
Alaksandr Buchvostau

Trade Unions in Belarus

Trade unions formed part of the government system in the Soviet Union, but internal trade union democracy was limited. Trade unions' internal regulations declared democratic centralism to be the main governing principle, but in reality they were guided by the principle of centralism. The All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions (VCSPS) owned all trade union property, including in Belarus. The Belarusian Council of Trade Unions (Belsavpraf) was in fact a branch of the VCSPS. There were no branches of national unions in Belarus, but there were national committees of the Soviet Union's branch unions.

Grass-root unions had limited rights with budgets strictly controlled by superior organizations. The trade union environment began to change after the start of social democratization in the mid 1980s. Some union leaders sought to establish trade unions independent of the government and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The movement for trade union independence gained strength in 1989 and 1990. Delegates

at the last 19th congress of Soviet trade unions voted to reorganize the VCSPS and establish the General Confederation of Trade Unions (VKP), a union independent of the government. That was the end of the Soviet period in the history of trade unions. The VCSPS and Belsavpraf faced perestroika and reform.

My trade union career began in 1984 with election as chairman of the trade union committee of Homsielmash, a state-owned agricultural equipment manufacturing company. The Homsielmash trade union committee was one of the first grass-root unions to embark on a reform path.

Homsielmash workers staged more than 40 strikes between 1985 and 1990 to demand wage increases and better conditions for work. 1990 saw the establishment of Belarusian branch trade unions. On 7 September 1990, delegates at a conference founded the Belarusian Automobile and Agricultural Equipment Manufacturing Trade Union (ASM). The delegates elected the ASM chairman and declared the establishment of

the new union. The conference was suspended and resumed on 30 November 1990 as the first ASM congress. The Belarusian Union of Electronic Industry Workers (REP) was founded in October 1990. The Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus (FTUB) was established on October 5, 1990. It represented 27 branch unions launched in 1990 and 1991. Some workers formed alternative unions. The Labour Confederation of Belarus emerged around the same time with M. Sobaleu at the head.

This was the beginning of a new phase in the trade union movement triggered by political, economic and social reforms.

Unions assumed their original functions and freed themselves from government control. The Belarusian Association of Independent Industrial Trade Unions (BNAPP) adopted a plan of trade union movement development under conditions of social and political reform. Other unions later adopted similar plans.

The ASM, REP and regional branches of industrial trade unions established the BNAPP in 1992 as an alternative to the FTUB, criticized for conservatism and compromises to the authorities.

Workers in Minsk went on strike in early April 1991, later supported by

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leader of Independent Metal Workers Trade Union

strike committees across the country. The strikers demanded the elimination of Communist Party committees from enterprises, and independence of Belarus from the Soviet Union. The strike committees were led by activists of the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) and the Labour Confederation of Belarus. The strike committees and the Labour Confederation of Belarus established alternative trade unions — the Free Trade Union, the Independent Union of Miners, the Free Trade Union of Metal and Transport Workers. These unions formed the Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions (BKDP), an alternative trade union centre.

In the early 1990s, many unions distanced themselves from politics in order to be beyond control of the Communist Party.

Trade unions are a form of organization of hired workers for class struggle, therefore they perform both social and political functions. However, they use methods that differ from those employed by political parties. They have different manifestos and goals. Political parties struggle for power, while trade unions seek better conditions and living standards for their members, the hired workers.

The Free Trade Union of Belarus, the Independent Union of Miners, the Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions and other unions sought to compete with the FTUB. They pursued more radical and aggressive policies, which made them more attractive. Their membership was on the rise. Political democracy created a good opportunity for trade union reform. Unions competed with each other for members, trying to offer workers better services.

To press for reform of the FTUB and compete with other unions, industrial unions set up the Belarusian Association of Independent Industrial Trade Unions, but it was closed down in 1999 as a result of a conspiracy between the FTUB and the Ministry of Justice. Regretfully, it was not the only mistake made by the FTUB leadership in the last ten years.



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A picket against contract system imposed by the government.

Inconsistent policies, unreasonable hope for an agreement with the government and the employers, failure to develop a new ideology of struggle, and the use of all means to suppress alternative unions prevented the FTUB from establishing itself as a reputable organization of workers.

Despite policy flaws, Belarusian unions forced the authorities to enact the Trade Union Act in 1993 as well as laws governing labour relations, collective bargaining and labour disputes.

The BNAPP staged rallies, demonstrations and strikes to defend workers' rights. It held at least 50 mass protests between 1992 and 1999.

Alaksandr Łukašenka was elected president of Belarus in 1994. He established an authoritarian regime that sought to restrict the rights of trade unions. Łukašenka used police and military forces to disperse peaceful demonstrations by workers. In 1995, special police units broke up a strike by the Minsk Metro workers who were protesting the administration's failure to respect the collective bargaining agreement. Strike leaders were arrested and sentenced to jail. Łukašenka and his regime launched an attack against trade unions. In early 1995, he made an unsuccessful attempt

to bring the FTUB under the government's control. The government adopted laws banning strikes, rallies and demonstrations. Authorities allowed demonstrations only on city outskirts so that organizers could not attract large numbers of participants. The Łukašenka regime's first target was free trade unions affiliated with the BKDP. Leaders of these unions failed to put up strong resistance, and all unions, except for the Independent Union of Miners (NPG), saw their membership fall dramatically as a result of victimization. NPG teamed up with grass-root unions of chemical industry enterprises to form the Belarusian Independent Trade Union. The authorities intervened in union conferences in an attempt to oust critical trade union leaders Hančaryk, Buchvostau, Fiadynič and Jarašuk. But most members rallied round their leaders.

The ASM, REP, BKDP and the Belarusian Trade Union of Agro-Industrial Complex Workers (APK) appealed for support to the International Labour Organization (ILO). The ILO expressed concern about union rights violations and urged the Belarusian authorities to comply with international standards. Belarusian unions were granted membership in key internation-

al organizations of trade unions. The ASM and REP joined the International Metalworkers' Federation (IMF), one of the oldest trade union associations founded by Socialists at a congress in Zurich in 1893. Alaksandr Buchvostau held a seat on the IMF Executive Board from 2002 to 2005. Alaksandr Jarašuk, chairman of the APK, was elected to the Executive Board of the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Association (IUF). When elected chairman of the BKDP, Jarašuk joined the Executive Board of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU). The BKDP was admitted to the ICFTU in 2002.

The authorities' attacks on trade unions prompted the latter to back FTUB leader Uladzimir Hančaryk's presidential campaign against incumbent President Łukašenka in 2001. Hančaryk ran as candidate from the pro-democratic opposition but lost the race, marred by allegations of large-scale fraud.

Łukašenka dealt another heavy blow to trade unions when he ordered his government to ban the deduction of trade union dues from workers' wages. The Council of Ministers passed a directive to that effect, entitled "On Measures to Protect the Rights of Trade Union Members", on December 14, 2001.

Miners staged a big rally in Salihorsk on 11 January 2002 to protest the move.

Meanwhile, a split widened within the FTUB between leaders loyal to the authorities and those who attempted to defend the federation's independence from the government. The financial position of the FTUB, from grass-root cells to the FTUB Council, deteriorated dramatically after the adoption of the above-mentioned directive amid the rising tensions with the authorities. Many grass-root cells at agricultural and industrial enterprises stopped functioning due to the lack of funds, since it was difficult for trade union activists to collect dues in cash from every member. Industrial unions, unions operating in education



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Alaksandr Jarašuk, chairman of the Belarusian Confederation of the Democratic Trade Unions, member of the Executive Board of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU).

and other sectors introduced a new mechanism where workers transferred dues through banks by issuing payment orders. Hančaryk stepped down as leader of the FTUB at the time. Members of the FTUB Council elected Franc Vitko, former first deputy chairman, as chairman of the FTUB. But the authorities sought to crush all elements of dissent within the FTUB. The government broke off relations with the FTUB and encouraged managers at state-run enterprises to set up parallel loyal trade union cells, also known as yellow trade unions. In 2002, yellow unions cropped up at several large enterprises including the Minsk Automobile Factory (MAZ), the Mahilou Automobile Factory (MoAZ), the Integral electronic company and the Belarusian Steel Works (BMZ).

The Presidential Administration increased pressure on FTUB Chairman

Vitko with the help of pro-government trade union activists, taking advantage of union bureaucrats' general discontent with the state of affairs. After some hesitation, Vitko tendered his resignation. Presidential Administration officials succeeded in their effort to install a pro-Łukašenka leader in the FTUB.

The takeover of the FTUB and the dismissal of the critical leaders of branch unions was the final phase in the government's effort to subdue the federation. In early September, a few days before the FTUB conference, Leanid Kozik, the new FTUB leader installed by the Presidential Administration, called an APK executive board meeting whose participants dismissed APK Chairman Jarašuk. The meeting was conducted with gross violations of the APK rules of procedure. A few months later Jarašuk took over the Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions. He managed to make the BKDP more efficient and gave an impetus to the independent trade union movement in general.

In December 2002, Kozik and the Ministry of Industry, acting on orders from the Presidential Administration, orchestrated executive board meetings of the ASM and REP in an effort to replace the unions' leaders Buchvostau and Fiadynič. However, the executive board members voted down the proposals to dismiss the leaders of the ASM and REP.

Łukašenka severely criticized officials for the unsuccessful attempt. Speaking at a government conference on 27 March 2003, he gave the industry minister two months to replace Buchvostau and Fiadynič with more loyal leaders.

The industry ministry elaborated a new strategy and tactics to purge the two unions of the independent leaders and their supporters. It instructed the management of enterprises to pressure ASM and REP grass-root cells into joining a newly established government-controlled industrial union.

As a result of the manipulations, a group of the grass-root union lead-

ers from large enterprises (the Minsk Tractor Works, Homsielmash, MZKT, the Motavela bicycle and motorcycle factory and others) loyal to the FTUB leadership was formed in the ASM Council Presidium in September-October 2004. The group, guided by the FTUB which sought to carry out Łukašenka's order, managed to dismiss the ASM leader.

The authorities failed in their attempt to use the same tactics to oust the REP leader because each grass-root union regardless of its size had one representative on the Presidium and the REP Council. Fiadyniĉ, supported by most members of the Presidium, managed to block all attempts to convene a special conference to replace him. Meanwhile, most REP grass-root organizations were transferred to the industrial union by the first quarter of 2004. But REP retained its legal status and office.

REP convened a special conference in February 2005 with former ASM leader Buchvostau and his supporters in attendance. The conference participants voted to form a new union called the Trade Union of Electronic and Automobile Industry Workers (REPAM) incorporating REP and ASM members who had formed an independent union by this time.

On 19 July 2004, REPAM held a conference whose delegates elected Buchvostau and Fiadyniĉ as co-chairpersons of the new union.

In March 2004, the Ministry of Information suspended the newspaper *Raboĉaja Salidarnaść*. In June 2004, the Ministry of Justice brought a clo-

sure suit against the Belarusian Party of Labour (BPL) led by Buchvostau. The Supreme Court outlawed the party in August 2004.

The Ministry of Justice issued Order N 239 on 16 July 2004 to annul its earlier decision made on 12 April 2004 to register a new version of the REP Charter providing for the formation of REPAM. The illegal decision in fact banned REPAM. REPAM appealed to the Supreme Court, but it upheld the ban.

By the end of 2004, most trade unions were under the government's control and turned into ideology squads of the Łukašenka regime. Most independent unions found themselves under conditions where they could not function properly. The Belarusian Independent Trade Union is the only union free of government control with a large membership (7,000 to 8,000 workers), and some of its grass-root organizations have an opportunity for collective bargaining and can sign wage and collective bargaining agreements. Other unions do not have such an opportunity.

Łukašenka launched a large-scale campaign against independent unions, but this failed to eliminate the unions completely.

REPAM and BKDP continue to function, relying on devoted activists and international support. The unions have shifted their focus to human rights defence, and also efforts to expand their influence and form groups of support for the independent trade union movement.