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Chapter 12. Labour activist in exile

This article is based on my personal work experience with other Belarusians. I am sure it will be useful to European trade unions and to those trade unionists who had to leave their country because of repression for organising workers, but are trying to help even from abroad.

I worked as a chemical production operator at Grodno Azot from 2013 to 2020. My active participation as an observer in the presidential election campaign dramatically turned my quiet life upside down. The facts I registered about election fraud and my public statements of these facts at the enterprise led me to the idea of setting up a strike committee. The strike was to free political prisoners and give us fair elections back. The regime was forced to release detained peaceful protesters because of our activity; but that made me a target for the KGB. Three days after the fabrication of a criminal case accusing me of ‘Forcing to take part in a strike under threat of violence’ and an attempt to detain me, I made the difficult decision to leave the country.

Since the end of August 2020, I have been a Belarusian refugee in Warsaw. With 18 months passed, I still don’t feel disconnected from our people in Belarus.

The Belarusian diaspora helped me in my integration a lot; but truly my involvement remained possible because NSZZ Solidarność offered me a job in the international department as a specialist for relations with trade unions in the post-Soviet region.

I wish our fraternal trade unions in the Western destination countries for nowadays’ refugees see an opportunity and a need for employing such a specialist. That trained and experienced trade unionist could have informed Western trade unions of the methods of putting pressure for trade unions working in dictatorships, and could have helped to organize and integrate refugees coming from the same country. Thus, to support a trade union leader in exile would mean to support large numbers of refugees from their country.

It will not be easy to do, because you need the person to know the language of your country and have other important competences. Another difficulty is that an initiative with an offer to work for the union from the union itself is important.

It is more likely that refugee trade unionists will look for work in a similar enterprise and unlikely that they will look for ways to continue to be active as an employee of a trade union in another country. In other words, it is important to give a helping hand. The value of such a person's experience in a trade union in a more developed country cannot be overstated. It is a very serious contribution both to the resistance to dictatorships and to the future of trade unions operating under dictatorships today.

Realising that I have a job and it is related to trade union activities allowed me in 2020, together with the Centre for Belarusian Solidarity, an NGO in Warsaw, to help many Belarusian labour movement activists forced to flee to get back on their feet. Many of them work with me as part of the Rabochy Ruch initiative to support contacts with people remaining in the country, and we are not going to give up.

Another very important area was working with representatives of the diaspora, who organised fundraising in the ByHelp and BySol campaigns to help victims of repression. We were able to do a quick verification of the appeals of the workers of those enterprises where our people were and to make sure that the aid reached the recipient transparently for all concerned (but not for the eyes of the regime).

I understand that not every trade union is able to employ trade unionists in exile. In such cases, wouldn't it be possible to support activist groups and individual activists who are willing to work with the remaining trade unionists inside the country?

The most important activities that trade unionists from various state-owned enterprises in exile can do after Russia's attack on Ukraine are aimed at ending the war. The words of one of my colleagues stuck in my mind after the violence by Belarusian state security forces in August 2020: 'There is no soap to wash away human blood'. So, no one should shed blood is our only principle. Coordination through people out of reach of the regime is badly needed in such actions.

Also, many issues in the workplace need to be highlighted, especially at this time of unprecedented worldwide sanctions against Russia and Belarus. People are being intimidated and lulled into believing that there will be enough hay in the stall for everyone. And it is all related to the war and repressions launched by the dictators. The fear of the managers of not satisfying the management above is astonishing. Unfortunately, because of the machine of repressions that has been set in motion, the unions in Belarus cannot directly point out the connection of workplace problems with the system that has been built and the politics of the dictator. Because of the lawlessness of the special services, this would clearly lead to arrest and a long jail term. This is why it is the responsibility of exiled labour

leaders and activists to highlight such issues. The field of activity is very wide - the terrible economic conditions at the enterprises, the investigation of corruption cases which it has now become fashionable to disguise as sanctions-circumvention schemes, the publicity of violations of labour and basic rights at work, methods of safe behaviour on the internet and so on.

The main thing is to carry this with the message that by holding hands we can overcome such problems of dictatorship, and moreover we can build a brighter future.

Another area of work is maintaining and creating new safe channels for communication of closed groups of activists from work collectives. There are no better moderators for state enterprise workers than exiled trade unionists who, in addition to working for the general public, can help keep closed communities safe online.

Many people can ask 'How can trade unionists from abroad ensure safe communication between the people remaining at home when criticism of the authorities is voiced in whispers between trusted people?' Actions coordinated through social networks and ordinary groups of sufficiently anonymous Telegram are partly learned lessons for the special services of the Belarusian dictator. These simple modes of communication make it possible to identify some users. By publicising these cases extensively, propaganda tries to convey that the authoritarian regime is watching everyone, although that is far from being the truth. Thanks to the work of talented Belarusian programmers we have possibilities to reduce identity revelation incidents to almost zero.

The moderation of such communities and ongoing training in safe group communication methods will scale up the number and quality of such groups. Yet we need moderators from trusted people who have fled the country. Administration of such communities through passing on knowledge of security protocols and monitoring the protocols' implementation can help organise discussion, decision-making and coordination among people inside the country.

I would like to point out that exiled activists need to remember not to call for immediate strikes. The time to accumulate resources and learn can take longer than we expect. It is hard not to be emotional when you can't get home, when Belarus has been dragged into a war against the Ukrainian people, when every day thousands of totally innocent people are in prison and repression continues in the most sophisticated forms. But it is very important for us to work without calling for immediate strikes. We know from all independent polls that there is a majority of those who want changes in Belarus, but it is important to come to the willingness of the majority to act.

The boiling point is close, because heavy economic consequences are on the way.

As a strategic plan for change in our country, I see a coordinated nationwide strike through the Rabochy Ruch platform, created through the united efforts of the workers' team from different state enterprises and Belarusian programmers. Before that we still have work to do. The mistakes of the dictators, leading to the impoverishment of the Belarusian and Russian peoples, bring us closer to changes by galloping steps.

The world has seen many times that a united force of workers is able to fundamentally change the situation and change the direction of policy. In today's context, I am convinced that it is information technology that will play an important role in organising this force, because it allows passionaries in exile to be useful to their sisters and brothers even from abroad.