

THE SOLIDARITY CENTER PODCAST

Workers Speak Out: Unions Are Essential for Democracy

Host: Shawna Bader-Blau, Solidarity Center Executive Director

Guests: Lizaveta Merliak, leader of Solidarnast (Belarus); Uroš Milivojević, shop steward for McDonald's trade union, Serbia; Lejla Čaušević, leader of the International and Information Department of the Confederation of Independent Trade Unions of Bosnia and Herzegovina; Maung Maung, president of the Confederation of Trade Unions Myanmar, CTUM

Shawna Bader-Blau

Hi, this is Shawna Bader-Blau, host of The Solidarity Center Podcast with a special bonus episode featuring the voices of workers, our partners, some of whom are facing repression and persecution. Their crime? Being a trade unionist. These brave workers and union leaders from around the world describe what democracy means to them. Earlier this month, when I spoke on The Solidarity Center Podcast with Sticks Nkambule, he talked about being driven from his country for leading a strike to improve working conditions for transport workers. Sticks and other trade unionists in Eswatini, formerly Swaziland, and union members in countries like Belarus and Myanmar are among those being persecuted, even killed, for forming unions, taking part in peaceful rallies and going on strike. They're being targeted by authoritarian regimes because unions are essential to democracy. Let me say that again: Unions are essential to democracy.

For more than 100 years, unions have been key in the struggle for democratization, defending democratic institutions and standing up to autocratic challenges by advancing the voice and interests of working people. This week, there will be several key summits on democracy, including in Washington, D.C., and in Zambia, where the spotlight will be on how to amplify worker voices to safeguard democracy in Africa and globally. Workers know the importance of unions to democracy and what democracy means in their lives. Now let's go to Lizaveta Merliak, a Belarusian trade unionist who speaks to us from Germany where she and other union leaders were forced into exile by a brutal regime bent on destroying the strongest voice for democracy, the union movement.

Lizaveta Merliak

Hi, my name is Lizaveta Merliak. I'm one of few trade unionists who escaped from Belarus after the liquidation and repression of democratic trade unions. Unlike my comrades, leaders and activists of democratic trade unions who are jailed and tortured in prisons, Aliaksandr Yarashuk, Siarhei Antusevich, Iryna But-Husaim, Hennadz Fiadynich and 30 brothers and sisters more. The dictatorship outlawed trade union activities in Belarus. All attempts by workers to assert their rights are brutally suppressed by the totalitarian regime. It is impossible to sit and wait that the situation improves. We the activists in exile founded association Solidarnast in Bremen, Germany with Solidarast to be the voice of the Democratic unions and make the names of our comrades vocal, to provide humanitarian support to the political prisoners, leaders, and activists of the democratic unions and workers movement and to their families.

One of our tasks is, at minimum, to consolidate the international democratic community in joint action to liberate those in Belarus who had been fighting for workers' rights and overall freedom of the country. We are not free until our comrades are released from jail. We cannot leave Belarusian workers alone with

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the regime. Despite the destruction of the independent trade union movement, workers in Belarus remain the force which can resist the dictatorship. We must support the inspirations for democracy in every way we can, and at the same time preserve and develop the idea of grassroots democracy at workplace. With a solidarity from the forces inside and outside Belarus, we will revive independent trade union movement in Belarus with the aim of creating a democratic society based on the principles of social justice and decent work.

Uroš Milivojević:

My name is Uroš Milivojević and democracy matters to me is an ideal that we aspire to build because it represents the fundamental principle of equal participation in decision making processes. As a McDonald's worker and a unionist from Serbia, I believe that everyone should have a say in how our society is run and that our leaders should be held accountable to the people that they represent. Although I may not have experienced democracy in its fullest sense, I know that it has the potential to empower individuals and communities to achieve great things. Democracy has made it possible for people to speak out against injustices, to organize for change, and to create a more equitable society. As a worker, democracy has made it possible for me to join a union and to advocate for better wages and working conditions. It has made it possible to have a voice and a say in the decisions that impact my life and the lives of my coworkers.

Lejla Čaušević:

I'm Lejla Čaušević, head of International and Information Department of the Confederation of Independent Trade Unions of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The best answer to the question of what democracy means today we can see unfortunately in those parts of the world and those societies where it doesn't exist. For me personally, democracy above all things means freedom. Freedom to think, to speak, to work. Freedom and democracy mean that I live a life following my dreams and striving to achieve my own goals. Democracy gives me a right to choose, choose the life I want to live, who I trust, who I want to represent, [inaudible 00:05:50]. Democracy gave us a right to organize as workers, to have our trade unions and to have our own worker's voice.

As someone who's been working for trade unions for the past 20 years, I know how much democracy means in everyday life. Hundreds and hundreds of different destinies that I've heard about, so many outstretched that asked for help, injustices that I unfortunately witnessed. That is a burden I carry with me every day. That is the price that we as the trade unionists have to pay, but to be a voice of those who cannot or are not allowed to speak, to stand in front of those who are humiliated or whose rights have been violated, to have strength and power to rebel on any injustice in our society, that is a great responsibility, but also a huge honor that democracy and trade unions gave us. Without that, we would be one of those people who are unfortunately forced to be silent, who live suffering behind closed doors without any kind of support or help.

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We very often forget how much strength democracy gives us as individuals. We allow ourselves to be shackled and our voice to be silenced. We forget, unfortunately, what Abraham Lincoln once said, and that is that the democracy is a government of the people by the people for the people. We are that people, each of us, and that is why we must not allow ourselves not to use all the strength and power Democracy gives us every day to make this world a better place for all of us. We must use that power to help those in need, to protect those who are weak. We must use that power to condemn any injustice in our societies, to fight evil, and to be a spoke persons for a good.

Sticks Nkambule:

Greetings from Swaziland, comrades, brothers, and sisters, and all democracy loving people of the world. I'm Comrade Sticks Nkambule, General Secretary for Swaziland Transport Communications and Allied Workers Union. The upcoming summit on democracy in Southern Africa at end of March 2023 is coming at a time when my country and its seasons are raising critical voices around democratic calls in my country. In response to this, the regime has unleashed its military might against innocent and unarmed citizens. In June 2021, the government, in response to protests that were calling for democracy, it unleashed its security forces and killed over a hundred of our peoples. Several others were arrested and dozens injured. The massacre and butchering of democracy activists is continuing even today. Many more activists have been killed and others forced to flee the country in fear of their lives. Trade leaders like myself, we have not been spared.

As I'm talking to you, I'm away from my motherland because the regime has unleashed its forces against me. We have lost too many activists and it cannot continue. We call on you comrades, brothers and sisters, to support and amplify the call for democratization of Swaziland as you even prepare for the summit. Your calls will ensure democracy and workers rights in Swaziland in that respect.

Maung Maung:

Good day, colleagues. My name is Maung Maung and I'm the President of the Confederation of Trade Unions Myanmar, CTUM. I represent an organization that fought against a military regime in 1988, and now we are fighting against a regime in 2023. On 3rd February, we issued a statement that denounced a coup, and because there was no civil liberties and democracy basis for freedom of association that we were withdrawing from the National Tripartite Dialogue Forum. The regime responded very badly. All together, 118 workers, representatives CTUM members, trade union leaders, have been arrested and now they are in prison. Then we have Brother Chan Myae Kyaw from the Mining Workers Federation, who was shot to death. Another four from a mining union were burned to death together. Then regarding our own leadership, all 29 company members have issued grants for all of us. Also, our passports were declared null and void by the regime. That's the situation. That's how the regime responded to us.

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But at the same time, we are also part of the democratic movement, we are members of the National Unity Consultative Council, and we are members of the General Strike Coordination Body. From these alliances, we are working together within the country for daily strikes and demonstrations against the regime making policies within the NUCC for a future federal democratic system, and we are working with the international community, especially calling for comprehensive economic sanctions, which is very important to embargo the regime. We have to stop the income of the regime if you want to stop the fuel coming to the military regime, if you want to stop the regime using bombs and weapons that are important.

What we want from the governments of the world, we want all of them to support and stand together with the independent trade unions. There is a chance for democracy to flourish in the world, especially for the government staff members of the U.S. administration. It is very important and we request that trade unions are talked to. As explained, we have experienced fighting against regime since 1988 and we still are fighting up to now, and we call for and ask for meetings. We are working, we know that we are winning, and we call upon the U.S. administration that please, keep on supporting us. We will win the fight.

Shawna Bader-Blau You can follow and subscribe to The Solidarity Center Podcast on Apple Podcast, Spotify, or wherever you find your shows. Learn more about the Solidarity Center at solidaritycenter.org, and follow our social media on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. 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, they work to ensure a righteous future for workers fighting for dignity, freedom, equality, and justice. For The Solidarity Center Podcast, I'm Shawna Bader-Blau. Thanks for listening.