of the Belarusian State University (BGU), chasing security forces away and blocking streets in the city center. Communication workers, as well as medical workers from six different hospitals in the city, reportedly joined the protest. On social media, pictures circulated, showing protests and walk-outs by college and high school students from across the country. Many coffee shops, restaurants, and libraries reportedly also closed. In Minsk and other cities, pensioners joined large demonstrations against Lukashenko.

The NEXTA Telegram channel claimed that many railway workers also joined the strike, leading to substantial delays of trains on Monday. NEXTA, which has become the main opposition channel, is run by a young Belarusian blogger from a foundation in Warsaw that is funded by the far-right Polish government of the Law and Justice Party (PiS).

NEXTA also reported that at Grodno Azot, a chemical

fertilizer plant in the west of the country, 200 workers demonstrated on Monday morning to show support for the strike. At least 50 of them were arrested. On Tuesday, the opposition called for an “economic boycott” of the regime, including through a boycott of companies that are run by figures around Lukashenko, the general reduction of purchases and the refusal to pay utilities for two months.

The strike wave in August and early September in Belarus brought the country’s economy to the “brink of collapse,” according to an analysis by the German business daily *Handelsblatt*, costing billions of dollars. The Belarusian GDP was less than \$60 billion in 2019. The strike committees that were formed then have since been disbanded or collapsed, according to media reports.

So far, it does not seem that the strikes have assumed as large a dimension as in August. However, the Lukashenko regime clearly fears the spread of strikes in the working class and the movement among the youth, and is preparing for a violent crackdown against the protests. Speaking to his cabinet ministers on Tuesday, Lukashenko warned of a “radicalization” that was under way and stated that the government was confronted with a “terrorist war” from “criminal organized gangs.”

He insisted that the demonstrators had “crossed a red line” and instructed his cabinet: “Don’t try to convince anyone—not the workers, not the students, not the teachers, not the doctors, not the public sector workers. ... Those who illegally joined unsanctioned protests have forfeited their right to be students. Send them into the army or onto the streets, but they must be removed from the colleges. The same goes for the teachers, there are just a few of them, but those who behave in a disgusting way in the colleges [must be fired]. I repeat: don’t try to ask or convince anyone, this is useless. ... I’m appealing again to the parents of children in schools and colleges: take your children off the streets, otherwise it will be painful.”

The Russian government has refused to comment on the situation and insists that it does not give Lukashenko any advice as to how to deal with the protests and strikes. However, it was reported that on October 22, the head of Russian foreign intelligence, Sergey Naryshkin, visited Lukashenko's palace.

There is evidently enormous concern about the strikes and the fact that Lukashenko, after 11 weeks of protests, has been unable to shut down the movement. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov noted on Monday, "Of course, we are following the situation. It is extremely important for us that the factories in Belarus are operating in a reliable and timely manner."

The online newspaper *Gazeta.Ru* published an analysis evaluating the potential fallout from large-scale strikes in Belarus for the Russian economy. About 45 percent of all Belarusian exports go to Russia. Russia is especially reliant on Belarusian manufacturing of tractors and parts for the Russian defense industry, and also imports a substantial amount of milk produce from Belarus. The greatest fear in Moscow, *Gazeta.Ru* said, is that strikes could impact the operation of the Druzhba oil pipeline, which is delivering Russian oil through Belarus to the European Union (EU). Russia's economy has already been hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic, and its GDP is expected to shrink by 9 percent this year.

Even more than the economic impact of the strikes in Belarus, however, the Russian oligarchy fears that they will spread to workers in Russia. Social and political anger over both the mass impoverishment of the population and the policy of "herd immunity" with regard to the coronavirus is running high in the Russian working class.

Workers in Belarus, Russia and across the region are indeed facing the same economic, political and social problems, as a result of decades of Stalinism and the restoration of capitalism by the Stalinist bureaucracy. However, any struggle for social and political progress requires the independent intervention of the working class on the basis of a socialist and international program.

Such a struggle is impossible without a conscious, political break with the right-wing opposition of Tikhonovskaya, which is heavily nationalistic, anti-communist and backed by the imperialist powers. Despite its limited appeals to widespread social and economic discontent, the opposition is deeply hostile to the working class. It speaks for sections of the ruling and upper middle class in Belarus that seek to advance their own social interests by integrating the country more closely into the

EU and NATO.

Earlier in October, Tikhonovskaya met with French President Emmanuel Macron, as well as German Chancellor Angela Merkel and foreign minister Heiko Maas. There is little question that, at this point, all major steps by the opposition are discussed with Berlin and Paris. The opposition is also receiving funding and is in close discussions with the governments in Poland as well as the Baltic states, all of which are ferociously anti-Russian and nationalistic.

German imperialism, in particular, regards the crisis of the Lukashenko regime as an opportunity to bolster its own influence in the region and undermine Russia. Under conditions of growing inter-imperialist tensions with the US and an international economic breakdown, Berlin has recently significantly stepped up its intervention in the former Soviet bloc. In this regard, Berlin's aggressive intervention in the highly dubious case of anti-Putin oppositionist Alexei Navalny, and its backing of the Tikhonovskaya opposition in Belarus are of a piece.

German companies already have a substantial foothold in the region, which has been turned into a cheap labor platform for German imperialism after the restoration of capitalism in 1989–1991. In terms of geo-strategy and war preparations against Russia, Belarus is also of enormous significance. After Ukraine, where Berlin and Washington backed a far-right coup in 2014, Belarus is the last country on Russia's western borders that is not directly aligned with NATO. While Lukashenko has been seeking to balance between NATO and Russia in recent years, the installment of an openly pro-Western regime in Minsk would signify a major geo-strategic blow to Moscow. Germany, as well as the US, also seeks to roll back the influence of China, which has become one of the main investors in the Belarusian economy under Lukashenko.



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