

INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION

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Spotlight interview with Alexander Yaroshuk (BKDP - Belarus)

"Without international solidarity, independent trade unions would be unheard of in Belarus"

Brussels, 06 June 2011 (ITUC OnLine): Although it has signed key ILO conventions (87 and 98) and in spite of ILO monitoring, Belarus continues to pursue its policy of constant workers' rights violation and persecution of independent trade unions. The press is gagged and in some instances severely repressed, as was seen in December 2010 during the presidential elections, when security forces seized computers and documents belonging to journalists supporting the opposition, some of whom were arrested and sentenced to jail in the months that followed (*). It is within this hostile environment that independent trade unions are relentlessly fighting to defend workers' rights. Interview with Alexander Yaroshuk, president of the Belarus Congress of Democratic Trade Unions (BKDP), who tells us how international exchanges with other trade union organisations give him the strength to keep up the fight.

What is the scale of trade union rights violations in Belarus?

It is not by chance that the situation regarding trade union rights violations in Belarus has featured constantly over the last ten years on the International Labour Organisation's agenda and has been denounced the world over. In December of last year many trade unionists and human rights activists were arrested and beaten, once again, for demonstrating in Minsk against the results of the presidential elections. Over 600 people were held on remand during the weeks following Lukashenko's re-election on 19 December, and 25 opposition activists have been sentenced to jail since the beginning of 2011. Belarus received the "honour" of been quoted in a special paragraph in the report by the ILO Committee on the Application of Standards during the last International Labour Conference. The ILO was even forced to take the urgent, extreme measure of setting up a Commission of Inquiry. There has been no letup in the confrontation between the unions and the authorities since then. The European Union, for its part, has withdrawn the trade preferences granted to Belarus under the Generalised System of Preferences (GSP+). Only Burma had until then seen the same fate.

Are workers able to mobilise in spite of the repression?

Workers still mobilise, in spite of the tensions. This demonstrates that worker mobilisations organised internally to defend their rights, when supported by international solidarity, do have a chance, however slim it may be in some cases, of succeeding.

Have you seen any progress since the trade preferences were suspended?

Today, it could be said that we are seeing a gradual change. My organisation, for example, is involved in social dialogue at national level, and we are now able to say that the government recognises us... even if it has been forced to do so.

How are relations with employers?

It is true that a general agreement has been signed between trade unions and the association of employers in Belarus, but we have no illusions regarding our situation. It should not be forgotten that the regime in place in our country is very harsh and is well known for its intolerance of organisations that may have opinions other than its own, especially trade union organisations. That's why we believe that our existence will always be under threat for as long as this regime is in place. Our situation can be likened to that of a ghetto. Things may be done from time to time to improve our conditions, but only on the inside of the ghetto. There is absolutely no room for development, we cannot set up new organisations. We have not, nevertheless, given up hope. We will never give up. Never! We take encouragement from the gains we have secured, however relative they may be. There is no doubt about that.

Do your members share your optimism?

That's the most complicated part. For us, it is vital that we do not lose our members. Yet everything is done to discourage them. Most employment contracts, nowadays, are fixed term. The first victims of this type of "servitude" are, of course, the members of independent trade unions. In this day and age, being a member of an independent union is an act of bravery, as the threat of dismissal is real. Thankfully, many people in the country are persevering! That's why I have no doubts about our ability to meet the future challenges awaiting our organisation and our members.

You took part, in December 2010, in the latest ITUC-PERC regional conference, held in Moscow, on trade union rights in the New Independent States (**). What conclusions did you draw from it?

We discussed the obstacles to union organising in the new independent states in the region. Trade union representation has undergone massive changes over recent years. We are now faced with huge challenges in terms of organising and collective bargaining. The holding of such a conference above all reminds us of the importance of international solidarity. If it were not for the support of trade unions from countries such as Russia, Poland, Netherlands, Ukraine, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, the United States and many others, I do not think we would be able to talk of an independent union in our country today. It is during events such as this conference that exchanges are possible. We receive advice, exchange experiences... How to respond to such and such a situation, how to survive in exceptional circumstances... Exchanges with other organisations give us greater strength in our fight, our struggle to defend the workers of Belarus.

Interview by Mathieu Debroux

(*) Following the presidential election in December 2010, which saw the re-election of Alexander Lukashenko, independent journalists were arrested by the authorities. After been held for questioning, searches were carried out in their homes and newsrooms, and their reporting equipment was confiscated. On 19 January, two more journalists were imprisoned. <http://cpj.org/2011/01/in-belarus-two-more-independent-journalists-jailed.php> The president of Belarus had promised to rein in those responsible for what he had called the "mass disturbances of the public order". He honoured his word, as seen on 16 May with the two-year suspended sentence meted out to journalist Irina Khalipa. Over 25 opposition activists have been sentenced since the beginning of the year.

(**) See the ITUC report on trade union rights in the New Independent States: <http://www.ituc-csi.org/ituc-perc-regional-conference.html?lang=fr>

Also see the chapter on Belarus in the ITUC Annual Survey of Violations of Trade Union Rights: After a brief period during which dialogue had been resumed between the authorities and the Belarus Congress of Democratic Trade Unions (BKDP), the situation has once again deteriorated. Members of the union have been confronted with harassment, bribery, arrests and summary dismissals. A number of new presidential decrees attacking trade union rights have also been adopted: <http://survey.ituc-csi.org>

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