

Belarus: Women trade unionists in prisons

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For almost three decades, Belarus has been a world champion in violating fundamental human rights, including the rights of workers for freedom of association. Belarus is mentioned among the 10 worst countries for workers. During the mass uprising of Belarusians against Lukashenko and his regime in 2020, workers challenged the dictatorship with the threat of a general strike. The regime deployed outstanding repressions against the civil society, against the workers, against their unions. What more, Lukashenko dragged Belarus in the war backing another dictator, Putin against the people of Ukraine. And it was the Democratic organization of workers, the Belarusian Congress of Democratic trade unions who voiced the firm antiwar position of the Belarusian workers. The consequences were massive arrests and criminal accusations for trade union and workers' leaders in April 2022. Moreover, Belarus became a country without trade unions since July 2022 when all democratic trade unions were liquidated. The dictatorship in Belarus where any activity is labelled as extremism and terrorism does not stop repression against the civil society.

Trade unionists in jail

47 Belarusian comrades of ours are in prisons and penal colonies in Belarus, convicted of high treason, defamation of the state, participating and supporting extremist activities with terms of up to 15 years in prison. Among them are well known trade union figures, such as Aliaksandr Yarashuk – the President of BKDP, Vice-President of the ITUC and a member of the Governing Body of the International Labour Organization.

Among the imprisoned are women trade unionists and elderly people. And many of them are labelled extremists, some even terrorists. The robes of political prisoners are also labelled. Sadly, with yellow labels. Political prisoners constantly undergo torture, severe punishment by staying in closed solitary confinement in freezing cells. Forced labour of political prisoners without any trace of occupational health and safety, often in wood and textile industry, is widely used in penal colonies to convert the prisoners into law obedient citizens, the state says.

Women trade unionists political prisoners

According to human rights organization Viasna, as of December 25, 2023, there were 1,496 political prisoners in Belarus, of which 174 were women. Since 2020, at least 895 women have been prosecuted for political reasons.

Today, among those women political prisoners at least 8 women activists and leaders of independent trade unions are kept in Belarusian prisons and penal colonies: Hanna Ablab, Zinaida Mikhniuk, Volha Brytsikava, Volha Barushka, Hanna Karneyenka, Sviatlana Sakovich, Palina Sharenda-Panasiuk, and Halina Smirnova.

They lost their freedom because of their activities. Like many Belarusian women, they rebelled

against injustice and dictatorship. In 2020 many women marched in the front row after the rigged elections during the protests against electoral fraud in the fight against the dictator, in the fight for freedom. They didn't demand free elections only, they also demanded liberation from authoritarian structures, liberation from a repressive masculinity that is part of Lukashenko's ideology and power base. Their protest was about equality, respect and self-determination.

They were sentenced to prison terms of between 2 and 11 years for their protest. Our solidarity and worldwide support is helping them and their families in this difficult time, when the regime is locking them away in prison and wants nothing less than for the world to forget them and their names.

We share the stories of our sisters here

Palina Sharenda-Panasiuk

Palina is a public and trade union activist from Brest, who was detained on January 3, 2021. The mother of two minor sons was convicted under a number of articles of the Criminal Code. At the end of February 2022, a criminal case was opened against her under Part 2 of Article 411 of the Criminal Code (malicious disobedience to the colony administration). On October 9, 2023 court found Palina guilty under Part 2 of Article 411 of the Criminal Code and sentenced her to one more year of the colony in addition to three years she got in 2021. At the first court hearing, she reported beatings in the Zarečanskaya penal colony: her face and internal organs were severely damaged.

Palina's family had to leave Belarus, and had fled to Lithuania; they are fighting to make her case known to public and aim at her sooner release.

There is evidence that female political prisoners are periodically placed in a penitentiary - a closed low temperature cell where they are deprived correspondence, packages from the family, or personal things, warm clothes, and bed linen either. Although the exact details are not always known, and sometimes it is not possible to talk about it publicly such information finds its way to outside of the prison. The status that Palina got - of "malevolent" - imposes additional restrictions on prisoners, the main of which is the reduction of the "in prison shopping" to two basic values (74 rubles or 20 euro per month). As prisoners note, it is very difficult to survive on this money without a salary and with the deprivation of parcels from family in the colony.

Hanna Karneyenka

Hanna is a member of the Free trade union of metal workers. a former accountant of the Minsk Electrotechnical Plant named after Vavilov. She was fired after protests at work place in 2020 and her union was suing the company for her illegal dismissal. Hanna had been sentenced for 5 years in penal colony allegedly for disclosing personal data of state agents. She was taken to custody when her newborn baby was three months old. Her husband is doing his best taking care of their two children on his own. Hanna is in the list of terrorists.

Volha Brytsikava

Volha is the chairperson of the Belarusian Independent trade union of miners and chemical workers at an oil-refinery Naftan. In 2022 with the beginning of war in Ukraine Volha has been arrested for her anti-war position and placed to jail. While she was in jail they sentenced her 5 times 15 days each time. After Volha was released she continued helping her comrades. And with the liquidation of all independent trade unions she was one of few remaining union leaders who didn't leave the country. In August 2023 the regime has arrested her and a couple of other comrades. Now she is

under criminal investigation in a pre-trial jail of KGB in Minsk facing at least 6 years in jail. And there is not much information about her since. There are ongoing arrests of workers of Naftan, and the comrades of Volha link it to her case.

Hanna Ablab

Among our comrades Hanna is the one with the longest term – 11 years for high treason and defamation of the state. She worked for the Belarusian state railways, was part of the workers' initiative Rabochy Rukh. Hanna denied her guilt during the court hearing. The mother of three children, she has been recently transferred to one of the women penal colonies from the pre-trial prison.

Penal colonies or forced labour camps

The places where women political prisoners are kept are penal colonies where they are supposed to work. The labour of political prisoners should be qualified nothing else but forced labour without health and safety regulations, without proper payment (often less than 1 euro per month), most often in textile industry. In case of women prisoners, it is eight hours working shift in a sewing shop making uniforms for the military, most probably Russian army, or for the Belarusian police.

Trade union in exile

Many trade unionists had to flee from the dictatorial regime, and continue their work in exile. Thus, in exile in the free city of Bremen in Germany they founded an association and called it Salidarnast – literary “solidarity” in Belarusian – to support trade unionists arrested and convicted by Lukashenko regime. “Union activism is not extremism” is their slogan. They are campaigning to release their comrades from jail, spread the news from Belarus, collect donations to a solidarity fund to help the families, children of Belarusian comrades, maintain networking and start providing union education.

Freedom is not something once gained and then staying forever. We need to constantly fight for it. The same goes with the Freedom of Association.

It is a big challenge for the Belarusians and the Global workers' movement to act together with the employers and respective governments to put up pressure on the regime in Belarus. And the release of all political prisoners should be the precondition of any dialogue with Lukashenko.

The [Salidarnast](#) Association was founded by trade union leaders and activists from Belarus, who were forced to leave the country after the liquidation and repression of democratic trade unions. The charitable association is registered in Germany and based in Bremen.

Salidarnast

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