



NORDIC IN

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***By e-mail only***

## **SUPPORT FOR INDEPENDENT TRADE UNIONS IN BELARUS**

*Dear Colleagues,*

The situation is getting more and more difficult for the democratic forces in Belarus. In 2004, the ILO Commission of Inquiry called on the Belarus government to stop the harassment of trade unions and guarantee freedom of association and the right to organise. The ILO Committee on Freedom of Association has expressed its deep concern that, rather than making efforts in good faith to implement the recommendations of the Commission of Inquiry, the government was on a path to eliminate all remnants of an independent trade union in Belarus, apparently hoping that in this way there in effect would be no further sources of complaint.

Criticism from the ILO and the European Union's decision to withdraw GSP preferences from Belarus as of 21 June 2007 have not led to any positive changes in the regime's policies. On the contrary, President Alexander Lukashenka is reacting by preparing legislation that would in fact make it impossible for free and independent trade unions to act in the country.

President Lukashenka has shown that he deserves the hardly flattering reputation of being the last dictator in Europe. The economic and political prospects in Belarus are deeply worrying. There is a risk that the country will be hit by an economic crisis and even rawer dictatorship.

The uniting factor between the few free and independent trade union organisations, notably the metalworkers' union REPAM, the BKDP confederation and its chemical and mining union BNP is the opposition against Lukashenka. Cooperation between these organisations is however limited. The political opposition has joined its forces in an alliance with the shared objective of defeating Lukashenka in the next election. There is nevertheless no joint programme on how democracy should be developed in the country after an eventual election victory.

We have great respect for the engagement of those who represent the democratic forces and the work they are doing. We admire the courage that they show by continuing to fight for democracy and freedom, despite the risk of repression against themselves, their families and friends. We are, however, worried about the future. This is partly because of the limited dimension of the democratic forces, partly because these forces, trade union and political, are not cooperating and joining their efforts in an organised struggle against the regime. Such unification seems indispensable now and after an eventual change of regime.

With this background, we think it's extremely important that the international trade union movement, and not least the European, takes the responsibility of supporting the trade union and political forces that are working for a democratic change in Belarus.

Last October, Nordic metalworkers' unions wrote to the IMF and EMF, suggesting that they:

- Take a joint initiative to relaunch the IMF's Belarus campaign,
- Work on establishing effective cooperation between the free and independent trade union organisations in Belarus,
- Influence the ITUC, ETUC, Global Union Federations and European Industry Federations so that they together get engaged in the fight for a free and democratic Belarus,
- Urge the Socialist International and the Party of European Socialists to engage in the efforts to help the political opposition to formulate a programme for developing a democratic Belarus.

**As a result, the IMF and EMF in February sent the attached letter to their affiliates. Nordic IN would now like to call on the ICEM, EMCEF, ITGLWF and ETUF-TCL to look at ways of joining the IMF and EMF in their action, including the four steps mentioned in their letter.**

Nordic trade unions will continue their development project work in Belarus. The Nordic chemical workers' fund is looking at possibilities for supporting meaningful action in the country. Nordic metalworkers' unions have announced that they were also prepared to offer direct financial support to independent trade unions in Belarus. We call on other unions in Europe and in the world to participate in this contribution to the survival of these unions.

With fraternal regards

*Yours Sincerely,*

Nordic IN



Stefan Löfven  
President



Jyrki Raina  
General Secretary

Cc *Marcello Malentacchi, General Secretary, IMF*  
*Peter Scherrer, General Secretary, EMF*