

Strikes spread in Belarus as EU, Washington step up pressure

By Andrea Peters
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Anti-government protests against Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko continue to grow, as a police crackdown fails to suppress popular anger over the results of last Sunday's presidential election. On Monday, the country's Central Election Commission declared Lukashenko had secured 80 percent of the ballots cast, decisively defeating his main contender, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya. There is a widespread belief that the government, which has been under Lukashenko's control for 26 years, falsified the tally.

Yesterday, thousands of demonstrators poured into the capital Minsk. Protesters are also taking to the streets in smaller cities around the country. Workers at Belarus' major auto plant, BelAZa, have gone out on strike, and they have been joined by fellow autoworkers at other enterprises, including metallurgy, electronics and technology, pharmaceutical, fertilizer, ceramics and other factories. Healthcare workers and members of the Minsk Philharmonia have also walked off the job.

The strikes and demonstrations are occurring in defiance of mass arrests and in opposition to the use of police violence to suppress social opposition. As of Thursday, the Belarusian Ministry of Internal Affairs had arrested more than 6,000 people and killed two demonstrators. The OMON, Belarus' militarized police force, has attempted to drive back crowds with water cannons, tear gas, rubber bullets and stun grenades.

One autoworker at BelAZa told the press that the OMON snatched a fellow worker off the street as he returned home from the factory, and he has not been heard from since. BelAZa strikers have raised an outcry over the fact that the OMON are bussed into neighborhoods in the same vehicles that the workers produce.

The central demand raised so far by protesters and strikers has been for Lukashenko's resignation. "Get out!" is a common slogan at protests and on picket lines. Demonstrators are also calling for an end to state violence, the freeing of political prisoners, and the holding of new elections. There are also indications of nationalist sentiment,

with "Long Live Belarus" shouted by protesters.

Thus far, social and economic demands do not appear to have come to the forefront of the strikes, but the political oppression faced by the Belarusian working class is entirely bound up with its intense exploitation at the hands of the capitalist class—domestic and foreign alike. Decades of poverty wages, cuts in social spending, and most recently, the government's homicidal indifference to the COVID-19 pandemic, are all fueling social discontent.

The factory walkouts occurred in response to an appeal issued by NEXTA on the social media platform Telegram for a general strike. NEXTA is an online channel run by the former sportswriter and musician turned blogger and oppositionist Stepan Putilo, who currently resides in Poland. He left Belarus because of persecution by the Lukashenko government for his oppositional activities.

Putilo is one of a number of "anti-corruption" social media personalities who have emerged in recent years, a type that hides support for free-market capitalism under the cover of appeals for "democracy." A central demand advanced by NEXTA is for Tikhanovskaya to simply be awarded the Belarusian presidency.

Tikhanovskaya, who entered the race after her husband, another pro-democracy opposition blogger, was arrested, ran a largely empty campaign that appealed to little more than "free and fair elections." Portrayed as simply a brave mother and housewife standing against the regime, she was backed by different wings of Belarus' right-wing opposition and lauded by the Western media. None of these forces have the slightest concern for the democratic rights of the Belarusian masses, who they look upon as objects of exploitation and political pawns to be used in the broader struggle over the geostrategically important territory occupied by Belarus.

The explosion of popular opposition to Lukashenko—a deeply corrupt, former Stalinist turned wealthy autocrat—is being utilized by the United States and the European Union (EU) to advance their aims against Russia. Minsk has long been a key ally of Moscow and is the last remaining territorial bulwark against NATO on Russia's western

frontier.

Washington has been working to draw Belarus into its orbit, and since 2019 has been in the process of restoring full diplomatic relations with the country after a two-and-a-half-decade hiatus. If it is unable to achieve this with Lukashenko, it will work to achieve it without him. Earlier this week, in a staggering display of hypocrisy, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo released a statement denouncing “ongoing violence against protesters and the detention of opposition supporters” in Belarus. These are the very same actions currently being carried out by the Trump administration in major cities across the United States.

Washington’s right-wing, anti-Russian allies in the Baltics, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, are being pushed forward to pressure Lukashenko. Lithuania has given political refuge to Tikhonovskaya, and the three states have outlined a three-point plan that Belarus must adopt if it wishes to avoid punitive measures. In addition to ending the violence and freeing prisoners, the Baltic states are demanding that Belarus create a “national council of representatives of the state and civil society, whose goal would be to find ways out of the crisis.” This is a set-up, as everyone knows, that Lukashenko cannot accede to without effectively losing political power.

The EU announced Tuesday that it will meet today to discuss sanctions against Belarus, and EU ambassadors made a show Thursday of laying wreaths at the sight where an anti-government demonstrator was killed. A statement from Brussels declared that the EU is preparing to take “measures against those responsible for the observed violence, unjustified arrests, and falsification of election results.”

The EU’s efforts to portray it and its member countries as champions of Belarusian democracy and defenders of Belarus’ peaceful protesters are grotesque. In France, the government beats up, arrests and disperses with brute force “yellow vest” protesters. In Poland—on the very days that demonstrators were being arrested in Belarus—police were kicking, crushing the necks of, and detaining protesters supporting LGBTQ rights. In Germany, the far-right AfD wields broad sway over the entire political system.

Among the chorus of those condemning Lukashenko is the government of Ukraine, where neo-Nazis hold top military appointments and bands of paramilitary gangs maraud through the country killing opponents.

It remains unclear as to how the protests and strikes will develop in the coming days and weeks. The embattled Lukashenko regime issued an appeal Thursday for citizens to send in video-recordings of the “provocateurs” it insists are behind the demonstrations. There are some signs that support for Lukashenko within the state apparatus itself is

beginning to give way. An audio recording of the head of the Central Election Commission in Vitebsk, Sergei Pitalenko, was released in which the bureaucrat states that the election results were falsified and that officials were instructed by higher-ups to change the vote tallies.

The central question facing the Belarusian working class is one of mobilizing independently of and in opposition to not just Lukashenko, but all the so-called advocates of “democracy” in Belarus. The battle going on between the regime in Minsk and its domestic and foreign opponents is not one between autocrats and alleged supporters of “human rights” and “freedom.”

The imperialist powers, led by the United States, see Belarus as a pawn within their larger struggle to assert control over the Eurasian landmass. This involves, most centrally, military conflict with Russia and China. They are prepared to unleash slaughter in the region, and the Belarusian population—of which 70 percent speaks Russian as its first language at home—will suffer the consequences. Lukashenko, as well as Vladimir Putin in Russia, having failed to come to a deal with imperialism that will allow them to continue exploiting the working class in the vast region under their control, resort to violence and oppression in an effort to hold onto power.

A unified struggle of the working class of Belarus and Russia, linked with fellow workers in Europe, Asia, and the Americas, is the only basis upon which both imperialism and the post-Soviet ruling class can be defeated. The program that is required is not one of “free and fair elections” but of socialist internationalism.

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