

Total support for the mobilizations against Lukashenko's autocracy!

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1. Despite extremely brutal repression (already more than 12,000 arrests, hundreds of wounded, at least 4 dead), the mass revolt of the Belarusian population is entering its ninth week extending both socially and beyond the capital, Minsk, without succeeding for the moment in turning into a general strike. Since the falsification of the results of the presidential election on 9 August, in this country of 9.5 million people, located between the EU and Russia, every week hundreds of thousands of peaceful demonstrators, notably women, have been demanding:

- The departure of Lukashenko (who organized his investiture on 23 September in the greatest secrecy, under the protection of the army and the police who blocked the centre of the capital);
- Free and fair elections;
- An end to police violence and the release of political prisoners.

This impressive mobilization of popular resistance gained momentum after the first demonstrations following the announcement of the official election results faced government terror. But its roots are deeper: for more than five years – in the context of the Ukrainian crisis and the sanctions against Russia the economic and social deterioration of

Lukashenko's autocratic regime, his neo-liberal policy in the field of labour law (including the replacement of collective agreements by individual fixed-term contracts) and the persecution of the unemployed, the wage freeze since 2015, the increase in the retirement age, the denial of workers' dignity in the face of the pandemic... It is against a regime that treats people like a disposable commodity, that hits, tortures and lies to them about the coronavirus that the Belarusian population has risen up.

2. Coming to power in 1994 with a populist discourse, when the population was mobilizing against the policy of privatization, Lukashenko formed an authoritarian regime to pursue capitalist restoration. It is a peculiar system of semi-peripheral capitalism, in which economic and political power is not fundamentally based on private big capital, but on a bureaucratic-paternalistic state apparatus of which Lukashenko is the symbol (but not the owner). By devoting a substantial part of the state's resources to maintaining industry, the rural sector, infrastructure and the population, this regime subordinated the elements of private capital to its officials, limiting (unlike Russia) the growth of inequality. Thus, it is the nomenklatura, mixed with private capital, that subjugates and exploits the workers in an economic, administrative, political and cultural-ideological manner. It is this system that entered into stagnation from 2013 onwards. And today it has plunged into a multidimensional crisis.

3. Proclaimed in the late 1990s, the Union of Russia and Belarus, which represented an attempt to re-integrate the post-Soviet space in the last decade, finally turned into a form of economic dependence of the country on Russia while keeping the political autonomy of the Belarusian regime. It became clear that Putin's Russia understands integration of post-Soviet countries only as an opportunity for expansion of Russian big capital and its key role in privatization of former Soviet enterprises. For Lukashenko, such integration

would mean not only the loss of control over property, but also the loss of political power that would have passed to Russian bureaucrats and top managers.

Lukashenko's economic and political model in Belarus had to constantly manoeuvre between the European Union and Russia to survive. Thus, the West, despite its dissatisfaction with Lukashenko's authoritarianism, valued him for his desire to maintain his independence from Russia and his resistance to expanding Russian military bases in Belarus. This neutral status of Belarus allowed Minsk to become the main platform for negotiations between Russia, Ukraine and the EU in 2014. For Putin, on the other hand, Lukashenko remained a leader who would never let his country get closer to NATO and maintained the orientation of a large part of the Belarusian economy toward Russia. Thus, Lukashenko did not enjoy the trust of either Russia or the West, but at the same time satisfied them because he guaranteed the stability of current position of Belarus.

Mass protests that began in Belarus after the presidential election on August 9 have primarily internal reasons. Over the last months we have seen that Lukashenko failed to resolve this crisis on his own and openly turned to Russia for help. Russian political advisers and representatives of special security agencies have arrived in Belarus, and Putin openly expressed his willingness to send Russian riot police to help Lukashenko. Now, if Lukashenko manages to stay in power, his political dependence on Russia will increase dramatically, and he will be extremely unpopular inside his country.

After recent talks between Putin and Lukashenko, it became clear that Moscow sees the current Belarusian crisis as a way to push forward from above a gradual transformation of the authoritarian model. It is a question of modifications of facade (constitutional reform) with the aim of facilitating the privatization of the big Belarussian state companies by the big Russian capital. The EU as a whole is ready to accept

such a model, as it cannot offer Belarus any distinct alternative and is afraid of provoking Putin to creating another point of conflict (political and possibly military) in Eastern Europe.

Ultimately, only its people who have risen up to protest are interested in Belarus' deepgoing transformation and democratization.

4. Although after the presidential "elections" of 2001, 2006, 2010 and 2015 – the results of which have always been contested by the opposition (according to a recent statement by the chairman of the Grodno Regional Executive Committee, there is no "method of counting the votes") – there were suppressed protests, the new wave of mobilizations began in 2017 when the regime tried to impose a tax by decree on the unemployed, who were accused of "parasitism". Not only in Minsk, but also in regional cities thousands of demonstrators chanted "No to Decree No. 3! Lukashenko get out!" forcing the regime to replace taxes with a reduction in state subsidies. This appeared to be a first step backwards for the regime.

When the Covid-19 pandemic began, although Belarus has a public health system superior to many developed countries (5.2 doctors per 1000 inhabitants, compared to 3.9 in the Eurozone and 2.6 in North America), the bureaucratic system was unable to adapt to the crisis. The regime called the pandemic a "psychosis", failed to provide protective equipment and medical supplies to health care workers and faced a shortage of ambulances, while Lukashenko cynically called the first official death (a known actor) a "poor bastard" who "could not hold out". And caregivers who dared to talk about the pandemic were repressed. It was then that the self-organization of the population began: the ByCovid19 campaign was able to substitute for the incapacity of the State, providing equipment and volunteer workers, setting up a coordination network in each region. The regime then oscillated between repression and collaboration with these volunteers, whose

initiative “highlighted the need for change,” as the coordinator of the ByCovid19 campaign put it.

Fearing that “they will come after me with pitchforks” (26 April 2020), Lukashenko decided to prevent his main liberal opponents – Viktor Babaryko (CEO of Belgazprombank), Valery Tsepkalo (former ambassador, deputy minister and administrator of the High Technology Park of Belarus) and Sergei Tikhanovsky (entrepreneur, blogger and host of the popular YouTube channel A Country to Live) – from running in the presidential election. Fundamentally macho, he believed that a female candidate “unable to carry this burden, would collapse” and had the hundreds of thousands of signatures accepted allowing Sergei’s wife, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya to run. This teacher, an “ordinary woman” who claimed not to aspire to power, whose image corresponded to that of the majority of voters, supported by Tsepkalo’s wife and Babaryko’s campaign manager, was able to gather tens of thousands of people in her pre-election meetings throughout the country. And her official score – 10.9 per cent of the vote – could not be admitted by anyone.

The extremely violent repression of the first popular protest rallies on 9, 10 and 11 August did the rest: as the Belarusian sociologist Andrei Vardomatsky said, “when someone shoots at your window, the whole building sees it”. Against injustice and terror, the extension of the protest movement was immediate: the Lukashenko regime is now only able to hold out thanks to the forces of repression. How long can one reign while “sitting on a bayonet”?

5. By responding with terror, the Lukashenko regime hoped to prevent concentrations of demonstrators. It actually pushed the protesters to demonstrate in front of their homes, in the courtyards of their buildings and in suburban villages, thus multiplying the protests and pushing for forms of local self-organization around neighbourhood relations – very strong because the bureaucratic system of building management and

social services is malfunctioning and forces neighbours to solve urgent problems among themselves. With the role of social networks and internet channels – popular with young people and the main source of information in a country where the regime controls and censors the media – the result has been the appearance of a huge network of local, spontaneous protests, which has no centre and no assertive leadership, but a “fluid leadership”: as soon as one person appearing as a “leader” is repressed, another naturally takes their place locally. What characterizes this movement is great creativity, the protesters are constantly inventing new forms of control, of peaceful struggle, and all this circulates, spreads and enriches itself through social networks.

From 10 August the workers **as such** joined the mobilizations. Healthworkers (mostly women, doctors and nurses) of the wounded took to the streets protesting against torture. Work stoppages took place in a large number of enterprises (sometimes with the support of owners in the private sector) and, above all, in at least a dozen very large state-owned enterprises, leading to gatherings of workers in the factories, sometimes polemics with the management and local representatives of the regime and even with Lukashenko (dismissed by the workers of the Minsk Automobile Plant with the cry of “get out” on 17 August), strike committees appeared, but it seems that nowhere were there any attempts at an occupation strike. On the contrary, the workers came out of the factories to demonstrate. And with repression (sometimes massive layoffs as in State Television or the National Theatre of Minsk, or threats of layoffs, arrests often followed by imprisonment of real or imaginary “leaders”), the weakness or absence of real unions, and sometimes the “advice” of directors to go on the “Italian strike” (that is, a work to rule, invisible, leaving the workers atomized), the strike movement retreated, the proletarians dissolved into the vast protest movement. The factories have not become the centre of the revolt and the proletariat has not (yet?) managed to

assert itself as a class, around its own demands, within the democratic movement that struggles against the regime.

In the face of the brutal repression of the demonstrations, women **as such** organized numerous "solidarity chains", offering flowers to the repressive forces and overflowing them with their masses, very peacefully, which for a time paralysed this very macho sector, before the authorities ordered it to repress women and even their children as well. However, demands for women's rights have not (yet?) appeared in these initiatives.

6. While opposition presidential candidates rejected by the regime (V. Babaryko, V. Tsepkalov and S. Tikhanovskiy), as well as Andrei Dmitriev (candidate for "Speaking the Truth", who officially obtained 1.21% of the votes) put forward liberal economic programs, aimed in particular at the "freedom of enterprise" of the private sector and the need to "stop financing unprofitable companies", this theme almost disappeared from Svetlana Tikhanovskaya's presidential campaign (without being rejected by the candidate). Since August 9, 2020, they have not appeared in the revolt of the masses against the regime either. The demonstrators only put forward the three democratic demands.

The liberal opposition parties, sidelined since 1994 and deprived of any significant representation in the institutions of the regime, are in fact very weak. The same is true of the political parties claiming to be left-wing (often mixed with a dose of nostalgia for the old regime of so-called "real socialism"), reduced to discussion clubs.

Finally, while union membership is compulsory, the official trade union movement has nothing in common with even highly bureaucratized trade unionism but acts as a transmission belt for Lukashenko and possibly as a framework for social advancement for its officials. It is necessary to underline the rupture on this level which was Lukashenko's repression of

the very strong workers and trade union mobilization at the beginning of the 1990s at the same time as he put an end to liberal shock therapy: the “social protections” of his statist capitalism were organically linked to the atomization and bureaucratic supervision of the workers. Independent trade unions – such as the Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions (BKDP), affiliated to the International Trade Union Confederation – tolerated while being repressed, are very weak and not very present in large companies. The society modelled by Lukashenko is thus an atomized society. This is what has changed in recent months, especially since the beginning of the popular revolt. The calls for solidarity with the workers and people of Belarus from the ETUC networks – especially from the CGT (France), recently affiliated to the ETUC – mark an important possible turning point.

Whatever the limits, we are witnessing within this mass democratic movement an intense politicization, a learning of civic self-organization that puts on the agenda the appearance of a completely new political structuring. This movement for democracy will, sooner or later, have to build a project for society. If it succeeds in “getting rid of” Lukashenko and his autocratic regime, it will divide and the conditions may emerge for class and gender issues and discussions about what to build on instead to flourish. Then the role of the working class (whose beginning of the strikes forced Lukashenko, for a time, to limit repression, thus showing his strength), the role of women (whose demonstrations on Saturdays paved the way for the continuation of mass demonstrations on Sundays), ecological questions (Belarus has already experienced a serious beginning of climate change, the south of the country becoming a steppe region whereas fifty years ago it was still a swampy forest) will be at the centre of the discussions.

7. So that all the democratic, health, feminist, class and environmental issues that feed the current politicization of Belarusian society allow the emergence of an eco-socialist

front, the internationalist left (trade union, political, associative) must be able to develop concrete solidarity links, from below, with the Belarusian democratic movement as a whole.

Solidarity does not mean alignment with this or that decision of those who today claim to symbolize the movement: the coordinating council around Svetlana Tikhanovskaya (which repression has greatly weakened) or the former political parties that have joined the movement while keeping quiet about their real programmes and aims – pro- or anti-Russian, anti-social and undemocratic privatizations: this issue is now coming more and more into the open, at a time when the economic situation is deteriorating: it will be necessary to oppose both Lukashenko's pseudo-protective rhetoric and his pseudo-democratic opponents.

Solidarity means democratic defence against repression, defence of the pluralist right to free expression, support for the demonstrations and strikes that take place. Solidarity also implies independence from the manoeuvres of other countries' governments and international finance capital, which try to profit from the mobilizations of the masses in Belarus.

• International solidarity of workers with the democratic movement in Belarus! • Out with Lukashenko and his regime! • Free and fair elections in Belarus! • Free self-organization of the debate on the future of Belarus!

• Move towards an ecosocialist Belarus: transnational links between trade unions, movements of women, youth, workers!

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