

Anti-government strikes in Macedonia

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The Social Democratic Alliance (SDSM)-led government “Together for Macedonia,” formed in October, has been shaken by a series of strikes. An anticipated period of grace for the newly elected coalition evaporated as workers at 17 enterprises went on strike to demand the payment of back wages and the return of legislation protecting labour rights. Workers in private industry joined the strike wave, accusing managers of spending back pay to lead luxurious lifestyles.

Strikes began on November 26 and lasted until December 2, involving textile, tobacco, printing, mining and railroad workers. All rail networks in and out of Macedonia were blocked. Lead and zinc miners in Makedonoka-Kamenica began a hunger strike on November 26 to protest four months unpaid wages. As miners fell ill, popular discontent rapidly escalated into strike action. On December 2, the SDSM coalition government ceded to demands that it sell some of the mines’ produce to pay a portion of the back wages.

The Trade Union Federation of Macedonia (SSM) has said that a general strike will be called on December 20 if the SDSM refuses to sign a “social contract” proposed by the federation, which includes the reintroduction of severance pay abolished by the former Christian Democrat-type government of President Ljubco Georgijevski, ousted in a general election last September. The trade union federation is demanding that a list of 30 companies slated for closure be covered by a severance agreement.

Both the SDSM and its predecessors have vigorously pursued privatisation strategies. These policies have led to an economic catastrophe in Macedonia. In 2001, industrial production fell by 11 percent as a yearly average. According to economic advisor to the former government, Sam Vaknin, in August 2002 alone industrial production fell by 20 percent. Over 340,000 former state employees, out of a working population

about 800,000, have been sacked and are living off what Vaknin admits is barely subsistence-level welfare.

The scale of redundancies is so great that the SSM union federation is working closely with a newly created body called the Autonomous Trade Union of Bankrupt Firms and Redundant Workers. In October, under European and US pressure, Macedonia joined the World Trade Organisation and opened up what remains of its outmoded infrastructure to even more ferocious global competition.

In February tens of thousands of workers went on strike and 1,000 marched on the parliament building for the repeal of pro-IMF (International Monetary Fund) legislation. Marchers were attacked by police who made sure strikers got nowhere near deputies. Temporary barriers placed around the parliament are now a permanent feature. The SSM federation cancelled the strikes and encouraged illusions in impending talks in New York and Washington between the IMF-World Bank and President Georgievski and his economics minister.

World Bank officials declared they had no objections to the SSM federation’s demands, but said that any back pay had to be self-financed by cuts in the welfare budget. World Bank support would be withdrawn if repayment of wages were made an issue in the September 2002 general election campaign.

In April and May workers launched another strike wave, this time aimed against the Giorgievski regime. He responded by insisting that IMF-World Bank targets had to be met, severely undermining the government’s credibility with the Macedonian people.

The SSM federation worked diligently to bring the SDSM into office, insisting only that it have a say in appointment of the labour minister. However, once in power the new government pushed the SSM federation’s demands to one side. This left the trade union leaders confronting workers demanding an end to

the economic catastrophe while unable to influence the government it helped bring to power.

The SDSM government made repeated pledges to pursue World Bank-IMF structural reforms more vigorously, but on December 12, during a conference in the capital Skopje on poverty reduction, World Bank officials insisted that the social crisis has worsened because its policies have not been applied to the letter. The government's finance minister admitted that according to measures of world development, the whole of Macedonia was now in the "poverty zone". Two years ago, after a previous World Bank reform package, one in five lived below the poverty line. That figure has now increased to one in four.

The SSM federation is in effect warning the ruling elite and the World Bank that without some minimal social protection the whole economic restructuring project is threatened by social upheaval. The head of the federation, Vanco Muratovski, insisted, "Every government has to have good relations with the trade unions if it wants to have social peace." This desire to secure its own power base within the government in return for policing social discontent is what lies behind its demands on the SDSM to sign its "social contract". It is reported that the government has contacted the union federation to enter talks prior to the deadline for the general strike to begin, in an attempt to head off a political confrontation with the working class.



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