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Global Unions call for the immediate release of jailed Belarusian union activists

Statement by the Council of Global Unions (CGU), 13 May 2022

On 19 April 2022 more than twenty leaders and activists of the Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions (BKDP) were detained by the State Security Committee. While some of them were released afterwards, at least ten are still in custody, including the BKDP President, ITUC Vice-President and ILO Governing Body member Aliaksandr Yarashuk, and BKDP Vice-President Siarhei Antusevich. They and their colleagues are prisoners of conscience.

They face charges under art. 342 part 1 of the Criminal Code of Republic of Belarus and were transferred to the pre-trial detention for the time of investigation. The charges under the art. 342 include preparation of actions which gravely violate public order and are punishable with arrest, or restraint of liberty for two to five years, or imprisonment for up to four years. We demand their immediate release, and the withdrawal of all charges brought by the illegitimate regime of Alexander Lukashenko, who rigged an election in 2020 to stay in power.

Their arrest and treatment have provoked widespread indignation and protest: a politically motivated case directly related to their trade union activities, and an attack on democracy and the independent trade unionism that is a key component of it.

The arrest, even briefly, of trade union leaders for exercising their legitimate right to freedom of association constitutes a grave violation of fundamental human rights, reflected by the fact that the ILO Director General Guy Ryder issued a special communique and addressed the government of Belarus directly. We will use the forthcoming International Labour Conference and the subsequent ILO Governing Body to increase the pressure on the illegitimate regime of Belarus.

Communication with our imprisoned fellow trade unionists is only possible through lawyers and letters: we demand the right to visit them in person and are seeking to send a solidarity delegation to Belarus to that effect.

As global trade unions, we will not stay silent about this unjustified and unacceptable attack on the trade unions of Belarus and, by extension, the workers and trade unions of the world - an injury to one is an injury to all.

