

Belarus Workers Chant 'Leave' at Lukashenko as Anger Mounts Over Vote

By [Tatiana Kalinovskaya for AFP](#)

August 17, 2020



Hundreds of workers and protesters gathered outside the MZKT plant where Lukashenko was visiting, waving the red-and-white flag of the opposition and demanding his resignation. **Natalia Fedosenko / TASS**

Workers at a state-run factory confronted Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko with chants of "Leave!" on Monday as pressure built on the strongman to step down over a disputed election.

Employees at several factories and state television walked off the job after a historic protest on Sunday brought tens of thousands to the streets.

Embed:

In footage widely shared on social media, Lukashenko was confronted by workers at the

Minsk Wheel Tractor Plant (MZKT) who shouted him down with chants of "Leave!" as he tried to give a speech.

A visibly angry Lukashenko walked off the stage, saying: "Thank you, I have said everything. You can shout 'Leave'."

Pressure has been building on the ex-Soviet nation's longtime leader since the Aug. 9 election, which he claims to have won with 80% of the vote.

More than 100,000 people [took part](#) in a "March for Freedom" in the capital Minsk on Sunday following calls from main opposition figure Svetlana Tikhanovskaya for continued demonstrations.

A brutal police crackdown has drawn widespread condemnation and appears to have turned even Lukashenko's support base at state-owned industries against him.

European Union leaders are to hold an emergency video summit on Belarus on Wednesday, while Germany said it was prepared to back an expansion of previously announced sanctions.

'Fighting their own people'

Hundreds of workers and protesters gathered outside the MZKT plant where Lukashenko was visiting, waving the red-and-white flag of the opposition and demanding his resignation.

"We plan to participate in all peaceful strikes, in all peaceful protest actions... so that the government will finally realize they are fighting with their own people," Ilya Rybkin, a 30-year-old road worker, told AFP outside the plant.

Embed:

Look at this strike at BelAZ, one of the biggest plants in Belarus.

<https://t.co/bi1cnGFYdM>

— Shaun Walker (@shaunwalker7) [August 17, 2020](#)

After flying in by helicopter, Lukashenko told the workers he would not give in to calls for a new election.

"You will never expect me to do something under pressure," he was quoted as saying by his press service. "If anyone is unwilling to work and wants to leave, no one will harass you, do as you please, the door is open."

Lukashenko then [told](#) the MZKT workers that he was ready to transfer powers under a new constitution within one or two years.

"We can't give this constitution to God knows who, that would be a tragedy," he said, adding

that he has rejected two proposals on a new constitution and that work was underway on a third proposal.

In another video recording of the speech, he said: "Until you kill me, there will be no elections."

Demonstrators also gathered outside the Minsk headquarters of state television, where local media reported that 600 people joined the strike.

[Related article: Belarus State TV Workers Join Anti-Lukashenko Strike](#)

Maria Kolesnikova, a senior opposition leader, joined the protesters, saying: "I know how scared you are, because we are all scared. Thank you for overcoming your fear and joining the majority."

Workers of potash producer Belaruskali have also said they may go on strike, according to independent local news site tut.by.

Potash, used to make fertilizer, is a major source of income for Belarus, which is one of the largest producers in the world.

Tikhanovskaya 'ready' to lead

Lukashenko has defied calls to stand down after the election that saw him imprison his closest rivals, shun independent observers and unleash a brutal crackdown on peaceful protesters.

The opposition called for a general strike after hundreds of workers at state-run factories first downed tools last week.

In a video posted online Monday, Tikhanovskaya — who claims she won the election — said that although she never planned to enter politics she was prepared to temporarily take over the country's leadership.

"Fate decreed that I'd find myself on the frontline of a confrontation against arbitrary rule and injustice," Tikhanovskaya, said in exile in Lithuania.

"I am ready to take responsibility and act as a national leader during this period."

[Related article: Belarus Vote Challenger Tikhanovskaya Says Ready to Be 'National Leader'](#)

Tikhanovskaya has demanded the authorities release all detainees, remove security forces from the streets and open criminal cases against those who ordered the crackdown.

She has also said she will organize new elections if Lukashenko steps down.

Lukashenko has ruled Belarus for 26 years. Pressure is growing on him at home and abroad and EU leaders last week agreed to draw up a list of targets for a new round of sanctions.

UK 'watched with horror'

Britain said Monday it did not recognize the results of the "fraudulent" election and called for an independent investigation into the vote.

NATO member Lithuania warned that Belarus had started military drills on its western border and accused Lukashenko of escalating tensions.

The Kremlin, Lukashenko's closest ally, has said it is ready to step in if necessary.

More and more Belarusians have taken to the streets over the last week to denounce the election result and support Tikhanovskaya, a 37-year-old political novice who ran after other potential candidates including her husband were jailed.

The police crackdown saw more than 6,700 people arrested, hundreds wounded and left two people dead.

Original url:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/08/17/belarus-workers-chant-leave-at-lukashenko-as-anger-mounts-over-vote-a71177>