

Lukashenko regime, Belarusian opposition seek to stifle mass strike movement

By Clara Weiss
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The president of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, has initiated a violent crackdown on the protests and strike movement that have shaken his regime since the presidential election of August 9.

On Tuesday, Lukashenko instructed the paramilitary forces of the interior ministry, the OMON, to “not allow any unrest” in Minsk and other cities. Lukashenko has also mobilized the army for “tactical exercises” on the country’s western borders, where many of the strikes are taking place. At the same time, the government is trying to starve striking workers into submission, refusing to pay them their meager wages and threatening strikers at state-owned companies with layoffs.

A stamp operator at the Minsk Tractor Factory told the *Financial Times*, “There’s no way Lukashenko will resign without the workers. They need to stop the workers from striking because if the industrial giants cease production, then he’ll have to go.”

Gruesome reports of torture of prisoners and their systematic rape by security forces have emerged in the Belarusian press and social media. Dozens of striking workers have been arrested, including the leaders of strike committees. At least three protesters have been killed since the beginning of the protests, and over 80 people are still unaccounted for.

However, the strikes, which are part of an international resurgence of the class struggle, have continued at many key factories. A website that tracks ongoing strikes suggests that they have, in fact, been growing. According to belzabastovka.org, there were at least 150 ongoing strikes and industrial protests on Friday, up from around 140 the day before. Strikes are taking place at major factories, mines, meatpacking plants, railways, theaters, hospitals and EMS stations.

The vast majority of strikes are taking place in the capital Minsk and in the city of the Grodno, which is close to the Belorussian-Polish border. Since August 18, miners of the Soligorsk Belarusalsk mines, which account for a fifth of worldwide Potash production, have also been on strike.

Many state-owned companies, which account for 70 percent of the country’s GDP, have been hit by the strike wave, including the state-owned auto company BelAZ. One presidential aide acknowledged this week that the strikes had already cost the economy \$500 million. Belarus has a GDP of less than \$60 billion.

The strike movement has provoked deep concerns among all sections of the ruling class in Belarus and Europe, leaving the imperialist powers scrambling over how to respond to the crisis in Belarus. While the EU and NATO seek to exploit the crisis to further their foreign policy interests, there is nothing the bourgeoisie of all countries fears more than an international spread of the strike movement.

The EU-backed opposition of Svetlana Tikhonovskaya has wavered between attempts to shut down the strikes, and negotiate with the Lukashenko regime, and phony gestures of support for the strikers.

As strikes were escalating earlier in the week, the opposition on Tuesday called for a “pause” of protests until the weekend. At the same time, with the backing of the EU, the new Coordination Council of the opposition has urged Lukashenko to initiate “immediate” negotiations with the opposition and create the basis for new elections. However, on Thursday, the Lukashenko regime initiated a criminal investigation into the council, accusing it of an “attempt to seize power” and harming the “national security” of the country.

On Friday, after several days in which protests and strikes have continued unabated, Tikhonovskaya issued a call to “continue and broaden” the strikes. The opposition’s Coordination Council also set up a “National Strike Committee” through which it seeks to gain control over the strike movement.

The publicly known members of the committee include two CEOs of IT companies, Yaroslav Likhachevsky and Alexander Podgorny, as well as Andrei Stirzhak who headed a campaign to fight against COVID-19 in Belarus, and Eduard Palchis, a bitterly nationalist and anti-Russian

blogger who advocates a union of Belarus with Poland and Lithuania. None of them have anything to do with the interests of the working class, and the strike committee, like the opposition as a whole, has consciously excluded all social and economic demands from the movement.

Another “national strike committee” was formed by the so called “independent” trade unions. While the two organizations now exist in parallel, the “independent” unions which have emerged out of the restoration of capitalism likewise support the pro-EU opposition and seek to subordinate the working class to it.

Whatever the tactical differences and in-fighting between the opposition and the government, they share one common goal: to bring the strike movement to an end as quickly as possible. Workers must be warned very sharply of the political dead end and right-wing character of the opposition.

The opposition’s Coordination Council includes several figures who are directly associated with the destruction of the Soviet Union and the restoration of capitalism, which created the basis for the emergence of the Lukashenko regime and the current social and economic catastrophe in the country.

Alexander Dabravolsky, one of the most prominent members of the opposition’s Coordination Council, was a leading member of the anti-Communist and nationalist opposition movement in the late Soviet period. He supported the Stalinist bureaucrat Stanislav Shuchkevich, who led the break-up of the USSR in 1991 and presided over the restoration of capitalism in Belarus until he was replaced by Lukashenko in 1994. He is now the head of the opposition party United Civic Party of Belarus.

Yuri Gubarevich, another member of the Council, is a leader of the Belarusian National Front party (BNF) which likewise pushed for the destruction of the USSR and the formation of an independent Belarusian nation-state, and the restoration of capitalism.

Other figures are no less right-wing and associated with policies that are opposed to the social and democratic rights of the working class: Pavel Latushko was a long-time functionary of the Lukashenko regime and is a Belarusian nationalist who advocates that the Belarusian Cyrillic alphabet be changed to the Latin alphabet.

Olga Kovalkova, the representative of Tikhanovskaya, is a co-leader of the Belorussian Christian Democracy party which opposes LGBTQ rights, and wants to end the official status of Russian as a state language in Belarus.

Through its right-wing policies, which serve to disorient and demobilize workers, the opposition is ultimately playing into the hands of the Lukashenko regime and its brutal crackdown on the working class.

The situation raises the urgent need for the working class to develop an independent political line and socialist leadership. The fight for democratic rights against the repression of the Lukashenko regime can only be successful if it is connected to the fight against social inequality and capitalism on an international level.

Such a program must above all be rooted in internationalism and an understanding of the counterrevolutionary role of Stalinism. Far from representing the continuity of the October revolution of 1917, the Stalinist bureaucracy was a counterrevolutionary force which waged war on Marxism and the program of international socialist revolution for decades. The only genuine socialist opposition to Stalinism came from Leon Trotsky, a co-leader of the October Revolution, and his Left Opposition, whose traditions are today represented by the International Committee of the Fourth International.

Politically, both the Lukashenko regime and the opposition feed off of the reactionary legacy of Stalinism. The Lukashenko regime has consciously promoted and evoked the traditions of Stalinism since 1994. Meanwhile, the opposition champions a no less reactionary variant of Belarusian nationalism and anti-communism. By using the red and white national flag of Belarus as its banner, it consciously associates itself with the 1918 Belarusian National Rada (BNR) which was formed during the Civil War in order to prevent the establishment of a Soviet government and worked together with German imperialism against the Red Army.

There is enormous sympathy for the strikes and protests among workers across Europe and Russia. However, to unite the working class in a struggle against capitalism requires the building of a Trotskyist leadership and sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International. We urge our readers in Belarus and across Eastern Europe who agree with this perspective to contact us today.

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