

Protests continue in Croatia

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Since late February, continual protests involving thousands of people have been waged in many cities and towns throughout Croatia. Young people, in particular, are demanding the resignation of the right-wing government led by Prime Minister Jadranka Kosor. Workers and farmers are protesting against low wages, horrific working conditions and the precarious situation in the former Yugoslav autonomous republic.

Underlying the protests is the deteriorating social situation. Croatia was hit hard by the financial crisis, which the Kosor government met with a brutal austerity programme involving a drastic reduction in wages and benefits. The economy shrank by 1.4 percent in 2010, and the unemployment rate reached 19.6 percent. The unions say the wages of 70,000 employees are not being paid.

Demonstrations were held in several Croatian cities on Saturday, March 5. About 1,500 participants assembled in the northern Croatian town of Varazdin, according to the Hina news agency. The co-organiser of the protest, Denis Mladenovic, said, “We do not want a state in which the workers work without getting paid, in which they end up on the street after working for their firm for 20 years, and in which young people are left with no perspective.”

On March 6, more than 8,000 people gathered in the country’s capital, Zagreb, to hold the biggest demonstration so far. It was led by women workers from the Kamensko textile factory, who have been denied wages for months and are now out of work. The reason they have no job is because the company was forced into bankruptcy after its corrupt management was shown to have exploited close ties with the government.

The situation at the Kamensko factory reveals why the protests are spreading throughout the country. The company was lavishly subsidised by the government, but the money disappeared into dubious channels and it went bankrupt, while the workers went without wages for months.

On March 10, thousands of demonstrators amassed in front of banks and politicians’ homes, as well as the party and union headquarters in the Croatian capital. They

chanted slogans against the government and the opposition parties.

Resentment is also directed against Croatia’s Catholic Church, whose representatives are closely associated with the political parties, and regularly spout nationalistic and chauvinist poison from the pulpit. “Priests are thieves!” shouted the crowd in front of a cathedral in Zagreb. “Down with the child molesters!”

Some demonstrators wore masks bearing the image of the former prime minister, Ivo Sanader, who is currently awaiting extradition in an Austrian detention centre. The long-time head of the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), who operated with his party stalwarts to systematically plunder state institutions and companies, is seen by the population as a symbol of a thoroughly corrupt and rotten system.

Sanader was arrested on the Tauern motorway near Salzburg in December 2010 and immediately placed in detention, pending extradition. According to the arrest warrant, the Croatian judiciary accused the former prime minister of abusing his office and setting up a criminal consortium. He is said to have defrauded the Croatian state budget of €6 million via the dubious transactions of companies closely related to him. It is believed that the money ended up in the secret funds of the HDZ and elsewhere. He is also accused of involvement in the Carinthian Hypo-Alpe Adria bank affair, and suspected of participating in a money-laundering operation in Austria.

The Croatian anti-corruption prosecution office, the USKOK, is also investigating Sanader in relation to a new case. It accuses him and Croatian businessman Robert Jezic of intention to use Jezic’s petrochemical firm, Dioki, to hive off about €10 million from the JANAF state oil company. In doing so, Sanader again committed an abuse of office, according to the authorities.

It is believed that he pushed through the sale of a land site for oil storage tanks—supplied by Jezic—in Zagreb in 2008 and 2009. The site’s price of €28 million was overvalued by €10 million. The meeting between representatives of JANAF and Jezic is said to have been

organised by the former economics minister, Damir Polancec, who is already in custody awaiting trial for abuse of authority. When JANAF initially refused to go along with the deal, Sanader personally argued for the purchase of the property at a meeting with the firm.

Sanader denies the charges against him, claiming they were politically motivated. He opposes extradition to Croatia on the grounds that he cannot be expected to receive a fair trial there, although the country is ruled by a fellow member of his party, Jadranka Kosor, whose career he cultivated for many years.

The wave of protests is being supported by broad sections of the population. A survey released by the Croatian state television channel HTV showed that 70 percent of Croats support the protests. Only 21 percent are against it and 9 percent are undecided. One in three of those questioned is planning to participate in future demonstrations.

The protests will mainly be organised through the Internet and the media now refer to them as “Facebook protests”. Further demonstrations are planned across the country. The ruling HDZ accuses the opposition of fomenting the protests. However, although opposition politicians are now gaining plenty of media support in an attempt to latch onto the demonstrations, they wield very little influence over them.

More than 60 percent of the population demand immediate new elections. But a survey shows that not a single representative of the established parties is receiving any significant support. Zeljko Rohatinski, head of the federal reserve bank and representative of international finance, is only relatively well-placed in the race with a meagre 13.8 percent of the vote. On the other hand, the social democratic opposition leader, Zoran Milanovic, only has 5.8 percent and incumbent Prime Minister Kosor a mere 3.3 percent.

The distrust shown towards all the established parties is more than justified. The social democrats—who emerged from the pre-Balkan war Stalinist state party, and from whose ranks Ivo Josipovic was chosen to fill the current post of president—support the government’s plan to conduct the upcoming referendum on joining the European Union only after the parliamentary elections, rather than combining both ballots in the same vote. Josipovic warns that it “wouldn’t be good” if the EU referendum turned out to be a vote on the government.

Membership of the EU, which is the aim of the ruling elite, is increasingly unpopular in Croatia. The brutal austerity measures imposed by Brussels on Greece,

Ireland, Spain and Portugal have not gone unnoticed in Croatia. Last November, a Gallup poll indicated that only 38 percent were in favour of joining the EU, while some 43 percent were opposed and the rest remained undecided. During the recent demonstrations, EU flags were burned in the streets.

The HDZ reacts to the growing protests with provocations and outbursts of chauvinism. The party is presumed to have deliberately sent provocateurs to the protests to create a pretext for a crackdown on demonstrators by the security forces.

At least 33 people were injured in violent clashes between young protesters and police in Zagreb. According to the police, more than 50 demonstrators were arrested. These rowdy protesters were not participating in the rally, but had gathered outside the government headquarters in the old quarter of Zagreb. The police used batons against them, while the demonstrators threw bottles and stones.

The clashes occurred on the edge of a rally of war veterans, who accuse the government of not sufficiently protecting them from criminal prosecution for crimes committed during the Balkan wars between 1991 and 1995. These war veterans were mostly led by extreme right-wing groups closely aligned with the HDZ.

The current head of government, Jadranka Kosor, was formerly responsible for war veterans—among other things—in her first ministerial post under Ivo Sanader. She recently welcomed the release of the war veteran Tihomir Purda, who was arrested in Bosnia-Herzegovina for war crimes. This amounted to a deliberate attempt to stir up nationalist sentiment and come to terms with right-wing groups.



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