

Demonstrations support occupation of Czech state television station

Background to the conflict over "Ceska Televize"

Ulrich Rippert**15 January 2001**

On the evening of January 3 more than 100,000 gathered in Prague's historic Vaclav Square to demonstrate for press freedom and the independence of state-run television. Demonstrations also took place in other cities.

The demonstration in Prague was the biggest since those in November 1989, which led to the overthrow of the Stalinist government. The slogans sounded familiar. "We are already there", "Freedom!" and "Shame!" were to be heard throughout the city centre. Shouting "Hodac must resign" and "television for the people, not the politicians", demonstrators supported the editorial staff of the state-run television "Ceska Televize" (CT) who have occupied the station since Christmas eve.

Those occupying the station are calling for the resignation of Jiri Hodac, the newly appointed general attendant who, with some justification, they accuse of a biased relationship and political connections with the ODS, the conservative party of Vaclav Klaus.

However, as in the autumn of 1989—when slogans for "freedom and democracy" merely served to introduce market economy relations with devastating economic and social consequences for Czechoslovakia—there are now many indications that the demonstrators are being misused in a dirty power struggle within the Czech elite.

In an emergency meeting lasting 18 hours on December 20 the Television Council, which is controlled by the government parties, voted seven to one to make Jiri Hodac the new general attendant for Czech television. Hodac had left Czechoslovakia 20 years previously, living for a while in Australia before beginning work in 1988 for the BBC in London. In the course of his 11 years working for the BBC he took up British citizenship.

Hodac is feared and despised in the Czech Republic because of his authoritarian manner. In his previous function as head of news for "Ceska Televize" Hodac sacked the moderator of a Sunday political programme following complaints from the two coalition leaders, Milos Zeman (of the social democratic CSSD) and Vaclav Klaus (of the conservative party ODS), who were disturbed by the moderator's "cheeky" questions.

Hodac named Jana Bobosikova, the former advisor to ODS leader Vaclav Klaus, as the new head of the news department, with her husband as assistant. Following some resistance to his nominations and subsequent appointments Hodac sacked several dozen editorial staff and four members of the TV station's

executive committee. The new building of the station in the Prague district of Kavci Hory was subsequently occupied by 30 television workers.

When those occupying the station began to transmit programmes and appeals to the population, Hodac reacted by turning off the transmission signal for 30 hours while blockading the occupiers in the news rooms with a private security firm known as the "black gorillas". Since then the station has been transmitting an improvised news programme put together by Hodac's own appointees, while the occupiers continue to broadcast their own programme over cable, which can be received by about 20 percent of the population.

The occupiers have been supported by the general population in various ways, such as by passing food and everyday necessities to the team through a window of the news room. Demonstrations have taken place on a daily basis in front of the occupied building.

The occupation, however, is concerned with the struggle for the freedom of the press in only the most limited way. None of the rebelling editorial staff have seriously criticised political relations or commented on the devastating social conditions in the Czech Republic following the implementation of ruthless policies of privatisation and the radical dismantling of social gains.

In its latest edition, the German magazine *Der Spiegel* quotes the editor in chief of the Czech magazine *Listy*: "Before 1989 there were no journalists on television, only news readers. So then it was necessary to bring in the 20 year olds. They were against communism and supported Havel in the first place." Later the majority of young editorial staff supported the Thatcherite-type Vaclav Klaus, who promised a fast lane to freedom and prosperity.

Two years ago, when Klaus helped pave the way to power and tolerated the minority government of social democrat Milos Zeman, a political sea change took place in the news agency. It increasingly took sides against Klaus in favour of the opposition four-party coalition. The coalition comprises conservative Christian Democrats and liberal free-marketers under the leadership of a right-wing split-off from the ODS, challenging the toleration of the social democrat government. This four-party coalition is backing the striking television workers, attempting to intensify the conflict with a view to precipitating new elections.

Czech President Havel has also thrown his weight behind the CT rebels. In his New Year's address he praised the fact that in the

Czech Republic there was not just a subservient media or sensational gutter press, but journalists who “despite all the risks freely and independently seek to devote themselves to the darkest sides of politics.” President Havel could say a great deal about these “dark sides”, having himself used his official function over the last years to occupy prize positions in Czech business with members of his family or other personal favourites.

For years Havel and the former head of government Klaus have worked hand in hand and today are united in their political aim of membership in the European Union, despite the drastic cuts in the social safety net this would entail. However, as is the case in other Eastern European countries and Russia, the introduction of the free market and nepotism has led to mafia-type structures precipitating hefty conflicts between rival economic parties and interests.

Klaus is personally seeking to take over as president and on the way is attempting to bring the most important media sources under his control. To do so he is using his current post as president of the Czech parliament and prop of the social-democratic minority government. Havel is attempting to curb the rights of parliament and Czech political parties and for some time has been conducting his own demagogic campaign—“against the corrupt party state—for a people's state!” In common with other right-wing European populists, Havel's campaign is nothing other than a cover for the dismantling of democratic rights and the establishment of an authoritarian regime faithful to the president.

Definite business interests are also involved in these political conflicts.

Under the headline: “A conflict over power and millions,” journalist Ludmila Rakusan reported from Prague for the Berlin daily *Tagesspiegel*: “The digital epoch is not expected to arrive in the Czech Republic before 2010-12, but digital frequencies are expected to be divided up in Europe over the next two years. It is estimated that the introduction of digital television will lead to an explosion of commercial channels with their own distribution, which in turn will lead to a drop in advertising income—then the license for digital transmission of state-run television programmes will resemble a win at the lotto: charges for television and radio are a guaranteed source of income.”

A few months ago the winner of the tender for the future digital transmission of the state channel CT was not the state-run Czech Radio-Communication, which has transmitted the station in analogue form up until now, but rather Czech Telecom, which is 27 percent in Swiss and Dutch hands. Hodac's predecessor had been sacked just before he could have signed the new contract. Now it is quite possible that Hodac will introduce a new tender. His declaration that he wants to carefully check all of the previous business decisions of former CT executives points in this direction.

The vigorous dispute over state-run television has served to expose the powerful tensions at work in Czech society. The Czech Republic has for some time forfeited its role as the “prize pupil” amongst potential new candidates for EU membership. For the first time last year, unemployment rose to an unprecedented level of 10 percent. In some regions, such as the coal-mining areas of North Bohemia and North Moravia, unemployment has reached 20 percent. Only 42 percent of all those unemployed receive unemployment benefits.

Average monthly wages are in the area of 12,000 crone—or around US\$350, with substantial variations among different branches of employment. Workers in the financial sector earn the highest wages, averaging \$600 monthly, and workers at the Skoda auto works earn about \$500. However, the vast majority of those active in domestic industries, such as textiles, must make do with around \$150 a month, with a take-home wage of only \$100. In addition, it is often the case that this minimum is not adhered to or employers pay workers irregularly.

Mass poverty is increasing continually while state forms of support are being eliminated. In 1987 Czechoslovakia occupied twenty-fifth place in a United Nations table measuring life standards. Eleven years later the Czech Republic has dropped down to thirty-sixth place. Compared to 1989 levels, in 1998 industrial production was down 22 percent, agricultural production down 30 percent, and housing construction had dropped 65 percent. Over the same period state debt has risen from \$7.8 billion to \$23 billion, or 45 percent of Gross National Product.

In order to measure up to conditions laid down by the International Monetary Fund, the government under Prime Minister Milos Zeman plans drastic new cuts, which include a further cut in pensions and stricter criteria for the payment of social benefits.

No doubt many of those who assembled for the demonstrations on Prague's Vaclav Square to shout “Down with this totalitarian government” were motivated by such glaring social injustice. But the struggle against the continuous attacks on democratic and social rights requires a socialist programme which draws the lessons from the period of Stalinist dictatorship and puts the interests of working people before those of the banks and big corporations. Otherwise, Czech workers stand to be duped once again.



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