

Teachers strike in Bulgaria

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19 October 2007

Teachers and kindergarten staff in Bulgaria have been on strike for three weeks. Lessons at most schools have been cancelled, with about 80 percent of teaching staff involved in the strike. Teachers are demanding a doubling of their salaries and an increase in the state education budget of at least 5 percent.

In recent weeks, there have been protests in the capital Sofia and in other large cities. In Sofia, teachers erected a tent camp and blockaded roads; in Burgas, in southeastern Bulgaria on the southern Black Sea coast, some have even launched a hunger strike to support their demands.

On September 11, 75,000 teachers and other public sector workers demonstrated in front of the parliament building in Sofia on Independence Square. The atmosphere at the rally was tense, with representatives of the teachers, unions and government politicians sharing the platform. The protesters repeatedly shouted “mafia” during the speech by parliamentary speaker Georgi Pirinski. The teachers’ strike enjoys widespread public support. According to various opinion polls, 50 to 80 percent of the population support the strike, even though the cancelled classes are causing many families serious problems.

The strike has exposed the terrible situation faced by teachers and the entire education system in this new European Union member state. The average teacher’s salary in a state school is around €170 per month, with many recent graduates or auxiliary teachers earning even less. The fact that most teaching staff, faced with steadily rising prices, do not have enough money to live triggered the strike.

In all the eastern European EU states, public sector wages are far lower than in western Europe. But teachers’ wages in Bulgaria are particularly low. Even in neighbouring Romania, teachers earn twice as much, and in Hungary they earn four times as much.

The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* quoted a Bulgarian teacher who had taught for 35 years and described her desperate situation. “Today we are poor and exhausted,” she said. “We stand in front of the class wearing worn-out clothes and cannot shake off our poor image. How then does a teacher have any authority with his or her students?”

In the past two years, about 2,500 teachers, especially men, have abandoned their profession since they can earn far more as construction workers or taxi drivers. Only 3 percent of teachers are now under 30 years old. Those who teach until retirement can look forward to a pension of only €60 euros a month.

About 90 percent of all schools are in the state sector. Since the early 1990s, funds for equipment, personnel and maintenance, as for all public expenditure, have steadily been reduced. The government in Sofia, whether nominally right-wing or left-wing, has enforced radical spending cuts in order to meet the criteria for EU entry.

Only a few schools were exempted from these cuts—for example, a state-funded school on the outskirts of Sofia that used to be for the children of the Stalinist nomenclature. Since the collapse of the

Stalinist regime in the early 1990s, this school is now exclusively for the children of the political elite and nouveaux riches.

While teachers are demonstrating on the streets of Sofia against the intolerable conditions in their schools, the rector of Sofia University, Boyan Biolchev, said he would be forced to shut the university if the government did nothing about the demand for higher government subsidies. Although he said this would not be a “strike action,” the link with the teachers’ protests is clearly evident. For a long time, the universities have faced the same problems as the schools: permanent cuts in funding and miserable levels of pay for the staff.

The crisis in the education system is symptomatic of the state of Bulgarian society today. A thin layer of the super-rich has been able to acquire fabulous wealth at the expense of the broad masses, which face social misery and poverty. The present government consists largely of this newly wealthy elite, whose interests it upholds.

Since the parliamentary elections two years ago, a grand coalition under Socialist Party leader Sergei Stanishev has governed Bulgaria. The Socialist Party (BSP) arose at the beginning of the 1990s out of the former Stalinist party of the state. Like so many former bureaucrats in eastern Europe, Stanishev also made the rapid transformation into a fervent advocate of capitalist property relations and the free market.

After initial difficulties forming a government, the BSP now rules in a coalition with the right-wing party of former tsar Simeon Simeon Saksoburggotski (NDSW) and the Party of the Turkish Minority (DSP). Although this alliance is far from stable and political crises are the order of the day, Stanishev and Saksoburggotski agree that the interests of the ruling elite must be defended under all circumstances against the general population.

Previous government offers to the striking teachers were unacceptable and provocative, since the BSP and NDSW are determined not to accede to the demands of the teachers. Although they certainly could be met, as the Bulgarian economy has recorded one of the highest growth rates in the EU in the past year, they fear that meeting the teachers’ demands would encourage other professional groups to make similar claims.

Forestry workers are also protesting for higher wages. Since October 4, forestry work has come to a standstill in large parts of the country. Public sector workers in this sector are seeking a 100 percent increase in their wages as well as recompense for overtime and night shifts.

They too are hopelessly underpaid. A trained forester earns between €150 and €180 per month. Since the forestry workers have already fulfilled their work quota for the year, all the income they now generate goes directly into the government coffers.

Last week, Education Minister Daniel Valchev and Finance Minister Plamen Oresharski provoked the strikers even further. During negotiations with the teachers’ union on Sunday, a conversation between the two ministers was broadcast. In this, the two were seen

talking in a very condescending manner about the negotiations, agreeing that they had no interest in reaching a settlement.

The government's first proposal to raise the salaries of teaching staff by 10 percent is outrageous given an inflation rate of 12 percent; and it was rejected accordingly. The same response was given to a new offer for an increase of 30 percent while simultaneously reducing teaching staff by approximately 25 percent and introducing performance pay, which would mean teachers were no better off.

Premier Stanishev and President Georgi Parvanov have so far maintained a low profile. In interviews, they have expressed their "understanding" of the teachers' situation, but have referred repeatedly to the budgetary situation and the need to cut costs. Their caution is motivated mainly by the upcoming municipal elections at the end of the month. The expected heavy losses for the Socialist Party and the tsarist party (NDSW) would not only mean a loss of power in some municipalities, but would also further undermine the stability of the coalition in Sofia.

The intransigence with which the Bulgarian elite have met the teachers' legitimate demands stands in stark contrast to their subservience to international capital. A recent World Bank report attests to Bulgaria's exemplary role in introducing various "reforms." Of 178 nations, the Balkan state ranks among the top 10 for introducing tax breaks and other advantages for businesses.

Co-author of the study Simeon Dyankov spoke of the teachers' demands, saying, "The increasingly louder calls for wage rises in the public sector would blemish much of the work already achieved."

In particular, Finance Minister Oresharski rejects making any compromise with the strikers. The non-partisan Oresharski is one of the most hated figures in the country. As a member of the right-wing government of Ivan Kostov, which ruled in the early 1990s, he was instrumental in the dismantling and privatisation of Bulgarian industry, which led to an unprecedented impoverishment of the population.

The teachers' strikes are taking place under the direction of various trade union organisations. It is increasingly clear that the chances for success under this leadership are highly unlikely. While there is no lack of willingness to struggle and sacrifice among the teachers, the aim of the strike as far as the union leadership is concerned is to reach a deal with the government that will strengthen their own position.

Leading union officials repeatedly state that the strike has no political agenda. "I want to emphasise that our demands are purely of a social nature," explained Zhivka Scheljaskowa, chairman of the teachers' union in the Podkrepa labour federation.

The attempt to ensure the strikes have no political content is not accidental. The largest Bulgarian unions stand on the far right politically.

The Confederation of Independent Trade Unions in Bulgaria (KNSB), which also includes the Association of Teachers, is the largest union association. It came out of the official Stalinist trade union, which until the end of the 1980s was close to the Communist Party. Podkrepa, in which most teachers are organised, is the second largest union federation. It arose in 1989 out of the anticommunist "democracy movement" and in the first years after the fall of the Stalinist regime stood staunchly on the side of the Kostov government. Podkrepa describes itself as a Christian organisation.

In addition, there is the National Trade Union Confederation Promanja (NPS), a relatively young union federation, which played an important role in the overthrow of the government in the 1990s. It is notorious for its nationalism and populism, and its leaders have close

links with various right-wing parties in the country.

In the years following the collapse of the Stalinist bureaucracy, the unions regarded their main task as maintaining peace inside the factories, to ensure that the transfer of state-owned property into private hands passed smoothly. In addition, they sought to establish "social partnerships" modelled on Western institutions.

However, these never really succeeded, since the greedy and not infrequently criminal Bulgarian elite bitterly opposed even the smallest encroachment on their own interests.

In the early 1990s, all the unions supported the rapid privatisation of the state enterprises and were largely involved in organising this; the KNSB even established a separate fund for this purpose. Not infrequently, the former Stalinist union apparatchiks lined their own pockets, while helping to impose mass layoffs and wage cuts in the factories that had been sold off cheaply.

It is significant that at the end of the nineties, more than half of the businesses in which the unions were involved went bankrupt, but only after the management had raked in large profits.

It speaks volumes about the unions that the average wage of a Bulgarian worker today is still just a tenth of what is the norm in the western EU countries. Since the mid-1990s, the major trade union federations have directly influenced wages policy and conduct regular talks with the government.

There are two reasons why the unions currently lend verbal support to the teachers' strike. Firstly, they are losing members hand over fist, with many unions experiencing serious financial problems. The main reason, however, is that the unions fear that the strike could develop outside their control. Given the extremely tense social situation, the teachers' strike has the potential to spread and become a struggle against the entire political elite. The unions dread this as much as the government.



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