

In Belarus, Labor Is Struggling to Find Its Voice

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Since Belarus's disputed election, both President Alexander Lukashenko and the liberal opposition have recognized the importance of strike actions in deciding what happens next. But while there have been protests across Belarus's major workplaces, a long-shackled labor movement faces an uphill struggle to advance a political agenda of its own.

Since Belarus's disputed election on August 9, [protest actions](#) by industrial workers have played a crucial role in the rallies against the reelection of longtime president Alexander Lukashenko. Walking out in their thousands, employees at industrial behemoths such as BelAZ (Belarus Automobile Plant), MTZ (Minsk Tractor Works), Grodno Azot, and Belaruskali carried signs saying, "We're Not Serfs — We're Workers!" with some even calling for a general strike.

This represented an impressive act of solidarity between workers and the liberal, urban upper-middle class that voted for opposition candidate Svetlana Tikhanovskaya. In particular, their walkouts dealt a heavy reputational blow to the regime of a country that prides itself on a vibrant industrial sector, dominated by state-owned heavy industry.

These actions have not yet reached anything like the scale of a general strike, and are in some cases comparatively limited — worker protests, more than "strikes," per se. But the keen attention that the main actors in the conflict have devoted to them are vivid demonstrations of their importance for future developments.

In an escalation of his customary bombastic style, Lukashenko reacted by threatening massive layoffs, factory lockouts, and even the introduction of strike-breaking workers from Ukraine and Russia. None of these moves have been made yet, but the Belarusian Ministry of Industry has already announced [a significant number of vacancies](#) at important state-run companies. Additionally, strike committee leaders from some more rebellious factories such as MTZ and Belaruskali have been detained and sued for illegal agitation.

Workers' leaders have thus shared the fate of key figures in the liberal opposition such as Olga Kavalkova, who was detained and given a [ten-day sentence in a fast-procedure online trial](#). Kavalkova — a *doverennoe litso*, or trusted representative, of Tikhanovskaya — had been quick to recognize the significance of strikes, calling workers to form a regionally representative national committee and elect deputies to the opposition's [Coordination Council](#).

Since then, the council has been voicing regular and unconditional support for the strikes, calling for national action, and has even tried to organize a support fund for workers who are not receiving salaries or are getting laid off.

Yet despite the importance placed on strike action, it is less clear what political role workers can themselves play. The danger is they will fall into a false dilemma — that of having to choose between authoritarian and parliamentary variants of neoliberalism.

Back in the USSR

The solidarity between parts of Belarus's white- and blue-collar workforce — and entrepreneurs — may be surprising. But this can be at least partially traced to the effects of the Lukashenko regime itself. There is the obvious and negative part: people are exasperated at an autocratic leader who has single-handedly ruled the country for more than a quarter-century. As one analyst put it, [Belarusian society has outgrown its regime](#).

But there is also a positive side to this. During Lukashenko's long rule, Belarus has seen not only good economic growth, but also decreasing levels of inequality, lower than those in other East European countries — including [EU member states such as Lithuania and Bulgaria](#). This is itself a factor in fostering solidarity between social groups.

Added to this is the fact that Belarus's state-owned industries need a trained workforce. In effect, Belarusian industrial workers are not that easily dispensable, and this — together with the fact that their factories are owned by the government — accounts for the power they yield. Ukrainian sociologist Volodymyr Ishchenko further points out that [Belarus's mono-industrial town setup, inherited from the Soviet Union](#), brings together the problems of the community and those of the workshop.

Indeed, looking at its Soviet-inspired national flag and state-run economy, it might be tempting to view Belarus as somehow stuck in the early 1990s. It is true that as an MP back in August 1991, Lukashenko voted against the country leaving the USSR, and it was he who reintroduced the redesigned Belarusian SSR flag. But thinking about the regime through labels such as “Europe's last dictatorship” — or using this title to counterpose it to neoliberalism — is bound to lead to oversimplification.

In fact, a number of neoliberal measures hitting labor have been implemented by the Lukashenko regime itself. Key among these is the widespread introduction of fixed-term contracts that deprive workers of job security and certain social benefits. The very idea of bringing in poorer industrial workers from neighboring Ukraine fits well not only with strike-breaking tactics, but also with the social dumping rampant in the European Union — a union that parts of the liberal opposition look up to.

For Sergei Vozniak, a central committee member of the left-wing party Just World, the Lukashenko regime is a “bourgeois dictatorship.” Such a choice of words may seem odd to the outside observer, given Belarus's “Soviet” trappings. But it is in many ways borne out by Lukashenko's real actions.

The regime has not been entirely hostile to private entrepreneurship, either: in some senses, it has even built the material foundation for its liberal opposition. Belarus's thriving IT sector (in recent years the country has been a top outsourcing destination) has been driven by the so-called High Technologies Park. Based on an idea by Valery Tsepkalo and other businessmen, the HTP was made possible by a decree Lukashenko issued in 2005 giving [generous tax breaks to companies](#) within the park.

The HTP now employs more than thirty thousand people. This is not a big percentage of the country's overall workforce (it is roughly equal to that of MTZ, for instance), but it provides for a significant portion of GDP and plays an important reputational role. The young people in Minsk's streets are sometimes given the label of *aitishniki* — the IT crowd.

Tsepkalo went on to bid to become one of Lukashenko's main rivals at this year's presidential race. After his candidacy application was rejected, he escaped across the border, seeking to avoid the fate

of influential banker Viktor Babariko, a once key would-be candidate who is now in jail. Tsepkalov now travels between Ukraine, where he continues to give press briefings, and Lithuania, to consult with Tikhanovskaya.

The Specter of Foreign Influence

The fact that Tikhanovskaya is still in the Lithuanian capital Vilnius, while one of the main opposition Telegram channels, NEXTA Live, is stationed in Poland, has stoked speculation among fans of longue durée history that old geopolitical interests are resurfacing. So have the supposedly ubiquitous West vs. Russia tensions — indeed, much like its conflict-ridden neighbor Ukraine, Belarus is part of the “border” between the two.

Polish left activists — who have much bad to say about Poland’s conservative government — have played down concerns about foreign interference in Belarus. They argue that while Poland has long supported independent Belarusian media, the government has recently cut down such funding, and is actually accusing Belarus of interfering in *Polish* affairs. The situation showed its comic side when a Belarusian army helicopter encroached upon Lithuanian airspace to shoot down balloons painted in the Belarusian opposition’s alternative white-red-white flag.

Nonetheless, the fact remains that NATO was upping the ante in the region during 2020, including drills in both [Poland](#) and [Lithuania](#). Lukashenko has been keen to use this as a rallying cry and has ordered the military to get ready for action. For her part, Tikhanovskaya has made the questionable move of holding a [photo-op with US deputy secretary of state](#) Stephen Biegun. This latter then went on to meet [top Russian diplomat Sergei Lavrov](#) to jointly discuss the situation.

Turning to Russia, the Belarusian opposition knows well that for now it remains an indispensable economic partner — and that Vladimir Putin doesn’t have a soft spot for the overly assertive Belarusian president. A degree of pro- or anti-Russian, as well as nationalist, sentiment is being already being flared up by various agents in the unrest. But given Belarus’s especially harsh experience of World War II, both sides have sought to use antifascist rhetoric thus far — and both sides have spoken up against “dividing the nation.”

Unlike in the case of Ukraine’s Euromaidan protests in 2014, there is no EU free trade agreement ready to be foisted on Belarus. But this does not mean a lack of interest. The EU, which has a recent track record of pushing neoliberal policies in its close neighborhood, has declared it does not recognize the election results — and is set to impose sanctions on Belarusian officials.

Sociologist Volodymyr Ishchenko also [points out the limits of analogies with Euromaidan](#) — whether used to glorify or discredit the uprising. He highlights other, less discussed, but more nuanced similarities and discrepancies between events in the two countries that can be very illuminating for both. Given the complexities of the situation and the waves of escalation in the conflict, it is still worth keeping an eye open for both sides — or external actors — stoking internal tensions along allegedly “cultural” or “geopolitical” lines.

Democracy or Privatization?

How Lukashenko rose from obscurity to prominence is a story that remains to be studied. But he was first elected president in fair elections in 1994, as he promised to save Belarus from the shock-therapy transition to capitalism and the mass privatization to which other post-Soviet and former Eastern Bloc countries were being subjected.

Today, the privatization of Belarus’s lucrative state industries is among the main worries for those on the Left, should the anti-Lukashenko protests succeed. But the problem also lies in the weakness

of this part of the political spectrum, weak in Belarus as in many other former Eastern Bloc countries.

According to Just World's Sergei Vozniak, leftists did not make a good assessment of the preelection situation, participated rather passively in the campaign, and were taken by surprise by the events that followed: "We did not expect that anti-Lukashenko protests would be this big, and we are now very much behind events, trying to find our place in the movement and take the initiative away from liberals."

Belarus's representative in the Party of the European Left, in the election Just World supported independent candidate Andrei Dmitriyev, who came out fourth with an official vote of 1.2 percent. Unlike other opposition candidates, Dmitriyev stayed in Belarus after the elections and is actively participating in protests, as are some party activists, says Vozniak.

Just World, the Belarusian Green Party, as well as independent trade unions and other progressive organizations, did enter into extensive talks ahead of the elections, but [failed to reach an official agreement](#). According to Vozniak, the coordination among these forces remains insufficiently effective.

Supporting the workers' mobilizations, anti-system leftist organizations have now set up their own [people's strike committee](#). This is also a bid to oppose the liberals, whose messages are still by far the most dominant in the protests. Indeed, activist Dmytriy Kovalevich has expressed worries that even though liberals have embraced industrial action at state-owned enterprises, they have kept silent about privately owned businesses.

Calls for privatization are not heard at rallies, but a look at the minimalist campaign messages of banker Viktor Babariko and Tikhanovskaya reveals telltale signs such as calls for "boosting competition" and "optimizing" state companies that are deemed inefficient. During the protests, liberals have furthermore called for sabotaging the state-run parts of the economy, using methods such as refraining from paying bills and taxes or from buying goods produced by major state companies.

Beyond Fresh Elections — What Future?

Vozniak believes that ousting Lukashenko and restoring a parliamentary democracy will bring privatizations. He hopes that mustering a strong leftist vote in subsequent general elections, after the powers of parliament are restored, will at least set reasonable legislative limits on this process. Other leftist activists have argued that given the lack of democracy "under Lukashenko's system, [working-class or grassroots organizations will never be able to change the situation](#)," anyway.

For the time being, the demands voiced by the protests are electoral, and do not point to any particular vision of Belarus's social or economic development. But while the opposition insists that Tikhanovskaya is the legitimate president, even despite no free and fair elections having been held, leading anti-establishment Belarusian sociologist [Oleg Manaev argues that Lukashenko could well win a legitimate contest](#) — albeit with a much smaller majority, and only after a second-round run-off.

The industrial actions have, for the most part, been protests of *citizens*, not of *workers*. Ironically, it is pro-Lukashenko authorities themselves that are pointing this out, using the "rule-of-law" language to which the liberal opposition itself lays claim. For a strike to be legal in Belarus, it not only has to be backed by 50 percent of employees, but also to have been occasioned by a labor dispute with management (rather than a political grievance).

The fact that this stringent definition of labor rights is also the case in other, allegedly democratic, East European countries, shows that Belarus is not the aberration it is often portrayed to be. In fact, even within these tight legal limits, Belarusian workers have much to strike for. Yet the narrowly electoral demands of the protests have kept them confined.

In this sense, the prospects for Belarusian labor are mixed. In particular, a quick remodeling of institutions by pro-market forces in a country with no recent tradition of functioning democratic participation or vibrant trade unionism is bound to create the conditions for loss of worker control, rampant deregulation, and rising inequalities. In such an event, Belarus will join other fellow East European countries, which have not merely “caught up with the West,” but surpassed it — that is, in landing at the forefront of unfettered neoliberal capitalism.

An arguably fairer alternative — if a controversial one — would be for Belarusian working people, from industrial employees to “the IT crowd,” to press labor demands at the same time as working for the gradual dismantling of the Lukashenko regime. Pointing to the risk of institutional havoc is a well-known reactionary move. But as things stand now, anti-establishment radicalism in Belarus seems to serve the agenda of neoliberal hawks — not necessarily that of real democracy.

Belarus’s peculiar story thus calls for rejecting ready-made celebratory talk of transition to democracy or worker power — and demands a more levelheaded analysis of the specifics on the ground.

Today, workers in Belarus have the capacity to prevent private capitalist actors from gaining control over their lives by taking over the political regime. Certainly, the odds are against them. But they have the rare possibility of reclaiming the bases of political intervention — through industrial action that presses for the democratization of production.

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