

Belarus: Stop the silencing of trade union activists.

The Belarusian authorities are trying to silence trade union activists through a deliberate campaign of obstruction, harassment and intimidation.

Trades Union activists are caught up in the Belarusian authorities' systematic campaign of obstruction, harassment and intimidation against anyone who dares speak out.

On 30 October 2003 the chair of the Belarusian Automobile and Agricultural Machinery Workers' Union, Alyaksandr Bukhvostov, was detained by police in central Minsk for staging a peaceful protest action against the government's alleged interference in the trade union's internal affairs.

Surrounded by supporters, journalists and members of the security services, Alyaksandr Bukhvostov unfurled a placard which read: "We protest against violations of workers' rights!" before being detained with another trade unionist. Later that day, in a closed hearing, he was convicted of staging an unsanctioned demonstration, and sentenced to 10 days' imprisonment. Amnesty International considered him a prisoner of conscience.

Trade Union activists, like everyone else, must be free to promote and defend human rights.

TAKE ACTION

Show your solidarity by writing to President Lukashenka, urging him to ensure that trade union activists can exercise their rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association. Send a letter, e-mail or fax, using the sample letter below

Photo caption:

The arrest of Alyaksandr Bukhvostov in Minsk, 30 October 2003. © private

Sample letter:

Dear Alyaksandr Lukashenka,

I am deeply concerned by, and urge you to stop, the deliberate pattern of obstruction, harassment and intimidation of trade union activists, including by imprisonment of activists; the threat of liquidation of independent trade unions and anti-trade union discrimination. Please ensure that Alyaksandr Bukhvostov and other trade union activists will not be imprisoned or harassed by the police simply for their political beliefs and for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of assembly.

I urge you to take immediate steps to review laws, regulations and administrative practices relating to the registration and activities of independent trade unions in order that their establishment and free operation may be facilitated in accordance with ILO obligations under ILO Conventions Nos.87 and 98 to which it is a party. I also urge you to comply with the ILO Commission of Inquiry and to implement ILO recommendations.

I call on you to ensure that the principles of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders (Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms),

adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 9 December 1998, are adhered to in your country.

Yours sincerely,

Target contact details

President of the Republic of Belarus
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or send a letter directly from his web-site:
www.president.gov.by/eng/president/mail.shtml

Background

Gap between human rights in theory and their implementation

Belarus is a country where the theory of human rights on the one hand, and everyday implementation on the other, diverge widely. Even though Belarus is a party to most of the international human rights treaties and a whole spectrum of human rights and fundamental freedoms is guaranteed in the country's constitution, an inordinate gap exists between these rights in theory and their implementation in practice.

Pressures on human rights defenders

Amnesty International has repeatedly expressed its concerns about pressures on human rights defenders, including trade union activists, in Belarus (See: *In the Spotlight of the State: Human Rights Defenders in Belarus* - AI Index: EUR 49/005/2001), in particular regarding obstacles and constraints on their rights to freedom of association and assembly; and constraints and violations of their rights to receive and impart information about human rights and harassment.

Violations of the rights to be free from torture, ill-treatment, arbitrary arrest and arbitrary detention create a climate which impedes the important work of human rights defenders in Belarus, and sometimes places them at personal risk.

Trade Union Rights

In its 2003 Annual Survey of Violations of Trade Union Rights the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) described the predicament of trade unions in Belarus in the following dramatic terms: "Democratic rights are not respected in Belarus, least of all trade union rights. The government has sought by every means to undermine, if not eliminate, the trade unions. Workers are actively discouraged from joining independent trade unions ... Those who do, face continual pressure at the workplace to leave the union or risk losing their jobs. Members of independent trade unions have been arrested for distributing trade union literature, have had materials confiscated and have been denied access to work sites ... Trade union leaders are particularly targets for harassment. Threats are taken very seriously in a country where political opponents to the regime have disappeared."

The imprisonment of Alyaksandr Yaroshuk

On 18 September 2003 Leninsky District Court in Minsk sentenced the President of the Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions, Alyaksandr Yaroshuk, to 10 days' imprisonment, provoking widespread protest in the international labour movement. The court found him guilty of contempt of court in violation of Article 166 (1) of the Belarusian Administrative Code. The alleged offence related to an article which Alyaksandr Yaroshuk had written in the independent newspaper, *Narodnaya Volya*, on 21 August 2003. Amnesty International considered him to be a prisoner of conscience.

Background photo captions:

Alyaksandr Yaroshuk, Minsk, January 2004. ©AI

Related documents

[Press release 30 March (AI Index: coming)

Belarus: Stifling the promotion of human rights (AI Index: EUR 49/004/2004)

Human Rights Defenders under Pressure in Belarus (AI Index: EUR 49/004/2003)

In the Spotlight of the State: Human Rights Defenders in Belarus (AI Index: EUR 49/005/2001)

Belarus: And then there were none (AI Index: EUR 49/006/2003)]

Related Links:

Spring-96: www.spring96.org

Charter'97: www.charter97.org

Belarusian Helsinki Committee: <http://bhc.unibel.by/>

International Confederation of Trade Unions: www.icftu.org