

Serbian government threatens protesting farmers and armament workers

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Much of the Serbia's northern province of Vojvodina has been blocked since May 30 by protesting farmers. They have reportedly deployed some 10,000 tractors and other large machinery on vital traffic points throughout the region, protesting the decision by the Ministry of Agriculture to cut their subsidies. The farmers initially planned to stage a protest in Belgrade, but following the intervention of the police, they responded by blocking the roads to the capital.

Largely ignored by the mainstream media, the blockade received wider coverage as it grew and entered its fourth day on June 2, with no signs of subsiding. B92 news agency reports that the provincial capital of Novi Sad is cut off, as well as Pancevo, a city just north of Belgrade that is now accessible only by train. The international border pass of Tovarnik-Sid, between Croatia and Serbia, is also blocked and the only open road in Vojvodina is the highway Belgrade-Novı Sad-Horgos, toward the Hungarian border. According to the B92 reporter, it seems that the blockade has intensified with more tractors joining the protesters Thursday morning.

The protest started on Monday when farmers learned of the planned cuts in the subsidies. In 2010 the farmers received a subsidy of 14,000 dinars (€140) per hectare for up to 100 hectares of land. They claimed to have been promised the same subsidy for 2011 but that the government has suddenly reneged and decided to pay for only up to 10 hectares.

It is the middle of the growing season and farmers contend they have already invested in their land, often taking out large loans to do so, and that it is unacceptable for central government to cheat them out

of their expected subsidies now.

Despite the initial claims that there is no money in the budget the government offered to extend the subsidies first for 30 hectares and later unofficially for up to 50 hectares, but farmers are firm in demanding what has been promised them—i.e., the same level of subsidies as last year.

Addressing themselves to the government, but indirectly threatening the farmers and those tempted to support them, the Federation of Employers issued a statement Thursday, saying that private companies are losing hundreds of millions of dinars daily as a result of the collapse of most of the Vojvodina region. Since goods are not delivered and sales are down 70 percent, major retail chains are considering closing their stores.

Novi Sad-based Radio 021 reports on a possible radicalisation of the protests. On June 1, it quotes a farmer, Vladimir Njaradi, who explained that farmers could close off the supply of bread and milk to the cities in order to put pressure on the government.

On June 2, Radio 021 reported a failed attempt by the farmers to block the city garbage disposal plant. The same farmer related how police first threatened them with prosecution and later with physical removal if they continued to obstruct the garbage trucks.

There have already been numerous attempts to divide the farmers and manipulate public opinion against them. Deputy Minister of Agriculture Milos Milovanovic sought to defend the government's offer and told B92 that 90 percent of farmers have less than 30 hectares of arable land, thereby implying that they

had little to lose if they received less subsidy. With the exception of Belgrade, Vojvodina is the richest region in Serbia, and some reports are trying to capitalise on this to divide the farmers regionally, especially since there are signs of emerging support for the protests from other parts of the country, such as Mladenovac in central Serbia.

Reflecting the generally dire social situation in Serbia, the farmers' protest and blockade is resonating with many sections of workers. People interviewed by B92 and Radio 021, including truck drivers or passengers in a city bus stopped in traffic, expressed support and understanding of the plight of the farmers, despite being heavily inconvenienced.

The comments sections of news web sites have provided an outlet for this popular sentiment. Hundreds of comments express the desire of ordinary people to help by providing water and sandwiches to the "farmers on the barricades", and others call for widening the struggle and demands.

Social discontent and anger is palpable, and the current protest movements in Serbia are not restricted to farmers. Sections of workers are also undertaking militant actions in defence of their jobs.

Workers at the Zastava Arms armament factory in Kragujevac, central Serbia, have been striking from March 23, when they occupied the factory's arms warehouse in protest against unpaid wages, the unclear future status of the factory and the company's alleged export problems. The protest radicalised on June 2, when the workers occupied additional ammunition depots located away from the factory. The workers were outraged when the government missed the deadline for continuing negotiations.

Defence Minister Dragan Sutanovac was quoted by Belgrade daily *Politika* saying that the factory is "necessary", but implied that only those who scabbed on the strike would retain their jobs. Trying to divide workers and prepare for a future downsizing he said: "I support the union struggle, but a union can only exist in a working factory," and, "I wonder who's on strike, those who work or those who don't?"



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