

Czech public sector workers strike against austerity measures

Markus Salzmann
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More than 150,000 public sector workers took strike action in the Czech Republic on Wednesday to protest against the austerity measures of the government. It was one of the largest social protests since 1989.

Numerous hospitals were reduced to emergency operations and authorities such as tax offices, welfare agencies, museums, courts and schools remained closed. Demonstrations and protest actions took place in the capital city Prague and in an additional 20 cities. Policemen and firefighters, who are subject to a strike prohibition, plan their own day of action on 15 December.

The strike had been called by the CMKOS trade union federation and a number of smaller trade unions. According to their own figures, around a third of all public service employees took part in the strike. In several cities a large number of school and higher education students took part in the demonstrations.

The protests are directed against planned wage cuts and the reform of the country's industrial law. The reform entails a new tariff structure based on employee performance and involves wage cuts and worsened working conditions for a large majority of employees. In addition, the government's budget draft for 2011 entails a 10 percent cut in public service salaries.

The planned savings totals 35 billion crowns (€1.4 billion) and are aimed at ensuring that the state deficit not does not exceed 135 billion crowns (€5.4 billion) in 2011.

Components of the savings package are cuts in social security benefits for the handicapped, substantial restrictions in child subsidies and sick pay, as well as a cut in subventions for the newly born. Existing tax relief for lower and middle incomes is also to be lifted in order to finance the substantial costs of recent flooding in the republic.

Prime Minister Petr Necas of the conservative Civic Democratic Party (ODS) criticized the strike and stressed that his government would not budge from its austerity course. At the beginning of November the government had called a state of emergency in order to assure the passage of the austerity measures in the face of opposition in the Lower House.

Despite these circumstances, the appropriate laws were rapidly undersigned by the Czech president, Vaclav Klaus. The signature of the president served above all to accelerate of the procedure, since in the Czech Republic only amendments to the country's constitution explicitly require the agreement of the president. Klaus also called the strikes "irresponsible".

The protests are an expression of widespread anger with the right-wing government, consisting of an alliance of the conservative ODS with the Top 09 party, led by Foreign Minister Karl Schwarzenberg, and the right-wing pro-market Public Affairs party (VV). In 2008, over 800,000 people protested against the austerity policies of the ODS government at the time.

The rightist parties are able to impose their stringent austerity measures, despite massive popular opposition, because they are supported by the two largest opposition parties—the Social Democrats (CSSD) and the Communist Party (KSCM)—and the trade unions, despite the latter's occasional verbal opposition to the government.

The social-democratic CSSD has played the dominant role in Czech politics over the past 20 years. It implemented the privatisation of the state's former nationalised industries and wiped out extensive parts of the social safety net in line with its drive to enter the European Union. For nearly 10 years the CSSD governed in a de facto coalition with the ODS and represents the largest parliamentary group in the current

parliament.

In Prague the Social Democrats recently formed a coalition with the ODS, which has governed the Czech capital for 20 years and is notorious for its corruption, nepotism and contempt for ordinary citizens. The election of the ODS representative Bohuslav Svoboda to the post of mayor led to fierce protests because the largest number of votes had gone to Top 09, which emerged from the election empty handed.

The formation of the coalition in Prague, established shortly after the passage of the austerity laws, was a clear signal to Prime Minister Necas and President Klaus that they could rely on the support of the social democrats.

The same applies to the country's two trade unions. The current president of the Senate and official number two in the state is the former trade union head Milan Stech. Stech was recently rewarded with this office for his many years of activity as a trade union boss, acting in the interest of the ruling elite.

After the outbreak of the international economic crisis in 2008 the Czech trade unions had worked hand in hand with companies to reduce jobs in the automobile industry, in particular those of workers from the neighbouring countries of Poland and Slovakia. The trade unions argued that dismissing these foreign workers would help protect the jobs of Czech workers.

In the period following the collapse of Stalinism the CMKOS trade unions developed as part of the so-called "democracy movement". The ideology of this movement was based on vehement anticommunism and nationalism and the speedy introduction of free-market reforms. The results of this policy cost tens of thousands of Czech workers their jobs, led to the division of Czechoslovakia into two independent states, and subsequent sharp attacks on the jobs and rights of Slovak workers.

At the start of this year the Czech federation of trade unions called off a strike of its members in public suburban transport because it would have coincided with the protests in Greece and other countries. At that time the trade unions supported the politics of the "government of experts" led by the independent technocrat Jan Fischer, which also demanded swingeing savings cuts.

The Czech Communist Party has given its official support to the strikes, but has largely left it up to the

social democrats and trade unions to dominate the proceedings. Once again forces inside the Communist Party are calling for cooperation with the social democrats. According to recent polls both parties would have a majority in parliament, with the governing parties losing much of their support.



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