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Chapter 15. Reasonable forms of international solidarity: experiences from Belarus

Based on events in 2020 and 2021 in Belarus.

In the middle of August, 2020, *Global Labour Column* wrote that ‘...Belarus will never return to what it was before. There is no way back. If Lukashenko is able to hold on to power, he will be compelled to turn to an even more repressive rule as millions of dissidents need to be forced into obedience’ (Buketov and Merliak, 2020). That was a week after the rigged presidential elections, which led to people’s uprising. In those days we saw hundreds of thousands of peaceful protesters in the streets of Belarusian cities; workers of huge state owned enterprises forming strike committees; and a so-long awaited popular solidarity promising to wash the 26 year old dictatorship away.

Before elections, Belarus was a dictatorship that dared to leave some forms of dissent, like some independent media, some NGOs, some political parties, and some independent trade unions. Overall oppression of civil society seemed to prevent large protests for years. With the events that followed the elections back in August 2020 there appeared two new variables that have changed the scene dramatically. The first one was the insane violence that the state was using against peaceful protesters; and the second, the mass participation in peaceful protests that had been never seen before. The reasonable peaceful response to the state violence during the first days of protests was an urge for a general political strike coming from the united workers of the country’s largest enterprises.

The state had to cease violence, confronted with the threat of a general strike. However, the looming threat became a bluff quite soon for several reasons, such as the return of the majority of workers back to work as their main goal - to stop violence - was reached; the strike committees of separate factories failed to unite quickly into a general strike committee to coordinate activities together; the employers had time to overplay the workers by playing the card of legal and illegal strike issues; but mainly the lack of experience in collective actions and traditionally high threshold of distrust to others – all this indicated to the authorities that the general strike was not going to happen. When the participation in street protests started

to decrease, the repression mechanism of the state's vertical power structure continued to function again.

With the return to repression, the authorities tried to take control over the intensity of the workers' protests. The centres of the workers' protests, such as state owned companies Belaruskali, Grodno Azot, Naftan, BMZ and a couple of automotive plants in Minsk and its region, were hit hardest.

With the first detentions of unionists in August, 2020 it was crucial to have an extraordinary powerful tool for their release. The BITU chairperson from 2011 to 2019, Mikalaj Zimin had been arrested after the polling stations closed in Soligorsk on 8 August, right in the street. Compared to others arrested, his sentence was the longest, and the conditions of detention the worst. In addition Mikalaj had a poor health condition. There was no access to information concerning him as the whole law enforcement system didn't work to rule.

Extraordinary tools to respond to arrests

The union got news from Zimin after one of his co-prisoners went free. The urgent extraordinary tool used to liberate the union leader was the intervention by the ILO General Director. It was used once again on 17 September 2021 when the chairperson of BITU Maksim Pazniakou (BITU 2021) was arrested, allegedly for reposting a song from a news channel deemed extremist by the regime. Then, the two global union federations that the union is affiliated to, namely the International Union of Foodworkers and the IndustriALL Global Union, addressed the General Director of the International Labour Organization, Guy Ryder, for urgent intervention. Fortunately, it worked again, and the union leader was released.

The other case worth mentioning is my arrest and release (IndustriALL 2021), that happened on 30 August in Grodno where I was arrested after participation in a peaceful rally. The union was immediately informed by my family, and in a very short time while I was in the police station being interrogated, a spontaneous international solidarity campaign started: international unionists called the police department and asked about my health and reasons of detention. About 200 international calls from Switzerland, Russia, Germany, UK, Japan, Netherlands, and Ghana definitely changed the attitude of the police officers towards the International Secretary of the union, and I was released.

LabourStart online solidarity campaigns

It has been a long time since the most common reaction of global unions to the bold violation of rights was a general secretary's letter sent to a company headquarters or to a minister of a country, most possibly by fax or even more traditionally, by mail. Such a single letter would have most probably appeared in a trash bin of the addressee and disseminated no information to wider (international) public.

Luckily, the progressive union movement uses the development of technologies and we have comrades who pioneered advancing the workers' rights by creating LabourStart, an online news service maintained by a global network of volunteers which aims to serve the international trade union movement by collecting and disseminating information - and by assisting unions in campaigning in other ways. Its ActNOW campaigning system was used to launch several international solidarity campaigns in support of Belarusian union and labour movement leaders and activists.

Right at the beginning of peaceful protests that involved workers and union members who were confronted by violence in August, 2020, there was a general solidarity online campaign (Belarus: Stop the violence) launched in partnership with the International Trade Union Confederation, the European Trade Union Confederation, IndustriALL Global Union, and the International Union of Food-workers at LabourStart to send a clear signal to the authorities that the global labour movement would not tolerate repressions going on in Belarus. The campaign was widespread; the news appeared in social media in many languages. It sufficiently assisted the union at critical times to keep the news updated when the internet was blocked, mass arrests were happening, and the union human resources worked to the limit.

LabourStart had launched two more campaigns for the release of Belarusian union activists and leaders that year. In September and October of 2020, activists of independent unions who were at the same time part of the strike committee at Belaruskali were most often arrested, prosecuted and jailed. When solely local forms of solidarity started to be less effective or even became a direct cause for yet another arrest of another union activist, the BITU asked IndustriALL Global Union to launch an international online campaign. Thus, LabourStart launched an online solidarity campaign (Belarus: Free union leaders and activists) for imprisoned BITU vice-chairperson Siarhei Charkasau, union activists Pavel Puchenia and Yury Korzun and a co-chairperson of the strike committee of Belaruskali, Anatol Bokun. In one week this campaign was supported by more than 6300 unionists from all over the world. Campaigns of protest were generated and sent to

Soligorsk police and executives. It reached its goal: the four comrades were released and their terms in prison were not prolonged as had happened before.

The events in Belarus proved LabourStart union platform to be very effective in urgent interventions. Thus on 13 November 2020, the LabourStart executive board immediately launched a solidarity campaign in partnership with the BITU and International Trade Union Confederation, Belarus: Free dozens of jailed union activists. That day an excursion bus with 42 activists from Soligorsk, members of BITU and civil activists among them, went to visit historical places of Belarusian protests. Many activists who were previously arrested and sentenced to jail, were there. This time they had been arrested by the police for hanging the banned white-red-white historical flag at some point of their excursion and were taken to the local police station till court hearing.

Challenges of online campaigns

The challenge we faced during this campaign was that messages could not be delivered to the recipient. We overcame that challenge by printing out the entire list with over 7400 signatures and handing it in person to the recipient. The adaptation of official/corporate mailing systems of the whole authoritarian power vertical machine to bounce our emails was a minor challenge compared to the big one: although campaigns were fast and gaining many supporters, the leverage on the authorities was comparably weaker than we could expect. Online campaigns didn't bring immediate release of our comrades. However, in case of subsequent sentencing of activists we believe it was the campaign that restrained the authorities from extending the period of detention.

Another technical challenge that suddenly revived the 'urging letter' response of global union federations on violations of workers' rights is the two-step verification used for addressing officials (ministers, local authorities, president administration) from their websites. It is definitely worth doing to address the authorities, and to use this occasion for public statements. Same is true for state owned companies. One might think that the effect is close to zero, but we believe there is always a reaction: the state appointed CEOs report to their chief – the state.

One should keep in mind that the solidarity tools described here are not used alone, but are often part of a greater campaign involving coverage on social media and intensive interaction on union communication channels.

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The prison in the city where the author lives, surrounded by thousands of peaceful protesters on 16 August, 2020. Photo by Katsiaryna Hardzeyeva

<https://doi.org/10.5771/9783957104090-97>, am 07.10.2024, 21:26:39

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