Belarusian athlete flees to Poland, as opposition activist is found hanged in Kiev

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Belarusian athlete Kristina Timonovskaya, who competed for the country at the 2021 Tokyo Olympics, has defected to Poland after the Belarusian government sought to force her return to the country. Shortly after the incident, Vitaly Shishov, a Belarusian activist with ties to the Ukrainian far-right, was found hanged in Kiev.

Both cases have garnered international headlines, as the bourgeois press continues to drum up support for the pro-Western opposition to the regime of Alexander Lukashenko, which brutally cracked down on strikes and mass protests last fall.

Timonovskaya, a 24-year old sprinter, was set to compete in the Olympics for a 200 meters race. However, her coaches apparently put her in the 4×400 metres relay against her will. Following a post by Timonovskaya on her Instagram account in which she criticized the Belarusian Olympic Committee for forcing her to compete in a race she never trained for, Belarusian state TV launched a massive campaign against her. The Belarusian Olympic Committee is headed by Viktor Lukashenko, the son of the president. Both had earlier been barred from attending the games.

Timonovskaya's family reportedly warned her to not return to Belarus as she could face arrest or forcible detention in a psychiatric clinic. When two officials, one of them from the National Olympic Committee and one team doctor, escorted her to the airport, she refused to board the plane and sought refuge with Tokyo police. She applied for asylum in Poland, which was granted quickly, while her husband fled Belarus for Ukraine. On Wednesday, she boarded a flight to Vienna.

Unlike over 1,000 other Belarusian athletes, who signed an open letter against the Lukashenko regime following the outbreak of mass protests and strikes last

August, Timonovskaya reportedly had not openly supported the mass protest movement. Her husband told the media that they never had any ties to the opposition and never got involved in politics. Hundreds of athletes who prominently supported the protests last year have been imprisoned in Belarus, with some reportedly tortured, and many barred from competing at the Olympics and other major sports events.

In a CNN interview on Tuesday, Timonovskaya reiterated that she did not want to make any statements about Lukashenko. She said, "They took away my dream of performing at the Olympics. They took this chance away from me." She added, "We have to have freedom of speech and people must state their opinion."

The gangster-like attempt to force Timonovskaya to return to Belarus over a seemingly minor critique of the Belarusian Olympic Committee comes just about two months after the Lukashenko regime hijacked a plane to arrest Roman Protasevich, a prominent, right-wing opposition journalist. Both incidents are part of a massive crackdown by the government on all expressions of political and social opposition. The fundamental target of these attacks is the working class, whose strikes last fall almost brought the Belarusian economy to a standstill.

The Lukashenko regime, which routinely glorifies the crimes of Stalinism, has now all but abolished the right to strike. Workers, thousands of whom engaged in strikes last fall, are now facing immediate firing if they ever were arrested for political protests or encourage others to join a strike. The raising of political demands during a strike has been outlawed entirely.

Even as the incident around Timonovskaya was still evolving, the exiled Belarusian opposition activist Vitaly Shishov was found hanged in a local park on Tuesday. The Ukrainian police are investigating his

death for both suicide and a potential murder disguised as suicide. Ukraine's president Volodymyr Zelensky has taken the case under his personal control. Bellingcat, a NATO-affiliated outlet posturing as an "investigative" site, has announced that it would "devote all its resources" to investigating Shishov's case. The site has recently been heavily involved in the imperialist-backed campaign over Russian right-wing oppositionist Alexei Navalny.

Shishov was the head of the House of Belarus in Kiev which helps other Belarusian refugees and has lobbied the Ukrainian parliament for more sanctions against Belarus. He had fled Belarus for Ukraine in the fall of 2020 amid the mass protests to avoid arrest. The pro-Western Belarusian opposition has suggested that the Lukashenko regime is behind Shishov's death, pointing out that the Belarusian secret service, still called KGB, has been increasingly active in Ukraine amid the substantial Belarusian diaspora. Shishov himself believed that he was being surveilled and had reportedly received threats.

News reports also suggest, however, that Shishov maintained ties to Ukraine's violent neo-Nazi scene which itself is heavily backed by the Ukrainian state and US imperialism. Shishov co-founded the House of Belarus in Kiev together with Radio Batulin, a Latvian neo-fascist, who was involved in a far-right attack on former President Petro Poroshenko in 2019. Moreover, according to the US-funded Radio Svoboda Belarus, the House is tied to the neo-Nazi Sergei Korotkikh. Korotkikh has been a prominent neo-Nazi for decades, including in both Russia and Belarus. In Ukraine, he was first an instructor and then an intelligence commander for the neo-fascist Azov Battalion which played a key role in the US-backed 2014 coup in Ukraine that ousted the pro-Russian government of Viktor Yanukovich.

Korotkikh was personally handed a Ukrainian passport by Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko for his services in the Azov Battalion and the 2014 coup. Since then, he has repeatedly been accused of murder, including in the cases of Yaroslav Babich, an ideologist of the Azov Battalion, who was found hanged in July 2015, and opposition journalist Pavel Sheremet, who was assassinated in a car bomb attack in 2016. Between 2015 and 2017, Korotkikh headed the Police Department for the Security of Strategic Objects, under the Ukrainian Interior Ministry's Department of the State Security Service. He also has reported ties to Arsen Avakov, who just resigned from his post as Minister of the Interior.

Similar ties between the US-backed and state-funded Ukrainian neo-Nazis and the Belarusian pro-Western opposition have also emerged in the figure of the arrested journalist Roman Protasevich. Protasevich at least accompanied the Azov Battalion during its combat against pro-Russian separatists in East Ukraine in 2014.

Whatever the immediate background of Shishov's death, these ties to the Ukrainian neo-Nazis starkly expose the reactionary character of the Belarusian pro-Western opposition. Far from representing the interests of the working class and fighting for democratic rights, it speaks for sections of the bourgeoisie and middle class that are ferociously nationalist and seek a closer alliance with Western imperialism.

The most prominent opposition figure, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, who claimed victory in last year's presidential elections against Lukashenko, just completed a tour in Washington where she met with US President Joe Biden and declared, "With Biden's help, we will prevail." She made no reference to the raging pandemic or the attacks on the right to strike by the Lukashenko regime.

Whatever the infighting between different sections of the ruling class in Belarus, both factions are united in their hostility to the working class. They both emerged out of the restoration of capitalism by the Stalinist bureaucracy and the destruction of the Soviet Union in 1991. In their fight to put an end to the pandemic, and defend their democratic and social rights, workers must base themselves on a socialist program, and maintain complete independence from both the imperialist-backed opposition and the Lukashenko regime.

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