



Spotlight interview with Alexander Yaroshuk (BCDTU-Belarus)

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Chernobyl: 20 years on

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"Propaganda is pushing people to work in the contaminated areas."

Brussels, 21 April 2006 (ICFTU OnLine): Alexander Yaroshuk, President of the Belarus Congress of Democratic Trade Unions, denounces the lack of international aid and points the finger at Alexander Lukashenko. Pushed by propaganda, migrants are flocking to the contaminated zones, alongside the young graduates forced to move there on compulsory postings. Shortly after the elections marked, by massive fraud and hundreds of arrests (1), Alexander Yaroshuk called on the European Union to assume its responsibilities by excluding Belarus from the GSP.

Twenty years after Chernobyl, is the disaster still an important issue in Belarus?

"First of all, it has to be understood that Belarus was the hardest hit by the catastrophe: 70 per cent of the radioelements fell on our territory, a fifth of which is affected by long-term contamination. Chernobyl continues to weigh heavily on the national budget. In spite of the shortfalls and the mistakes, I believe it could be said that the programmes set up for the Soviet, and Belarus people affected, after the fall of the Soviet Union, have had a genuinely favourable impact. As a specialist in agrarian matters, I can attest to the fact that opportune decisions were taken to secure the food chain: special fertilisers were used in large quantities, additives were introduced into the processing of foodstuffs, etc. The measures taken were highly competent from a scientific and organisational perspective. But the financial resources allocated have plummeted. The loss of resources was first caused by the disintegration of the Soviet Union, then by the coming to power of Lukashenko. The level of international aid is derisory. In my view, this is one of most reproachable aspects of his rule. He has done everything to decimate the support of the international community. »

What policy is he pursuing in relation to Chernobyl?

"His approach is to play down the consequences and even push people to go back to live and work in the contaminated zones. Propaganda is being used to encourage this. The perception of the dangers is falling. The social benefits too. Until 2002, the Belarus Federation of Agricultural Trade Unions was fighting to counter this trend. We were trying to help the men and women who were living and working in the contaminated areas and were

receiving wage supplements that were only enough to buy two loaves of bread. I was the president of the organisation. In 2002, the authorities took control of the unions, including mine. My authority was challenged and then I was pushed out of the union. For Lukashenko, workers' organisations must be subservient to the government. Indeed, the official unions are still operating in the same way as they did during the Soviet era".

The agricultural sector too? Is Lukashenko not encouraging the privatisation of State owned farms?

"This reform is nothing but a façade. In reality, the same ruinous planning policy as 20 or 30 years ago is still being applied. Huge financial resources are being allocated, 15 per cent of the national budget, which is more than in Ukraine or Russia, but they are used in a totally inappropriate manner. Real entrepreneurs cannot be found. The farmers are dictated to: they are told what they have to do, what to plant, etc. The Lukashenko style of reform also rests on a very original concept: the State forces private enterprises to buy sovkhozes and kolkhozes under threat of economic sanctions. And the "packages" sold are complete: they include the premises, the material, the cattle and the workers. One could speak of an agricultural sector based on serfdom. It is true that production is on the rise and the number of unprofitable State farms is falling, but the flipside of the coin is that the sector is no longer competitive. The prices are often higher than those of our neighbouring countries."

The projects to revitalise agriculture are heavy handed and increasingly focused on the contaminated zones. How did this situation arise?

"In Belarus, agriculture has highly ideological overtones, even more so now than during the Soviet era. Economic planning and the imperative to produce results push those responsible to all kinds of extremes. I know that sovkhoz and kolkhoz leaders don't think twice about planting and growing crops in forbidden areas in order to artificially increase their yield. They do so out of fear of the trouble they may face or to be congratulated. The archaic ritual we call "demjinki" is still very much alive here. Many people are prepared to go to all kinds of extremes to receive a medal, a bonus or a company car. We are in a situation where economic results cannot simply be satisfactory. They either have to be "good" or "very good". The same applies to the contaminated zones. If you repeat often enough that everything is ok, people end up believing it. Migrants are the victims of this propaganda. They are flocking to work in the contaminated regions, unaware of the risks they are running. The government will have to assume responsibility for the consequences of such a policy."

Young graduates are also being affected by the revitalisation of the affected zones.

"Yes, we must be the last country in Europe to be forcing young graduates to work somewhere for two years. It is like having to serve a sentence and is totally against human rights. But it is even more intolerable to use this measure to send young people to contaminated areas. A bill was even introduced in 2005 to increase this compulsory first job posting from two to five years. I think that if Belarus were a democratic country, with political debate, a developed civil society, we would find young Belarusians, with full knowledge of the facts, who would agree to dedicate some time to these regions. Out of compassion, citizenship... But because it is compulsory, it doesn't work. The young graduates do everything they can to avoid this measure. Understandably so. «

The propaganda tries to paint Belarus as a land of plenty, a great place to live and work. What is your view on this?

"As regards propaganda, the government has a monopoly on information. To give an example: the trade union review, Solidarnast, was one of the best independent publications in the country, but it ceased to appear at the beginning of 2006, because of the government's attacks on it. The official press has unlimited resources to present the country as a kind of reserve protected from all the ills crippling its neighbouring countries. In Belarussian reports, the problems of Ukraine or Poland are systematically exaggerated, the United States is portrayed as a nation governed by a monster where planes crash, and France as a rioting ground, reduced to flames by immigrants or young thugs. The official press never, of course, compares the level of salaries, not to mention the freedoms. The population is being subjected to a process of "zombification" like nowhere else in the world. Since living standards have not fallen over the last two years, Belarussians tend to believe what they are told. With the means we have, and in the current context, we can provide workers with the proof that their rights are not respected, but it is much more difficult to destroy the myth that we have a good social system.

As for the health of Belarus' economy, it's all relative. It is based on a system of subsidies, the unreserved support of Russia, and the favourable economic climate. We do not have oil, but we refine Russian oil. The rise in oil prices has placed us in a favourable position. The market price of potassium-based fertilisers has also risen sharply, and we have very large deposits. Furthermore, we are totally dependent on fuel imports, and the country currently pays five times less than Ukraine for its gas imports from Russia. But what will happen when Russia joins the WTO? «

In conclusion, what are the chances of European economic sanctions being placed on Belarus on account of the systematic violations of trade union rights?

"In 2004, the report of the ILO Commission of Enquiry confirmed the accusations made by the ICFTU. The government has not responded to the requests of the ILO. As a result, the threat of economic sanctions is real. The European Commission should decide on the possible sanctions in May. It is likely that the country will be excluded from the GSP (2). It is not the current political context, with elections marked by fraud and the arrest of hundreds of people, including numerous trade unionists, that is about to change the Commission's mind. As citizens of this country, we fear these sanctions, which will have a very serious impact on the population. At the same time, we would be disappointed if this very long process were to lead nowhere, as this would be interpreted as a sign of weakness by a regime that ignores the language of diplomacy and prefers the use of force. In this instance, it's up to the European Union to take drastic steps."

(1) See the ICFTU press release on these elections, entitled "Belarus: Arrests of Union Officials by Lukashenko"

(2) In 2005, the Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) awarded Belarus a cut of 10% in customs duties on textile, metal and wood products, which the country exports in large quantities, representing a saving of 282 million euros.

See Trade Union World Briefing, entitled "The Chernobyl catastrophe - 20 years on and still a killer"

See Spotlight interview with Vladimir Naoumov (Chernobyl Union – Russia), entitled "The mortality rate among the liquidators from Tula is 25%"

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