

Public sector strike against austerity in Romania

Our correspondents
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Several hundred thousand public sector workers in Romania participated in a strike against the IMF-imposed austerity program of the conservative government of Emil Boc. It was the largest strike in Romania since the collapse of the Stalinist regime of Nicolai Ceaucescu.

According to the unions 700,000 teachers, health workers, local public transport workers and other employees joined the strike. Many of them continued the strike after Monday or are planning further strikes in the coming weeks.

In public hospitals only an emergency service was on duty. Public offices remained closed, as did the four customs facilities, most of the day. The employees of the Bucharest underground Metorex stopped working. According to the news agency Mediafax, no trains were running between four in the morning and noon.

The underground workers threatened to go on an unlimited strike during the next two weeks if their wages are cut. “The law gives us the right to call an unlimited strike if agreed wages—the collective contract—are no longer respected”, said Ion Radoi, the president of the underground workers’ union.

Also several thousand pensioners joined the protests in Bucharest and other cities.

The strike coincided with baccalaureate exams, the most important test in the school calendar. The education minister decided to hold the exam despite the strike, and legislation was quickly changed to use substitute teachers to try to break the strike. Meanwhile hundreds of teachers protested outside the Ministry of Education.

After the general strike on May 31, the protests continued the following day in several major cities. Protest rallies took place in front of the Prefectures of Alba, Arges, Bacau, Bistrita, Botosani, Buzau, Calarasi,

Dambovita, Dolj, Galati, Iasi, Mures and Timis. According to the trade unions, around 14,000 people took to the streets. Heavy rain didn’t stop public employees from protesting and pensioners from shouting their grievances in Timisoara. Some protesters hurled eggs in the building of the Timis Prefecture, others chose to eat grass to show the level of misery the government has brought them to.

The protests continued on June 2 in Gorj, Cluj, Constanta, Targu Jiu, Arad and Sibiu. More than 13,000 people went to the streets. In Targu Jiu, 600 employees from the health, interior and education ministries gathered in front of the Prefecture to shout out their complaints. In Sibiu, hundreds of pensioners gathered in front of the Prefecture. People asked the government representative in the territory to come to talk to them. In Arad, over 300 teachers took to the streets as well.

In many cases there were calls for the government to step down.

Protests are expected to continue and move to Bucharest as the ruling party is going to pass the austerity program through parliament next week. The opposition parties called a no confidence vote this Monday, which had no chance to find a majority in parliament.

Working people were out on the street en masse despite the treachery of the union leaders, who went out of their way to defuse, weaken and dampen the effects of the walkout, using legal maneuvers or in some cases simply refusing to call a strike in their own sector.

The leader of the subway union, for example, delayed a strike by metro workers until the day after the teachers strike and then called it off several hours early because, they said, a nonprofit organization asked them to ease access to a charitable concert.

The surface public transport in Bucharest also announced a strike for June 1, but the bus union leaders reached a deal “in the public interest” with the mayor, so the strike was limited to electric trams. By the morning, however, most trams were working.

The union leaders are not opposed to the austerity program in principle. They call on the government to clamp down on tax evaders and corruption in the public sector and look to the opposition Social Democratic (PSD) and National Liberal (PNL) parties for a solution. The opposition parties, however, only propose further cuts or tax increases, and both have amply shown in the past that they are perfectly capable of carrying out such anti-working class measures.

The protests and strikes are a measure of how seriously the planned cuts affect the lives of ordinary people. Wages in the public service are to be cut by 25 percent and pensions by 15 percent. Even before that the average monthly wage in the public service was only 300 euros. The average pension is €180.

Euronews quoted an angry woman, saying, “Let’s see a minister give up their salary and live on ours instead. Let’s see how they manage their lives”. Another worker said, “The government should give up these criminal measures, I mean it. They should apply some more coherent economic measures for the medium and long term. We’ll end up starving”.

The reaction of the government to the strike was a mixture of arrogance and provocation. Days ago, Transportation Minister Radu Berceanu admitted during a TV interview that politicians have been reluctant to speak about the real economical situation in Romania during the election campaign. They “lied by omission”, she said, because no party would have been so “suicidal” as to tell the truth.

Finance Minister Vladescu has declared, “We could have continued to lie for another six months to see what happens and to tell you that Europe is doing fine, that Romania is going well. But the government has decided to tell the truth and to let people know that things in Europe do not go well, and that there are chances for Romania to go even worse”.

While people were protesting all over the country Labor Minister Mihai Seitan declared that if the austerity measures announced by the government fail to have the desired effect, next year wages will be cut even more, possibly up to 30 to 50 percent.

The present protests are only the beginning of sharp social confrontations. According to a recent poll conducted by the Group of Social Studies 2000, 79.2 percent of the respondents believe Romania is moving in the wrong direction. The opinions regarding the population’s trust towards the ruling political class shows that 61 percent of those surveyed have negative opinions towards the ruling Democrat-Liberal Party (PDL), 56.5 percent towards the oppositional Social-Democrat Party (PSD) and 46.8 percent towards the National Liberal Party (PNL).

More than 40 percent of those polled consider the whole political class responsible for the economic situation, while another 22.8 percent blame the Boc government, and 26.7 percent fault President Traian Basescu. According to another poll, 81 percent of the surveyed are in favor of continuing the general strike. Eighty-eight percent consider the way the government has decided to reduce the budgetary deficit is wrong, while only 12 percent think it’s the right decision.



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