Belarus: Protest movement stagnates as Lukashenko consolidates control

Urte March Tue, 20/10/2020 - 11:16
Urte March

Anti-regime protests in Belarus are continuing for a tenth week; meanwhile, embattled president Alexander Lukashenko was formally inaugurated in late September. While tens of thousands continue to march in Minsk in the face of heavy police repression, reports of strike actions and protests in other parts of the country have dried up, and it is clear the president has weathered the immediate threat to his rule.

In early October, Lukashenko announced that police will be allowed to use lethal force against protesters, indicating he now feels secure enough to orchestrate a decisive confrontation with the pro-democracy movement on his terms.

Opposition figures in exile clearly also realise the final showdown is imminent. Erstwhile presidential candidate Svetlana Tikhanovskaya has set a ?deadline? of 25 October for Lukashenko to resign, calling for a nationwide general strike if he refuses. She is correct in the calculation that only mass economic disruption within the country could force the state apparatus to abandon Lukashenko, but the opposition has established neither the political influence nor the organisation necessary to transform the spontaneous protest strikes against police repression into a political general strike for the regime?s overthrow.

Absence of leadership

The pro-democracy movement in Belarus focused the world?s attention on a hitherto forgotten corner of the former USSR after a rigged election on 9 August inspired a wave of protests and strikes across the country. In the first few weeks, protesters faced mass arrests; many were beaten and tortured in prison. When thousands of workers in major state-owned enterprises walked out on strike, Lukashenko?s regime was thrown into crisis. Many of those detained were released, and protests were allowed to go ahead with little police intervention. Tikhanovskaya renewed her claim to the presidency, winning international support and recognition in the West.

How this interregnum would be resolved always depended on whether the movement could develop structures of leadership and coordination which could draw new layers of workers into industrial action, press its demands on the regime, and sustain itself for long enough to make Lukashenko?s position untenable. Of course, even if Lukashenko could be overthrown, there would be the crucial question - what next? Would the movement surrender leadership to the liberal opposition and accept a programme of integration within the EU, or could it seize control of the revolution itself with an independent working class strategy?

After the first wave of walk-outs, there were some encouraging signs of dynamic organisation. Workers at the larger state-owned factories like MTZ and Belaruskali established workplace strike committees, and leftist groups issued calls for a national strike coordination committee. Yet, in many workplaces, the strikes
never really went beyond limited protest actions. Independent unions are said to exist in many industries but reliable information about their composition is limited. It seems that in many places these were only small groups of activists organised outside the workplace with limited authentic influence.

Perhaps some handicapped themselves with partial demands: a representative from the independent union of miners and chemical workers told an international meeting organised by Another Europe is Possible in late August that their goal was simply to cripple the regime financially and force them to negotiate with the opposition, which didn’t require generalising the strike but could be done through targeted, limited actions.

Despite various call-outs, national strike coordination never took off in practice. State security began pursuing arrests and disappearances of strike leaders in earnest, neutralising the real threat while avoiding the public spectacle of crackdowns on protesters, which risked further exacerbating discontent and splitting the loyalties of the army and police force. Such targeted repression crippled nascent strike organisations and set a frightening example for others. The lack of coordination across workplaces and regions, combined with persecution of strike leaders, meant that the strike movement petered out. Confident of police loyalty, the regime was then able to return to dispersing protests with water cannons and stun grenades, alongside mass arrests and expulsions of journalists attempting to cover events.

Nevertheless, on October 10, after being secretly inaugurated as President, Lukashenko appeared at the KGB prison in Minsk and conducted discussions on constitutional reform with opposition leaders held there. Both opposition news outlets and the state TV reported the exchanges as involving emotional but constructive arguments. Two oppositionists were then released, though put under house arrest. However, the very next day, 400 demonstrators and 40 journalists were arrested and subjected to severe beatings.

Whether all this will lead to any serious opening or is just a ploy to trap and discredit the opposition is hard to say. It is highly unlikely Lukashenko will offer to go and it is hard to imagine the opposition could accept any reform short of this. The factors that could alter the balance of forces would be any break in the loyalty of the security forces, of which there is no sign yet, or if Putin were to encourage a reliably Kremlin-loyal replacement from within the state apparatus.

Class dynamics and foreign influences

Why was the rank-and-file workers’ revolt unable to consolidate itself, overcome the state’s repression and carry through the revolution? Ever since independence from the USSR, the state has suppressed all independent political organisation in Belarus, so the political infrastructure that would be necessary to sustain and coordinate the revolt was non-existent. Unlike cases like Egypt or Ukraine, where religion or competing nationalisms provided easy social schisms to exploit, there were no nationally organised shadow parties waiting in the wings which could fill the political vacuum or act as a conduit for foreign money and ambitions.

To attract substantial sections of the working class into new, democratic forms of political organisation would have required an independent political programme. The long-standing compact between labour and the state bureaucracy in Belarus, which has provided a paternalistic guarantee of low inequality and a certain universal standard of living, has meant a reluctance among Belarusian workers to embrace liberal capitalism as an alternative. Having witnessed the effects of shock therapy on neighbouring Eastern European countries in the 90s, many workers surely calculated that the status quo was the safer option, if that was the only alternative on offer. This would explain the waning enthusiasm amongst the workers.

The peculiar structure of Belarus’s economy, which is still largely based on state ownership and heavy
industry, meant that the liberal opposition lacked its own social base to sustain a political movement without the support of the masses. As a class, the bourgeoisie is weak and has not developed its own political organisations or come to a clear consensus about its own political interests.

Nevertheless, the longevity of the protests in Minsk show that there is a growing and increasingly self-confident middle class, many of whom have access to education abroad or work in the expanding private sector, who are no longer willing to accept the country’s Soviet-era social settlement.

The EU has been slow to pass a half-hearted set of sanctions against senior security officials, only adding Lukashenko himself to the list this week. It has clearly calculated that a more muscular intervention would be too great a risk without domestic organisations which could provide it with cover and legitimacy.

NATO countries in Eastern Europe, including Lithuania, Poland, and Romania, have been begging the EU to offer Lukashenko a carrot as well as a stick in the form of an economic assistance package conditional on new elections. Any deal brokered by the EU, however, would surely involve Lukashenko’s eventual departure, the breakup of the state bureaucracy and the ascendance of a new oligarchy - a fate Lukashenko can hardly be incentivised to choose.

Instead, he has been forced to upset his delicate balancing act between East and West, and reluctantly accept even deeper reliance on Russian capital in the form of a new $1.5 billion loan agreed with Putin. Although a large part of the loan will be used to service existing debts to Russia, it will give the regime a temporary reprieve from economic woes, and perhaps even allow him to buy off parts of the population by reversing some of the cuts and regressive labour laws of recent years, which form the backdrop to recent social unrest.

Reckoning postponed

The movement has clearly weakened Lukashenko and forced him into a position of increased dependence and subordination to Russia but, for now, the regime has staved off collapse and consolidated control with the help of the police and military. But as we have previously written, economic stagnation and social immiseration in Belarus are symptoms of the irresolvable contradictions of its economic model. The growing private sector and increased economic, cultural and social exchanges with Western Europe, especially among young people, will mean that awareness of these contradictions, and a willingness to entertain an alternative, will only continue to grow.

Fuller economic integration with Russia or with the EU are the only viable options in the longer term for Belarusian capitalism. Both will lead to privatisations and new attacks on living and working conditions, with renewed explosions of social unrest likely along the way. Leftists in Belarus must draw the lessons of recent months, above all the need for a party capable of leading the struggle for a socialist alternative when the next opportunity arises.

Such a party must bring together the leaders and activists who emerged in recent months on the basis of a programme for the overthrow of the regime and its replacement by workers' councils. In building this party they will have to draw on the long socialist tradition of strategies and tactics for underground organisation and the formation of independent rank-and-file networks within the workplaces and unions.

Internationally, socialists everywhere, but especially in Europe, must give every assistance possible to the movement in Belarus which is likely to face increased repression as the regime regains confidence with an increased awareness of its own precarious position.