

Political lessons of the events in Hungary

Peter Schwarz
29 September 2006

The events that shook Hungary last week should be taken as a political warning to the working class throughout Europe. The right-wing, pro-business policies of the post-Stalinist “Socialist Party” have underscored the absence of any political force on the official “left” that in any way defends the interests of the working population. The result is a political vacuum that allowed ultra-right forces to dominate the streets of the Hungarian capital for several days.

The so-called “socialist left” is implementing a program of cuts, which is being cheered on by European financial circles, and which is creating social misery and declining living standards for broad layers of the population, including the party’s own voters. The right wing, with openly fascist elements at its head, has mobilized in the streets and poses as the advocate of the ordinary citizen.

The racist gangs that out-shouted all others on the recent demonstrations and are quite prepared to resort to violence have absolutely no concern for the needs of the common man. They base themselves on the most reactionary tendencies in Hungarian history—in particular, the Horthy dictatorship which came to power in 1919 after bloodily crushing the Hungarian Soviet and went on to form an alliance with Mussolini and Hitler in the 1930s, and the anti-Semitic Arrow Cross Party, which organized the terror against Hungarian Jews.

The extreme right in Hungary consists of a few thousand persons, and comprised a minority of those taking part in the demonstrations, which included many angry but politically confused citizens. However, the vacuum which has emerged because of the lack of any organization representing the interests of the working class has made it possible for such fascistic elements to play a prominent role. Notorious right-wing extremists were able to speak to the crowds without hindrance and win applause from those gathered.

The far-right is attempting to channel widespread frustration over the country’s social crisis into nationalistic fantasies and racist hysteria. Organizations such as the Party for Hungarian Right and Life (MIEP), “the Rightists” (Jobbik) and “64 People’s Committee” combine agitation against the European Union and international capital with rabid anti-communism, supplemented by the demand for Hungarian expansion to the borders of 1918 and unabashed anti-Semitism.

All this is taking place in a country where over half a million Jews were murdered in Nazi gas chambers. Before the Second World War, one million Jews lived in the country. Today there are only 100,000 in a population of ten million.

The largest right-wing opposition party, the Federation of Young Democrats (Fidesz), is playing a double game. On the one hand the party maintains close political and personal contact with the extreme right and has never clearly dissociated itself from such forces. On the other, it generally seeks to publicly distance itself from the fascists.

During the election campaign of 2002, Fidesz leader Viktor Orban

used the language of the extreme right and denounced the Socialists as the “pawns of big finance capital.” He even sought to establish a coalition with the anti-Semitic MIEP—an attempt that was frustrated only because the latter failed to re-enter parliament.

Between 1998 and 2002, the same Orban occupied the post of prime minister and negotiated the country’s entry into the European Union. He had also served for eight years as a vice-president of the Liberal International, which includes organizations such as the “free market” Free Democratic Party of Germany. Since 2002, he has held a leading post in the European People’s Party, which is the umbrella organisation for conservative European Christian Democrats.

The recent demonstrations were in part controlled by Fidesz functionaries via mobile phone. They hoped to exploit the demonstrations to improve the party’s chances in local elections to be held October 1. These elections are regarded as the first big test for the Socialist Party since its victory in parliamentary elections last April.

At the same time, Fidesz has adopted a cautious public profile in regard to the protests in Budapest, even calling off a large demonstration planned for last Saturday after it became clear that many voters had been repelled by the violence of the extreme right.

The wave of protests died down considerably after Fidesz took the decision to call off the Saturday demonstration. On Tuesday, some 1,000 demonstrators rallied in front of the parliament in Budapest and on Wednesday this number had dropped to a hundred.

While the demonstrations of last week were large, they were by no means overwhelming. Some media outlets spoke of 40,000 participants turning out last Saturday, but many observers regard this figure as highly exaggerated and consider 20,000 as much nearer the mark.

A far larger number of Hungarians stayed at home, no doubt alarmed by the antics of the extreme right while brimming with anger over the right-wing course of the Socialist Party. This majority lacks any voice in official Hungarian politics.

The experiences of the past century show that the rise to prominence of the extreme right has less to do with the inherent strength of such forces than with the weakness and paralysis of the workers’ movement. The victory of the Nazis in Germany—a much larger and better organized force than the current Hungarian extreme right—was possible only due to the splitting and paralysis of the working class through the political agencies of Stalinism and social democracy.

The re-emergence of the extreme right today and its ability to manipulate social anger and despair constitute a devastating indictment of the policies of the so-called “Socialists.” The party’s unconditional pro-capitalist policies have disarmed the working class and ceded the initiative to right-wing forces.

This process is by no means limited to Hungary. In state elections held one month ago in the former German Democratic Republic (East Germany), the neo-fascist German National Party (NPD) was able to

win representation in a second eastern German state. It now has deputies in the state parliaments of Saxony and Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania. And in Poland, the extreme right and anti-Semitic League of Polish Families (LPR) sits in government alongside the conservative Law and Justice Party (PiS), led by the Kaczynski brothers. Until recently, an ultra-right farmers' party, Samoobrona, was also part of the government.

One-and-a-half decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the consequences of the restoration of capitalism in these countries are brutally clear. Far from bringing democracy or improved social conditions, the introduction of the market economy has plunged broad layers of the population into social misery and created conditions in which the most politically backward and predatory layers are able to extend their influence.

Former leading Stalinist politicians transformed themselves into confirmed advocates of the "free market"—while retaining the completely inappropriate label of "socialist."

The Hungarian head of government, Ferenc Gyurcsany, is typical in this respect. Once a leading functionary in the former Stalinist youth movement, Gyurcsany made his millions in the course of the "wild privatisations" carried out in the 1990s and is now head of a government intent on implementing an austerity program that is applauded by international capital.

Gyurcsany is by no means the only Stalinist youth functionary who has been able to acquire power and wealth. The same path has been trodden by Julia Timoschenko in Ukraine, Alexander Kwasniewski in Poland, and many of the current Russian oligarchs.

Opposing Gyurcsany and his party are former dissidents and "democrats" who have increasingly emerged as hysterical right-wingers. This category includes the Kaczynski brothers, who were both former functionaries of the Polish Solidarity movement and advisors to Lech Walesa, as well as Viktor Orban and the leader of the anti-Semitic MIEP, Istvan Csurka.

Orban's Federation of Young Democrats, the Fidesz, was founded in 1988 and played an active role during the period of the collapse of Hungarian Stalinism. The MIEP, led by 72-year-old Csurka, emerged from the Hungarian Democratic Forum, one of the first organizations to actively oppose the Stalinist regime.

The working class cannot afford to remain indifferent to the current efforts being made by these ultra-right forces to bring down and replace the present government. The chauvinist and racist policies of these organisations would have devastating consequences should they come to power. Any attempt to revive the project of restoring a "Great Hungary" would end just as bloodily as the fragmentation of Yugoslavia into ethnic states into the 1990s. It would plunge Hungary and its neighbours into violent conflicts and precipitate ethnic pogroms, already foreshadowed by the agitation of these organisations against Jews, Roma, Sinti and other minorities.

Opposing the efforts of the extreme right to bring down the government does not, however, mean that any political support should be given to the Socialists, whose policies are diametrically opposed to the interests of the working population.

The really scandalous part of the remarks made by Gyurcsany that became the occasion for the recent protests was not his admission that he had lied. Such a statement should surprise no one. Of much greater significance is the fact that he pledged his party to a policy which is vehemently opposed by the vast majority of those who voted for his party.

"What would happen," he said, "if instead of losing our popularity

because of marking time amongst ourselves we lost it because we promoted great social causes [i.e., capitalist market policies]? In that case, it is not a problem if we lose the support of society for a while."

In other words, to implement his pro-business program Gyurcsany was quite prepared to allow his party to lose support and to hand over power to the right wing.

Just two weeks after making his speech on May 26 to a closed meeting of his party's parliamentary fraction, Gyurcsany's government passed a radical austerity package involving a 30 percent increase in energy prices, a 5 percent increase in value added tax for foodstuffs and public transport, increased health insurance contributions, and education and prescription fees. All of these measures will have dire consequences for low-income social layers.

The European Union commission has expressly praised the package, which is aimed at lowering the country's budget deficit from 10 to 3 percent within three years. The European media has also praised Gyurcsany's "courage" in taking on the electorate.

To stop the right wing and oppose the pro-business, anti-working class policies of the Gyurcsany government, the working class needs its own, independent political party. It must draw the lessons from the experience of Stalinism. The latter's crime was not that it upheld the abolition of capitalist private property, but rather that it suppressed the working class in defence of the interests of a privileged bureaucracy, within the framework of a thoroughly nationalist program.

These lessons have yet to be understood by broad masses of workers, which is why the extreme right was able to garb its own mobilisation in the mantle of the Hungarian Uprising of October 1956. In fact, the 1956 Uprising was a left-wing rebellion by workers against the Stalinist bureaucracy. Today, the heritage of Stalinism is expressed in those figures intent on defending the interests of international finance capital while posing as so-called "socialists."

The interests of the working population can be defended only on the basis of an international socialist program, which unites workers across national borders and rejects every form of nationalism and racism.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact