Ukrainian government turns against Lukashenko amid ongoing mass protests and strikes in Belarus

By Jason Melanovski
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As strikes have spread across Belarus, sending shock waves not only through the ruling class in Belarus but across Europe, the government in neighboring Ukraine has rapidly turned against its former ally, Alexander Lukashenko.

Prior to the August 9 presidential elections in Belarus, which Lukashenko claims to have won, the government of Ukrainian President Volodomyr Zelensky displayed—at least publicly—a positive attitude toward his government. In 2014, the Lukashenko regime supported the far-right coup in Kiev that was backed by US and German imperialism. Since then, Minsk has served as an intermediary in negotiations between Ukraine, the EU and the Russian government.

While meeting with Lukashenko in Ukraine last October, Zelensky commented on the close relationship between himself and Lukashenko. "We understand each other," he said. "I think our two nations are friendly, mentally close. I am proud, and I am confident that every Ukrainian is also proud that we have such good neighbors."

Reflecting the strategic interests of Ukraine in Belarus, earlier in August Ukraine's foreign minister invited Belarus's foreign minister to a meeting of the "Lublin Triangle" group that was set up by Poland, Ukraine and Lithuania to advocate for each other's' armies within NATO against Russia and deepen military cooperation between the countries.

In a sign that the Zelensky government fully expected a continuation of the Lukashenko regime for another five years, on August 5 plans were announced for Zelensky to visit Belarus for the third annual Regions of Belarus and Ukraine Forum after the election.

In response to Lukashenko's initial crackdown on protesters after the elections, Zelensky steered away from directly condemning the Belarusian government. Instead, he called for "open, albeit complex, dialogue" and "mutual understanding between all parties."

However, as a result of the strike movement within Belarus and Lukashenko's turn to the Kremlin in response to these mass protests, the Kiev government has made a one-eighty turn. The Zelensky government was particularly infuriated over Lukashenko's decision to send 32 Russian mercenaries that had been arrested ahead of the election back to Russia.

The Ukrainian government had earlier requested that they be turned over to Ukraine where they would have faced prosecution for supposedly aiding separatist rebels in the Luhansk and Donetsk regions in eastern Ukraine.

Reports in the Ukrainian media last week suggested the Wagner mercenaries were, in fact, duped into going to Belarus by agents from Ukraine's Security Service of Ukraine (SBU). According to the reports, the aim of the SBU was to further strain relations between Belarus and Russia, and pull the Lukashenko government closer toward an alliance with the other NATO-backed countries of eastern Europe just prior to the elections.

Last week, the Ukrainian government recalled its ambassador from Minsk after accusing the Lukashenko government of engaging in "conscious provocative behavior" for sending the Russian mercenaries back to Russia. Zelensky himself ominously threatened Belarus for failing to hand over the mercenaries, stating, "God help the Belarusian authorities not to have another burning blood-shedding Donbas on their territory that all those Wagner troops are able to create."

The Ukrainian ruling class has also signaled that it is ready to join the efforts of the European imperialist powers and the EU-backed opposition to stop the strikes and channel the protests against Lukashenko for their own

interests.

As the strikes escalated, the imperialist powers have stepped up their intervention in the Belarus crisis, seeking to both put the strike movement to an end and advance their own geopolitical interests. Last week, the EU explicitly called upon the Lukashenko regime to initiate discussions with the opposition. This weekend, the US undersecretary of state, Steve Beguin, held discussions with opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya in Lithuania.

The Ukrainian government announced last week that it "generally shares" the EU's sanctions against Belarusian officials and the call for new elections. Lukashenko, for his part, feeling betrayed by his former "friends" in Kiev, accused Zelensky of "fomenting riots" within the country.

Revealing its own fears over the strike movement in Belarus, a meeting was held last week between Zelensky and the heads of Ukraine's intelligence and police agencies to discuss how the protests in Belarus could pose "direct risks to Ukraine" and issued a statement that events in Belarus "could significantly affect Ukraine."

The Ukrainian oligarchy fears, above all, that the strikes taking place across the border could quickly spread to Ukraine where conditions workers face are often even worse than those in Belarus. Especially since the US and EU-backed coup in 2014, the Ukrainian government has enacted massive austerity. The coronavirus pandemic, which has led to a further decline in the living standards of the working population, has only intensified the social crisis, and the oligarchy is well aware that it is sitting on a social powder keg.

Earlier in June, the Ukrainian government was forced to pay out wages to over 40,000 miners who were owed back-pay. The payout was a response to a miners' protest in Kiev that was attended by miners from both western and eastern Ukraine, regions that are often portrayed by ruling-class media as diametrically opposed to one another due to language and "culture."

As a result of the protest, Zelensky was forced to intervene directly, telling the miners that he would personally see they are paid.

The Donets Coal Fields in eastern Ukraine, in particular, have a history of fervent strikes, and the Ukrainian ruling class is right to fear a growth of working class protests inspired by their own history and the ongoing struggle of Belarusian workers across the border. The working class in both countries has a powerful shared revolutionary history, going back to the revolutions of 1905 and 1917. In the late 1980s, a miners' strike across the Soviet Union, which spread to the Ukrainian Donbass and to Soligorsk in what is now Belarus, shook the Stalinist bureaucracy, accelerating its drive toward capitalist restoration.

While the initial protests in Belarus have been set off by Lukashenko's blatant trampling of democratic rights, the most threatening protests have come from strikes at Belarus's state-owned industries. The German financial newspaper *Handelsblatt* reported that the state-owned companies where workers are on strike accounted for $10 billion out of a GDP of less than $60 billion in 2019. Lukashenko's economic adviser has acknowledged that "billions of dollars" had already been lost to the strikes. The average wage for workers in Belarus is $500 a month, but many only earn $250 or $300 a month.

Meanwhile, the average wage of workers in Ukraine is $180 a month. These poverty wages have forced up to 9 million people out of a total population of 42 million to work abroad for some part of the year. Another 3.2 million people are working abroad full-time.

The impoverished state of Ukrainian miners has not been lost on Lukashenko who threatened striking Belarusian workers last week with their replacement by Ukrainian workers if they did not cease their strike. Pointing to the Ukrainian miners, he said "There is a sea of unemployed people," warning "they will come."

These blatant attempts by a besieged ruling class to divide workers in eastern Europe must be firmly opposed. The way forward for the working class in Belarus, Ukraine and across Europe must lie in a joint revolutionary struggle for the overthrow of capitalism.

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