

## THE SOLIDARITY CENTER PODCAST

Now Imprisoned, Belarus Union Leader Spoke of Hopes for Democracy

Host: Shawna Bader-Blau, Solidarity Center Executive Director

Guest: Sergey Antusevich, vice president of the Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions

### **Shawna Bader-Blau:**

Hello sisters and brothers, and welcome to The Solidarity Center Podcast, an interview show that highlights and celebrates the individuals working for labor rights, the freedom to form unions, and democracy across the globe. I'm your host, Shawna Bader-Blau. I'm also the executive director of the Solidarity Center in Washington, D.C. We're the largest US-based international worker rights organization, we empower workers to raise their voice for dignity on the job, for justice in their communities, and for greater equality in the global economy, and for one just future.

On April 19th, 2022, at least 18 union leaders were arrested in Belarus where an autocracy has run the country since the fall of the Soviet Union. This is one of the most far reaching series of arrests of trade union leaders in the history of modern Europe.

Today the government of Belarus has aligned itself with President Putin's invasion of Ukraine. Despite the protest of many in Belarus, the workers movement in Belarus has spoken out clearly and decisively against the war on Ukraine, and against their government support for it, which is one big reason why they were arrested. Unions worldwide and global organizations like the United Nations International Labor Organization and Amnesty International are universally condemning those arrests and calling for the immediate release of these union leaders who are being held in pretrial detention, awaiting sentencing. They are being denied access to lawyers.

One of those arrested was Sergei Antusevich, the vice president of the Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions. We talked with Sergei on episode two of the Solidarity Center Podcast in March of 2021 and he spoke passionately about how Belarusian workers took to the streets to protest fraudulent elections in 2020 that meant the country's autocrat Alexander Lukashenko would continue in power.

The massive resistance movement that began in 2020 has been fueled by workers, with many women leading protests and gathering in public defiance of a regime that relentlessly seeks to crush those who stand up for democracy. We want to share this episode again in honor of the bravery of Sergei and the many workers across Belarus who literally risk their lives for democracy, freedom and social justice. And we want to bring to light once more, the stirring words of a union leader whose belief that all people should be treated decently with dignity and respect has meant constant dedication to improving their lives at work through unions, and their rights to freedom through democracy.

We opened with Sergei taking us back to that moment in August 2020 when the presidential election happened and the people rejected the outcome...

### **Shawna Bader-Blau:**

... take us to that moment in August of last year, when the presidential election happened and afterward people rejected the outcome. When is the first time you really realized that this was a different time in history than ever before?

### **Sergey Antusevich:**

After the use of excessive violence against peaceful protesters, many factories began to express a position, actively protest against violence and fraud. And started, for the first time and in modern Belarus, setting up strike committees. We have a ban for strikes, organizing strikes. The protesters had

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demands: resignation of Lukashenko and his clique, and [an end to] violence and repression, and holding fair elections. At the same time, as the goal of our organization, the KDP, the workers and employees began to quit the state trade unions. And try to create independent trade unions.

The protestors gave rise to numerous civil society initiatives and NGOs. New organizations from a period where they have never existed, particularly in healthcare institutions and educational establishments. We met many times. There's people, doctors, teachers, students. It's incredible. Really. I don't have this feeling before.

### **Shawna Bader-Blau:**

So across sectors, blue-collar workers in factories and in other blue-collar industries. White-collar workers, from teachers to people in hospitals and universities across the whole variety of types of employment. In Belarus, we have independent worker committees forming and people joining independent unions. It really feels like the workers movement is deeply at the heart of the democracy movement in Belarus. And I wonder if you could tell me why that is. Where does that come from, that spirit of organizing and worker collective power and engagement?

### **Sergey Antusevich:**

I'll try to explain our legislation system and repression regime: repression of all freedoms, freedom of assembly, freedom of association. And, Belarus is on the black list, the short list every year in the ILO international labor committee conference. I think this year, another trigger for changing the regime was the attitude of Lukashenko toward the COVID-19 problem. At first he denied the existence at all of the epidemic. Then he began inventing his own version of the pandemic and its treatment. And each time trying to conceal the real statistics and extent of the disease. This disdainful attitude toward the people also played a very important role in escalating the protesting. Of course, finally Lukashenko came to the election having imprisoned practically all his real opponents. Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, who went to the polls instead of her husband, Sergei Tikhanovsky, who was imprisoned by Lukashenko has personified the fight for fair election only. There was only one point in her program. It's the main problem of our life: Hold a fair election in the country after the victory within six months.

### **Shawna Bader-Blau:**

And she represents, as we understand it, a large number of women leaders in the country of Belarus across civil society and the emerging activist class. Can you tell us a little bit more about the role of young women and women leaders in this movement?

### **Sergey Antusevich:**

Women began the protest after brutal violence, after August 10 and 11, when a lot of people were beaten, a lot of people were detained. A lot of people jailed and opened criminal cases. And, the first rally, a women's rally in Minsk, was really, really, really so emotional. So hard. When women standing with flowers in a white clothes. I haven't enough words to describe my feelings. It's very, very, very strong and emotional. And after that started other rallies, I have a birthday on the 16 of August and it was the first 300 rally in Minsk. I have never seen a lot of people on my birthday.

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**Shawna Bader-Blau:**

Yeah. You're painting such a vivid picture of the rallies, women wearing white and holding flowers, public squares filling with more and more people and Brother Sergey, when you think about the future for your country, what does a free Belarus look like to you?

**Sergey Antusevich:**

For me, it's a free country. A pro-European country. It's so hard because for 26 years people couldn't participate in real social activities, in real civil society organizations, or our organizations of real unions [representing] only 10,000 people. It's little. Another pro-state federation has 4.5 million people. We need to build strong unions. Now I know that we need a lot of training and education. Collective bargaining, organizing, campaigning, occupational safety and health at work. Because millions of people affiliated to the state-controlled unions had no idea what the real union is, what real unions should be.

**Shawna Bader-Blau:**

You know, Brother Sergey, could we take a minute on that? Because I think not all of our listeners will understand the role of a state labor federation. It's not the role of a trade union, really. It plays a different kind of role in a repressive state. Can you just tell us a little bit about the state controlled federation? What was its job? What did it do?

**Sergey Antusevich:**

In 2002, when I was in Germany for the first time, I asked about the role of workers' organizations in the fascist time. And, the answer was, at the enterprise level, these organizations sometimes helped the people. And at the national level, it only voted for the state, for president. It's not a real union. I can't call this a social dialogue process, but sometimes we participated in this meeting, a real Soviet type system. When you can't criticize, authorities, maybe sometimes the government, but not the president.

**Shawna Bader-Blau:**

So a state labor federation has members that are workers, but they don't play the role in society, at the enterprise level with employers or with the state, of fighting or advocating for workers' rights. Contrast that to your independent trade union federation and your hopes for the future of the independent labor movement in Belarus. What do you hope become the gains of the new independent unions of Belarus?

**Sergey Antusevich:**

I saw that when we don't have social dialogue in the country for 26 years, as long as the regime has been established, social dialogue exists as a formality in order to disorient the world community. And formal government, formal trade unions and employers play a similar role in our country. And in our situation, all social partners will have to start the work on building up a social dialogue in the country, practically from zero. Well, I say it's a very important task.

**Shawna Bader-Blau:**

So social dialogue, where workers and their representatives, employers and their representatives and the government actually negotiate over labor market and wages and working conditions, minimum standards, and other things. Is this possible to achieve absent democracy?

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**Sergey Antusevich:**

I expect that without real social dialogue, we don't have any chance to build in democracy in our country. Only on international labor standards. We must build a new model of social dialogue. And we will have a new process of negotiation, real negotiation with employees, with employers in place with employers.

**Shawna Bader-Blau:**

So Brother Sergey, let's turn to what's happening right now in the [New York Times](#) opinion piece that you published—a very powerful piece you published in August of last year. You closed by saying change is happening in Belarus, and that Byelorussians are ready to confront the uncertainty going forward and that the uncertainty of the future. Talk to me about that uncertainty right now. Do you feel you've turned the page, and we're headed for a new Belarus? Does the movement feel the momentum is towards democracy and towards openness? How are you feeling? How is the movement feeling right now, months into the struggle?

**Sergey Antusevich:**

This article was with real emotions. In August, it was incredible seeing when we had a lot of meetings, a lot of marching and a lot of rallies, etc. But now, we live in new Belarus because people were changing, people's opinions. The majority of people voted for democracy, but we have a police state regime, and we have old legislation with a lot of obstacles. For example, when we establish a new trade union organization, we must have permission from the authorities. Yesterday, we received three cases when authorities forbade us to establish and legalize our organization.

**Shawna Bader-Blau:**

So the authorities are blocking your right to form international unions in court?

**Sergey Antusevich:**

Yes. Yes.

**Shawna Bader-Blau:**

Sergey why is the government so afraid of the trade union movement?

**Sergey Antusevich:**

Ha ha. Because they always say that workers voted for the president and voted for a strong state. Now this is not true.

**Shawna Bader-Blau:**

You were saying earlier, there's been a fundamental change in the people. What else has changed, do you think, permanently in Belarus?

**Sergey Antusevich:**

General changes in the heart, in the minds. Today, people know that pro democracy society is the majority. It's not 10 or 20 percent. It's a majority. It's up to 80, up to 90 percent of people. Maybe in the villages, in the small towns, where people don't have tablets, computers and see only state television, they recognize this political regime like a power, like a real power. And in Minsk, in big cities and towns, no.

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**Shawna Bader-Blau:**

And you know, thinking about your long leadership in civil society through years of repression and in this movement, and I know you must have drawn inspiration from somewhere. Where, where do you get your inspiration personally? Where do you get your drive to stay in this, this struggle and in this movement for workers and for a more free Belarus?

**Sergey Antusevich:**

My inspiration is the people, people standing and fighting after this August. I know that I have neighbors, I have workers at several enterprises, a lot of enterprises in Belarus, who want to live in a free and democratic Belarus, in a European country.

**Shawna Bader-Blau:**

I really want to thank you for sharing so much of this powerful story with us today.

**Sergey Antusevich:**

I thank you because it's very important for me to share this information. And sometimes I can't find the English words and the emotions for explaining.

**Shawna Bader-Blau:**

I felt every single one of your emotions Sergei. It's a powerful story of workers coming together. Brave and standing up for fairness and their country after years of repression. It's a powerful story. Your story, my brother Sergei, of a life dedicated to your people, your country, your labor movement and for a vision of the future that inspires, I'm sure, everyone who hears this story. Thank you so much. And thank you for sharing your experience with us.

**Sergey Antusevich:**

Thank you.

**Shawna Bader-Blau:**

The image of Belarusian workers taking to the streets in defiance of an authoritarian government is so powerful. Belarus workers have endured repression for decades, they have risked their lives to protest restrictions on their democratic freedoms, including the right to have strong independent unions. For more than 100 years, workers and their unions all over the world have been driving force for democratic change.

They have advanced a vision of democracy centered on political freedoms, economic rights and social justice. Right now, autocratic regimes are directly targeting workers and their unions at a larger scale around the world than we've seen in decades, more than I've ever seen in my life. Burma, Hong Kong, Belarus, Ethiopia, Bangladesh, Uganda, the list goes on. We know that democracy is under attack around the world and because labor rights are a foundation of true democracy, governments and employers are making it difficult, even impossible, for workers to join unions and make their voices heard and the people who stand up for democracy, who stand for worker rights, who stand against authoritarianism.

These are the voices that need to be heard right now. Sergei Antusevich, we hear you. The trade unionists arrested by the Belarus government are promoting a vision of democracy centered on political freedoms and justice, things that the reigning autocracy just will not abide. Our hearts are with you

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brother Sergei, and with all our sisters and brothers now imprisoned. We join the global community in demanding your immediate release.

Unions around the world are standing up for

Sergei Antusevich  
Alexander Yaroshuk  
Irina But-Gusaim  
Alexander Evdokimchik  
Vitaly Chichmarem  
Yana Malash  
Mikhail Gromov  
Vasily Beresnev  
Gennady Fedynich  
Dmitry Borodko  
Vatslav Oreshko  
Nikolai Sharakh  
Alexander Bukhvostov  
Olga Britikova.

You can support them and the campaign by going to [labourstart.org](http://labourstart.org), L-A-B-O-U-R-S-T-A-R-T.O-R-G. Look for the link in the podcast notes to this show. Also in the podcast notes, you'll see what unions are doing to assist workers and their families in Ukraine and find out how you can help them too.

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The Solidarity Center Podcast is a member of the Labor Radio Podcast Network. And our show is produced and engineered by Adam Yoffe. A special thanks to the staff of the Solidarity Center who assisted with this podcast. In more than 60 countries around the world we work to ensure a righteous future for workers, dignity, freedom, equality and justice.

For the Solidarity Center podcast I'm Shawna Bader-Blau, thanks for listening.