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By Alex Lantier
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Merkel, Macron call Putin as mass strikes escalate in Belarus

Strikes continue to spread across Belarus, after the disputed August 9 presidential elections and amid mounting anger at President Aleksandr Lukashenko's disastrous handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. This weekend, Belarus saw the largest demonstrations since the Stalinist bureaucracy restored capitalism and dissolved the Soviet Union in 1991. Around 200,000 people marched this weekend in the capital, Minsk, demanding Lukashenko's resignation and denouncing police violence and mass arrests targeting protesters.

The growing mobilization of the working class has alarmed the European bourgeoisie. German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron both called Russian President Vladimir Putin yesterday, before an extraordinary closed-door meeting of the European Council on Belarus today.

Several state-owned factories joined the strike action yesterday, including the Belaruskali potash factory in Soligorsk. The world's fifth-largest producer of the chemical, used to produce fertilizer, it earns a substantial portion of Belarus' export earnings. State broadcasters also joined the strike, as well as the Kupalausky Theater in Minsk. Actors at the theater resigned en masse after the director, Pavel Latushko, was fired for siding with protesters.

They were joining strikes, by Minsk transit workers and at auto and tractor factories as well as hospitals, that began on Monday amid calls for a nationwide general strike.

Workers are holding public strike meetings in workplaces including Belaruskali and the MSKT tractor plant in Minsk.



Belarusians gather for a protest rally in front of the government building at Independent Square in Minsk, Belarus, Tuesday, Aug. 18, 2020. (AP Photo/Dmitri Lovetsky)

Union bureaucrats in Belarus are warning the state that they may lose control of the movement, and demanding Lukashenko's removal to halt the protests. "The authorities should understand that they are losing control. Only Lukashenko's resignation and punishment of those in charge of rigging and beatings [of protesters] can calm us down," miners union official Yuri Zakharov told AP yesterday.

Merkel and Macron both called Putin to discuss the political situation in Belarus, a country of just under 10 million people bordering Russia. They transmitted terse reports to the media, indicating deep concern over the situation and calling for power in Belarus to be shared, or transferred to NATO-backed opposition candidate Svetlana Tikhonovskaya.

"The chancellor has emphasized that the Belarusian government must refrain from using violence against peaceful demonstrators, release political prisoners immediately and initiate a national dialogue with the opposition and society in order to overcome the crisis," said Merkel's spokesman, Steffen Seibert.

The Élysée presidential palace said Macron told Putin to "favor calm and dialogue" to resolve the crisis. Macron added that the European Union (EU) intends to play a "constructive role ... so that violence against the population ceases immediately, and so a political solution can rapidly emerge, respecting aspirations that have been pacifically and massively expressed in recent days."

The Kremlin, for its part, reported that the call with Merkel was “an in-depth discussion to focus on the developments in Belarus.” It said, “The Russian side stressed that any attempts to interfere in the country’s domestic affairs from the outside, leading to a further escalation of the crisis, would be unacceptable.”

Yesterday, Maria Kolesnikova, a leading figure in the opposition since Tikhonovskaya herself fled to Lithuania after the elections, said a “coordination council” would be formed to negotiate the transfer of power from Lukashenko. She also stressed the opposition’s “desire and readiness to build mutually beneficial relations with all our partner countries, including of course Russia.”

The *Financial Times* of London wrote that calls from Berlin and Paris to Moscow constituted an “acknowledgment of Moscow’s over-sized influence on both Mr Lukashenko and the Belarusian economy.” It added that the EU powers want Putin to end the movement by brokering a deal between Lukashenko’s and Tikhonovskaya’s supporters: “The hope in European capitals is that Mr Putin will use that influence to engineer a peaceful resolution to the crisis.”

After the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* in America published editorials this week demanding Lukashenko’s ouster, the FT warned against overt attempts at regime change, citing Eugene Rumer of the Carnegie Endowment think-tank: “Any future leader of Belarus will have to maintain good relations with the Kremlin and pay a certain amount of deference to its sensitivities and sensibilities. To attempt a different course would be unrealistic, dangerous, and run counter to the attitudes of the Belarusian public. Friends of Belarus need to recognise that.”

Such claims to respect Russia and abhor police violence against protesters are shot through with imperialist hypocrisy. While Merkel’s government played the leading role together with Washington in orchestrating a fascist-led coup in 2014 to oust a Russian-backed government in Kiev, plunging Ukraine into civil war, Macron is infamous for his violent police repression of social protests at home. However, it is apparent that Merkel and Macron are reacting to what they perceive as a new and dangerous political development.

Le Monde warned, “The Belarusian movement does not resemble any of the color revolutions that have shaken the post-Soviet space. It does not defend a Western model or oppose Russia.” The daily added that “no one can foresee what the coming days will bring. But one truth is self-evident: this small country ... is undergoing accelerating

change that is without precedent since the fall of the USSR in 1991. We—the experts, diplomats, and journalists—did not see it coming.”

The EU powers are moving somewhat more cautiously because, surprised by the strike movement, they want the opposition and the Putin regime to jointly strangle it. For now at least, they propose to deal with the threat from below before resuming the aggressive military build-up across Eastern Europe targeting Russia, begun with the Kiev coup.

Workers in Belarus need to organize a politically independent struggle against both Lukashenko and the opposition forces around Tikhonovskaya. Lukashenko, who has ruled Belarus since 1994, is a reactionary strongman presiding over the capitalist kleptocracy that emerged from the Stalinist bureaucracy’s restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union in 1991 and its resulting looting of state assets. But the opposition represents only another faction of the same kleptocracy, maneuvering between the NATO imperialist powers and the Putin regime.

Opposition leaders like Viktor Babariko, a former banker at the Belgazprombank owned by Russian state gas firm Gazprom, or Valery Tsepkalo, a businessman who worked closely with Lukashenko before fleeing to Russia this April, have no principled differences with the regime. The EU is willing to install them in power, because they would continue austerity and Lukashenko’s murderous “herd immunity” policy on COVID-19, which the EU also implements at home.

Nils Schmid of the German Social-Democratic Party (SPD) told *Deutschlandfunk* that his preferred model for regime change in Belarus is not the 2014 Kiev putsch, but the restoration of capitalism and the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

He said, “the broad popular movement in Belarus recalls more the change in Eastern Europe in 1989–1990. So I also think the model for organizing a political transition is more sitting around a round table than a movement that in one blow from the streets topples the regime. Lukashenko is still holding onto power, until now very few officials—mayors or security forces—have broken with him.”

To fight COVID-19, poverty wages and police-state violence, the principal allies of workers in Belarus are workers across Europe, Russia and internationally. As the EU hands out trillions of euros in bank and corporate bailouts for the super-rich, it is clear that the ruling class will neither provide the resources needed to treat the pandemic, nor halt the explosion of military-police violence across Europe. The workers must take control of

the urgently-needed resources, which are created by their own labor, as part of an international struggle to take power and build socialism.

Within Belarus and Russia, this means opposing the bankrupt political settlement that emerged from capitalist restoration in the Soviet Union, breaking with parties and unions affiliated to the regime or the imperialist-backed opposition, and a turn to the Trotskyist movement's struggle for Marxist internationalism against Stalinism's nationalist and counter-revolutionary role in the Soviet Union.

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