

# Reader's letter on the closure of the Nokia factory in Bochum, Germany

28 February 2008

*The following letter was sent to the World Socialist Web Site from a reader in Romania in response to the article, "Germany: Nokia announces closure of its Bochum factory: The fight to defend jobs needs an international strategy".*

I read this article with a great deal of interest, as I am currently in the city (Cluj-Napoca, Romania) where, after the closing of its factory in Bochum, Germany, Nokia will move some of its cell-phone production. I have lived in this part of the world (Romania and the Republic of Moldova) for 3.5 out of the last 5.5 years. While I haven't been in Cluj so much in the last 10 to 11 months or so, it is here in this city where I spent more time than in any other place in this corner of the world.

Being in Romania, politically speaking, is kind of like being in America during the 1950s heyday of Joseph McCarthy or during the Reagan presidency of the 1980s; the political discourse embraced by *all* the different major parties (I think we could classify seven as being "major"), not to mention all the major newspapers, print publications and TV outlets, is, at core, based on a crude and stupid anti-communism. As a result, left-leaning publications and books that have any sort of critical take on US imperialism and capitalism are hard to find (avowedly socialist ones are simply non-existent here), while the glossy posters and books of overtly fascist groupings are not at all hard to find. And unabashedly pro-Nazi groups whose members wear green shirts hold their meetings in the centre of the capital in nice conference halls.

Having said all of this, if you go and talk to ordinary working people who were at least 13 or so when the Stalinist regime of Nicolae Ceausescu fell in late December 1989, 70 percent will tell you that life is worse for them now. That is really saying a lot about how hard life is now for the majority of the population,

as the measures taken by Ceausescu from 1981 through 1989 to pay off the country's debts resulted in a steady deterioration of the quality of life for the population at that time.

The youth (those who either were born after 1989, or were just children at that time) generally tend to think things are better now, and a fairly large number of them embrace rightist conceptions, one of which—pushed relentlessly by the country's establishment—is that the change from Stalinism to capitalism meant the transformation from dictatorship to "democracy."

From 1990 through 2000, the position of the workers, peasants and retirees, as well as that of the poor majority of Romani (gypsy) people, worsened greatly. However, economic growth for the last seven years (2001 through 2007) was around 6 percent a year in real terms. While undoubtedly the country's narrow super-rich and grasping upper-middle class layers were the primary beneficiaries of this development, some "trickle-down" to the rest of the petty-bourgeoisie and the working class could be observed (after an economic disaster with hardly any precedent in history).

Around the middle of 2007, the boom seemed to reach its peak. The currency hit a level of 3.11 lei for 1 euro, while during 2004 and the very beginning of 2005, it had been something like 4.16. (The dollar's depreciation against the Romanian lei had been even sharper—from something like 3.46 for a dollar to 2.25.) The local currency's appreciation was coming in spite of a huge increase in the current account deficit, estimated for 2007 at 14% of GDP. This boom (which also coincided with the country's January 1, 2007, entry into the European Union,) led to what I could almost call the local equivalent of Francis Fukuyama's "End of History" hypothesis: that the local economic expansion would keep going as far as the eye could see, and that Romania was on its way towards joining the

club of relatively prosperous western European (bourgeois, though this word is never used in the country's press or media) democracies.

Well, in the last seven months, things have changed, and for the worse.

From 3.11 to the euro, the currency is down to 3.66 to the euro—a 15.5 percent depreciation. This has exacerbated the inflationary pressures that had already started to brew in the summer, at least partly because a severe drought resulted in a poor harvest and thus higher prices for all sorts of agricultural products.

Discussions with all sorts of people—the youth and workers—in the latest period have revealed growing discontent. People speak about large increases in food prices and how life is so difficult here. The relatively good times have turned worse (something that will almost certainly be reinforced by the Romanian central bank's recent campaign to raise interest rates by a fairly substantial amount), and people are aware of it.

As concerns Nokia, it is replacing its Bochum, Germany, factory at least partially with a new one here in Cluj-Napoca, Romania. This city is in one of the less-poor sections of the country, and a few new malls have appeared here within the last several months. There are reports that DaimlerChrysler will open some plant here (probably to replace another one manned by better-paid workers in western Europe). This constitutes the basis for the optimism of some regarding the development of the local economy, the living standards of a number of the region's inhabitants, etc.

In Romania as a whole, the average net (after-tax) salary is 300 euros a month. Given the fact that prices here aren't too much below the ones in western Europe, most Romanians would say that such a salary is pretty low; however, something like a net salary of 500 euros would, it seems to me, be regarded as quite decent by a majority of the population.

Outside of the anti-communist idiocies that they are bombarded with on a daily basis and which a not-insignificant portion of the population buys into, the following seems to me to be a fairly serious problem with the way many here conceive of pressing political, economic and social matters: they just focus on the immediate, local situation and do not see how these realities are connected to global ones. Furthermore, many here are so accustomed to having such extraordinary difficult lives that something like a net

salary of 500+ euros would make them rather “grateful” to their bosses and indifferent to the fact that even such relatively low salaries (when compared to both the cost of living in the country and the wages in the rest of Europe) are the result of their somewhat better-paid working-class brothers in sisters in western Europe being deprived of their jobs.

The key for one like me who tries to spread the message of international socialism in places like Romania and Moldova is that real improvements in the conditions in the masses even in the poorer countries can only be achieved via solidarity with the workers from other countries and of other nationalities. Wherever they may happen to be from, workers need to understand that the only way forward for them is to unite in the development of a new global orientation or strategy that will enable them to overcome the multinational corporations that ceaselessly try to pit them against one another. This is the sine qua non in the struggle to construct a new, democratic, equitable and peaceful world order—that is, for real (i.e., international) socialism.

AW

Romania



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