

# Austria's biggest strike in 50 years

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On May 5, plans by Vienna's right-wing conservative government to implement drastic cuts in the pension system resulted in the first major political strike in Austria in over 50 years. About half a million people took part in the strike—far more than expected.

Walkouts occurred throughout the public and private sectors. Printers had already gone on strike and the only newspapers to appear were supplemental emergency editions. Thousands of strike actions in the form of workplace meetings and demonstrations paralysed broad sections of public transport throughout the day. Railway workers blocked freight trains; many schools and offices remained closed. Blue and white collar workers in over 500 firms—300 of them in the metal and textile industries—participated in the strikes.

Demonstrations broke out in several major cities such as Salzburg, where about 10,000 demonstrators took part in an evening march through the city centre. Further protests are planned for May 13. As many as 70,000 teachers intend to stop work, and 5,500 schools will be closed. A mass rally will be held in the federal capital, Vienna.

The Federation of Austrian Trade Unions (ÖGB) and its constituent unions had called for the strike. Protest was directed mainly against reforms to the pension system, planned by the ÖVP/FPÖ (Austrian People's Party/Austrian Freedom Party) government. The ruling coalition intends to implement massive cuts in pension benefits for all workers.

Pension benefits are to be reduced on average by about 20 percent. People retiring in the coming years already have to face a cutback of around 15 percent. Reductions for younger workers will be even more drastic.

The proposed reductions result from a change in the way periods accredited to pension entitlement are calculated. From now on, pensions are to be assessed after 40 years of work instead of 15, as in the most

favourable cases presently. The age for early retirement and deductions from early retirement pensions will also be increased in stages up to 2009. At that time, men younger than 61.5 and women younger than 56.5 will have to keep working until they are 65 or 60 respectively. If a person nevertheless retires earlier—for example, because he has lost his job—he or she will face hefty deductions for each year short of the official retirement age. Concurrent with the slashing of state retirement provision, new opportunities for private old-age insurance are being explored.

The reform of the pension system constitutes the first stage in the plundering of the entire social welfare system. The next step will be a fundamental “reform” of the health system.

The indignation of Austrian workers is levelled not only at the pension cuts. Conservatives, right-wingers and social democrats have been attacking the social security system for more than 10 years. But the ruthless manner in which the government is now attempting to push the law through parliament in only a few weeks is inciting intense opposition. It is generally feared that the attack on pensions heralds a much broader offensive against social welfare. Previously well-nurtured forms of consensus politics, directed towards achieving agreement with the trade unions on all social questions, are to be jettisoned.

Berlin's *Tagesspiegel* newspaper aptly observed: “Never before in Austria has such a serious assault on the social welfare system been made; never before has the normal ‘period for appraisal and debate’ been reduced to a bare four weeks. And never before has a federal chancellor paid so little attention to his social partners who have been more or less secretly participating in government over the past decades.”

For its part, the right-of-centre government of Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel (ÖVP) is clearly intent on implementing the cuts, regardless of the mounting

opposition. Even Chamber of Commerce President Leitl's warnings that the government is putting the country's social stability at risk have had no effect. In a recent interview, Finance Minister Martin Bartenstein (ÖVP) arrogantly asserted that the government would "not yield to such coercion from the street; that would not be right for the country".

The trade union leadership around ÖGB boss Fritz Versetnitsch (SPÖ—Austrian Socialist Party) hesitated for a long time before organising a strike. The trade unions are not opposed in principle to the pension cuts and would have agreed to the recommendations of the coalition government if offered an alternative timetable for implementation. The unions are working out their own programme of "reforms" and have offered to cooperate with Schüssel on several occasions, only to have their recommendations categorically rejected each time.

Trade union circles continually stressed that no strike would be directed against the government and that it would not be a political strike. Verzetnitsch asked the government again on the Tuesday to resume negotiations with the unions.

The union leaders were determined to confine the strike and keep it at an apolitical level in order to stave off a general mobilisation against the government. For the ultraconservative public service (GÖD) and private industry (GPA) trade unions, any thought of political action was also out of the question. Teacher representatives, for example, complained to the GÖD that the strike had "not been organised in a professional way". The trade union plan consciously avoided simultaneous strikes at all schools, and originally the protest against the reform to the pension system was not to be linked to demands for a better education system.

The opposition parties—Social Democrats and Greens—are trying to exploit the strike for their own political purposes. At the same time, they remain silent about the fact that they themselves have drawn up plans for the dismantling of social services that differ only in matters of detail from those of the government.

Over the past few days, the SPÖ, Greens and trade union representatives tried to draw the government back to the negotiating table. Their concern was not about any change to the pension system; rather, they were worried about the danger of losing control of the

protests. Alexander van der Bellen, leader of the Greens, warned the government of a radicalisation of the population.

Representatives of the ÖVP and FPÖ in parliament will also vote against the draft law, putting a majority for the government's recommendation in doubt. Above all, FPÖ delegates, under the influence of their shadow chairman Jörg Haider, have signalled their opposition. Haider is again sensing a chance for himself, under conditions where the government—constituted only a few months ago—could fall apart with the collapse of the reform, and Haider could well be in a position to take the place of the current chairman of the FPÖ and vice-chancellor, Herbert Haupt.

With a view to their own advantage, the Social Democrats and Greens are trying to encourage the right-wing opposition around Haider to pursue their oppositionist stance. Alfred Gusenbauer, the SPÖ party leader, explained in an interview with the magazine *News*: "First we'll talk about how we'll go about stopping these pension cuts. If we're successful in that, then there'll possibly be a next step, which possibly could mean new elections. And after that we can talk about further steps."

Gusenbauer refrained from ruling out cooperation even with the Haider faction. He spoke about the possibility of the FPÖ repositioning itself and added: "When the people speak, then all the cards will have to be reshuffled." Haider also indicated that he was open to such an outcome and declared that he too was considering other combinations for a parliamentary majority.



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