

Thousands of Slovenian students protest attacks on their conditions

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Thousands of Slovenian students took to the streets in the capital city of Ljubljana Wednesday to protest the introduction of a bill in parliament that both limits their ability to work during their studies and places a maximum wage on their earnings.

The measure is part of a wider austerity campaign being implemented by the government of Prime Minister Borut Pahor and his Social Democrats, the former Stalinist party. Their goal with this particular legislation is to introduce a system of low-wage, part-time labor in Slovenia to drive down wages and make the country more “competitive.”

Estimates of the protest size range from 7,000 to 15,000 young people (in a nation of only 2 million people), who gathered initially in Prešeren Square. Many students then marched from the square to the Slovenian parliament, where despite the presence of hundreds of police officers in riot gear, some began to throw eggs, granite blocks, and other objects at the building, breaking some windows and forcing the parliament to suspend its session. Video clips of the protest show students being arrested and dragged off, as well as their obvious determination and anger.

The new law introduces so-called “mini-jobs,” limiting student work to 14 hours per week and puts maximum earnings at 6,000 euros per year. Wages are set at between 3.5 and 8 euros per hour. Students are upset because many hold down jobs during their studies to offset the costs, as well as meet living expenses in the face of dwindling stipends. According to a report from the Slovenian Press Agency (STA), the Labour Ministry states that there are currently few restrictions on student work. Katja Soba, a student leader with SOS (Slovenian Student Organization), told the Associated Press that while Slovenian politicians growing up in an earlier era, “had sex, drugs and rock ‘n’ roll. We’ll

have mini-jobs and loans to pay.”

The protest occurred after negotiations stalled between SOS and the government. On May 4, the prime minister announced a 50-day “reflection” period, but the students called for the protest anyway. A conference is supposedly scheduled to occur following the reflection period, though there is little reason to think that the government will back down from its position, in light of the official drive to lower wages and benefits. This was made clear from a statement by Pahor reported by STA following the protests, in which the prime minister stated that the government would not be “bullied into dropping its reforms aimed at making Slovenia more competitive.”

While students are the group most visible in protesting the bill, the proposed change in the law applies not only to them, but also to pensioners, the unemployed, or anyone over the age of 15. Private employment agencies will be set up to match employers with job-seekers. The likely result, according to the students, will be an increase in the number of low-paid, unstable jobs. In Germany, where such mini-jobs have already been introduced, the result has been a vast increase in the number of workers employed part-time, and the move from such positions into full-time employment is relatively rare.

In all likelihood this bill will also be accompanied by further spending cuts on top of the ones introduced last year, due to the European Union bailout of Greece. That gift to the international banks and investment funds will be taken from workers all over Europe, Slovenia being no exception. A Bloomberg report noted that Slovenia’s share in the loan pool is 384 million euros, an increase from initial estimates of 144 million euros.

Economic forecaster Bostjan Vasle said, “Slovenia

may review government spending because the amount we may have to pay to Greece is so much higher.” With Slovenia’s budget deficit now running at 5.7 percent of GDP, there will no doubt be further pressure on the government to take measures to decrease spending on social services.

The Social Democrats, the dominant party in the present government, are a remnant of the old ruling Stalinist party, that held power in the former Yugoslavia. Pahor, the leader of the Social Democrats since the late 1990s, began his political career in college, joining the ruling League of Communists of Slovenia. An inveterate opportunist and careerist, Pahor was named to that organization’s central committee in 1989, on the eve of the break-up of Yugoslavia, where he distinguished himself as part of its so-called reformist wing.

The Social Democrats (under different names) have taken various twists and turns since 1991, including stints in opposition and participation as junior partners in several coalition governments, but their dedication to the defense of capitalism and the free market has never wavered.

Pahor’s party won 30.5 percent of the vote in the September 2008 elections, and formed a coalition with three other parties. Now in government, the Social Democrats, following from their thoroughly nationalist and bourgeois orientation, are dedicated to implementing the needs of finance capital against the wishes of the population, just as in Greece, Spain, and elsewhere.

On the other hand, the sight of Greek students and workers battling the authorities has no doubt had quite a healthy and “contagious” impact on students and young people throughout the Balkans.



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