FUTURE OF SOCIAL DEMOCRACY 21.06.2022 | Maria Taradetskaya

Belarus' independent trade unions are under threat

The clampdown on independent trade unions – and the severe impacts of decades of neoliberal reforms – have left Belarus' labour force vulnerable

With all international attention on Ukraine, the clampdown on independent trade unionsin neighbouring Belarus has gone largely unnoticed. On 19 April 2022, the authorities launched the biggest attack on their organisations so far: more than 20 trade unionists were arrested, including the heads of three independent unions, numerous deputy leaders, almost every representative of the Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions (BKDP) and other representatives of the independent trade union movement, while the offices of both the Free Metalworkers' Union (SPM) and the BKDP were searched. Ten of our colleagues are currently in custody, including the BKDP president and his deputy, the leadership of the Radio and Electronic Industry Workers' Union (REP), and representatives of the SPM.

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They are accused of contravening article 342, paragraph 1 of the Belarusian criminal code: 'Organisation of group activities that grossly violate public order and fail to comply with the lawful demands of the authorities or that lead to the disruption of transport, businesses, institutions or organisations, and active participation in such activities where no more serious crime is indicated'. Further charges were added during the committal hearing.

Strained development since independence

Although thesemeasures target specific individuals rather than entire organisations, the mass arrests have nonetheless succeeded in bringing the

work of independent trade unions to a standstill. At the same time, they are also having the desired deterrent effect on other members. The whole operation seems designed to crush the last remaining civil society organisations in Belarus and to rob civilians of any possibility of defending their own rights.

As for the protection of Belarusian workers' rights, the situation is now on a par with the 1980s. The traditional trade unions are a sham. They are mouthpieces for the ruling regime and state propaganda, representing the interests of employers rather than those of workers. They willingly accept that working people have to 'tighten their belts' at the government's behest and put up with poorer working conditions and a reduction in living standards.

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The government-backed Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus (FPB) enjoys unlimited freedom of action, membership is in effect compulsory (it has around 4 million members) and revenue from union dues is correspondingly high. The FPB's member unions ensure that the workforce don't know the terms laid out in pay settlements, the means by which those terms were agreed or the rights they have as employees. Plenty of employees are not even aware what level of pay they are entitled to for what, and a good many have no idea how much tax is deducted from their income.

All of the reforms being put forward by the government would be detrimental to workers' interests. This is particularly true of the neoliberal shock therapies being characterised as reforms. None of the reforms to Belarusian employment law implemented over the past ten years have benefited employees. Instead, the regime has weakened employment law wherever it could.

Independent trade unions, meanwhile, have been operating in extremely difficult circumstances for some 30 years, arranging legal representation for employees in court cases, attempting to counter ignorance of the law and reporting violations of the lawto the International Labour Organization (ILO). They are therefore a thorn in the government's side and face ongoing persecution and obstruction – via measures such as a newly introduced regulation requiring organisations to have a legal address for them to be officially registered, or via threats made to ordinary union members. As a result of these measures, the BKDP's

membership has declined to around 10,000 – half what it was in 2002.

Belarusian civil society is ready for change

Irreversible changes are taking place in Belarusian society. Psychologically speaking, it could be said that society is coming of age. People are now clued up about key issues, they are prepared to find things out for themselves, and to take individual and collective responsibility. They want to influence life in their country in various ways, ranging from improving their living situation or local area to negotiating with government officials. This makes it increasingly difficult for state propaganda to cut through to people, to break popular solidarity, and to convince the general public of their powerlessness and thus ensure their ongoing passivity. In such a situation, the authoritarian regime is forced to rely on the tried-and-trusted methods of intimidation and rigorous repression. The extent of the crackdown indicates just how much the government fears civil society.

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There's no doubt that the Belarusian dictatorship is doomed to fail. Sooner or later, we will see a transition such as the one that took place after the break-up of the Soviet Union. At that time, concerted efforts to democratise were conspicuous by their absence. Today, the situation is very different, though sadly the majority of Belarusians have little experience in developing democratic institutions or their function. Now more than ever, the country needs competent experts – economists, lawyers, design engineers, and other skilled professionals – who can help establish crisis management mechanisms and workforce retention strategies that might prevent the Belarusian economy from collapsing completely. And yet for years the regime has been targeting these very professionals, aided by the FPB, which opts to sit idly by.

The trade unions remain the most enduring and credible structures. Moreover, their collaboration with other unions around the world continues to intensify in all areas. On the question of what needs to be reformed, the independent trade unions have a firm position based on

the core labour standards and conventions of the ILO. These set out red lines beyond which, from a trade union perspective, no reform should go. Those red lines relate in particular to decent working conditions, the public sector and the public good, as well as to foreign investment, natural resources and environmental protection.

People, labour, and nature are not commodities. We can't therefore rely solely on free market mechanisms. We need guarantees. That's why we should urgently be thinking about the kind of strategies that can help defend employees' interests – via structured action within democratic trade unions.

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