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Belarus

The Belarusian Revolution: Lessons, Perspectives and Tactics of the Radical Left

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In 1991, after the collapse of the bureaucratic model of “socialism” in the Soviet Union and in the Warsaw Pact countries, Belarus became independent. A liberal-democratic regime briefly existed in the country from 1991 to 1994, but failed to eliminate certain elements of the Soviet heritage.

In 1994, the social class contradictions between the bureaucracy, the nascent bourgeoisie and the working class resulted in the arrival in power of the populist politician Alexander Lukashenko. The bureaucracy did not want to part with its privileges, the bourgeoisie was not strong enough at the time, and both the old and the new masters of life feared that the working class would be disappointed not only by Stalinism, but also by capitalism, and that it would demand the restoration of the social guarantees that had existed during the Soviet period.

Emergence of authoritarianism

These fears were well founded, as the workers had built their independent mass organizations and had considerable experience in the fight against the Soviet bureaucracy. As a result, the bureaucracy and the bourgeoisie were forced to make an agreement and call on the dictator to protect their money and power. The regime established in Belarus can be described as a “post-Soviet Bonapartism”, which attempts to manoeuvre between all social groups and to remain outside the framework of a defined ideology.

The first thing Lukashenko did was extend his presidential powers through what he called a referendum. As a result, the democratically elected unicameral parliament was destroyed, the judiciary and legislative powers were subordinated to the executive, the most massive trade union organizations were subjugated by repression and political opposition was ousted from the public space.

The bureaucracy retained its influence, the bourgeoisie was forced to tolerate its protector, and the working class was pacified thanks to generous Russian loans. To some extent, this has maintained some stability, and some Stalinist and post-Stalinist parties in Russia, Ukraine and even Europe have considered and continue to consider this regime as “socialist”.

The causes of the political revolution

In May 2020, a huge protest mobilization began in Belarus. The country, which seemed to be in perpetual political winter, was emerging from its latent political life. The majority of liberal analysts and “left-wing” reformers predicted that the elections would take place without significant demonstrations. However, from the time of the collection of signatures for the nomination of candidates, people began turning the pickets into protests; queues of several kilometres formed in Minsk and other cities to give signatures in favour of independent candidates. The specificity of these elections lay also in the fact that the “old” opposition was not ready to face them and that new faces appeared on the political scene, some of whom were previously close to the establishment (former banker Viktor Babariko and ex-diplomat Valery Tsepka). The regime, seeing that the masses were joining the protest, did not accept the most popular candidates and imprisoned some of them. Lukashenko’s patriarchal stupidity played a cruel trick on him. The Central Election Commission was ordered tacitly not to prevent the registration of presidential candidate Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, the wife of an opposition blogger himself imprisoned because of his intention to become a candidate.

Protest actions in Belarus have traditionally taken place on election day or over a few days afterwards. This time, almost any statement or action by Lukashenko against the opposition became a catalyst for street actions.

In August, at the end of election day, people took to the streets and demanded a fair count of the votes. The police used violence and torture, the first deaths took place. On August 15, as the working class joined the fight and a national strike was called, the regime was forced to release those detained during the protests.

All these events bear witness to the profound contradictions that have accumulated during the existence of the dictatorship in Belarus. But what caused the uprising of the masses?

Most Liberal analysts and reformers predicted that the election would go smoothly. When the political revolution moved from the state of being a spectre to become a reality, they cited the regime's position concerning Covid, the odious violations of electoral law and repression as causes of the uprising. The only problem is that repression and the increase in electoral falsifications are a consequence, not a cause. Of course, many Belarusians sided with the protesters when they saw the torture, the blood and the murders committed by the police. However, these factors were the last to transform quantitative changes into qualitative changes; the revolutionary explosion was prepared by the entire history of Belarus during Lukashenko's years of power.

The dictatorship claimed to be "socially oriented" and used the rhetoric of Soviet nostalgia, but it combined an authoritarian political regime with a neoliberal economic policy. Under Lukashenko's tenure, allowances for students, pensioners, liquidators of the Chernobyl accident and other socially vulnerable groups were destroyed. In addition, most workers have had their employment contracts converted to limited-time contracts, which prevent a worker from leaving his or her job without the employer's consent for the duration of the contract and allow the employer to get rid of the worker at any time. The progressive tax scale has also been abolished and, in 2017, the regime attempted to introduce a tax on the unemployed in order to force people to tolerate even the lowest paid jobs and appalling working conditions. In the meantime, democratic rights have been completely destroyed and independent trade unions have been ousted from workplaces. In place of independent workers' organizations, "unions" entirely controlled by the government were set up to monitor workers, reminiscent of the "Workers' Front" of Nazi Germany. All these factors have ended up causing what we call a political revolution.

Has the wave of protest subsided?

Unfortunately, the national strike announced for 18 August failed, and the rallies in Minsk and other cities, which brought together hundreds of thousands of people, had no visible result.

The left guardians of the regime and the "constructive critics" of the left claim that the national strike failed because the working class did not support the "bad" protest. But this approach is totally abusive. If we followed this logic, then at the very top of the revolutionary wave, whose potential was sufficient for the following several months, the workers realized in one day that the protest was not in their interest. The main reason for the defeat of the strikes was the absence of independent unions in workplaces for two and a half decades. In fact, over the years of the dictatorship, independent trade unions have become political clubs for veterans of the trade union movement and for activists. Thus, when the August uprising opened a window of opportunity, unions had to relearn the functions they were supposed to perform. It should be noted that for a long time workers were also deprived of political representation and the school of political struggle, because all the left-wing parties, from the oppositional communists to the social democrats, were ousted from the public space and worked in a mode of survival and maintenance of their own existence.

The tactics of the liberals, who did not let the people win when they were ready to do so, were not a negligible factor. Their first mistake was that at the height of the proletariat's protest, there was not a single worker on the coordinating council! Then, when it was too late, a union activist was included as a decoration. The second problem was that mediatized opposition leaders, even before election day, declared that there was a possibility of compromise with the dictator, giving Lukashenko the opportunity to participate in new democratic elections and maintaining the bureaucratic clique in power for a transitional period in the event of the fall of the regime. Now imagine a revolutionary worker who is willing to sacrifice his job, the safety of his family, his life and his health, who hears about a possible compromise with those who killed and maimed the protesters.

Due to the lack of a clear plan, the negligence of the strike committees and the monstrous repression, the actions mobilized fewer and fewer people. In November, there was the barbaric murder of Raman Bandarenko, one of the protesters, who had simply asked the police not to destroy the symbols of the protest in the courtyard of his building. But even this terrible incident did not change much as to the number and radicalism of the demonstrators, exhausted by prison, searches, arrests and torture for several months.

Today, street actions are very local and carried out by people in their own backyards, and are sometimes reduced to the distribution of protest symbols in dormitory neighbourhoods. Every day, there are searches and arrests of trade unionists, human rights activists, journalists, and even a simple passer-by can end up in jail for wearing the "wrong" colour or a photo taken from posters on social media.

However, this temporary defeat was not in vain. It gave people the experience of the struggle, without which victory would simply be impossible in the future. The general mood among opponents of the regime is one of waiting for a "hot spring". It is based on facts, since the structures created by the protesters during the months of struggle - the "neighbourhood committees", the strike teams in factories, the cells of independent trade unions in factories and universities - have been preserved. Even the head of the Belarusian KGB had to admit that the authorities were preparing to suppress the spring protests. The very fact of the escalation of repression shows that Lukashenko's throne is not as solid as it used to be.

The demands of the left-wing forces

Our left-wing Belarusian party "A Just World" assesses what is happening in the country as a democratic revolution, which is in line with the party's programme. The party also considers that it is necessary to supplement democratic demands with transitional social demands: the restoration of the progressive tax scale, the reduction of the working day to 7 hours without a reduction in wages, total freedom to create independent trade unions, the abolition of all anti-worker laws and the restoration of the social benefits and guarantees that have been destroyed by the regime. The party also believes that the democratic revolution in Belarus not only can, but must, be transformed into a social revolution.

Unfortunately, an important point is missing from our party's programme, namely the convening of a transitional body made up of representatives of the various working-class groups, because that is the demand that should open the road from the present democratic demands to socialist demands. However, I am convinced that it is only a matter of time and that the development of the political process will push the entire left-wing opposition to adopt this demand if the mobilization of the protesters reaches the previous level.

The Democratic Left Forum, held on 7 February 2021, was also positive. In this forum participated: the largest of the three social democratic parties (Gromada - Assembly), the Green Party, the "A Just World" party and the free trade union of metalworkers, whose leadership defends socialist positions. This is entirely consistent with the position of

building a united front of the left instead of a “united front of all democrats.” Following Trotsky, I want to reiterate that temporary alliances with bourgeois organizations can only be made for practical purposes, such as organizing demonstrations or generating protest agitation, but without common programmes and without refusing to criticize temporary allies.

After all, there is only one sure path for the radical left: to prepare for a new protest mobilization and to fight to preserve its parties, trade unions and the self-organizing bodies of popular power. The radical left must lead the democratic programme to a victorious end on its own. Those who rely on the dichotomy - Tihanovsky (or any other liberal who could take her place) or Lukashenko - take a fundamentally erroneous position and deny the political subjectivity of the working class and other oppressed groups. The answer can only be participation in the democratic movement - without becoming involved in a monolithic merger with the leadership of the liberal opposition - and the defence of the demands of the demonstrators which lead to the dismantling of the dictatorship and which at the same time go beyond bourgeois democracy.

Minsk, 9 March 2021

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