Hungarian government agrees to forced labor for the unemployed

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Based on its two-thirds majority, the ruling Fidesz party led by Prime Minister Victor Orban passed a law in the Hungarian Parliament on 11 July requiring the unemployed to undertake forced labor. Those who refuse to carry out such compulsory forms of work will lose all entitlement to benefits. This so-called "Hungarian labor plan" is the latest in a new round of brutal attacks on the Hungarian population carried out by Orban, and accompanied by a further strengthening of authoritarian state structures.

The labor plan will result in 225 million euros savings annually for the government and in turn facilitate a massive reduction in national wage levels. The payment paid for those undertaking the forced labor is based on the social assistance rate of 28,500 forints (110 euros) per month, i.e., a sum which is less than half the monthly minimum wage of 78,000 forints.

In recent years thousands of public employees have been laid off, leading to staff shortages in some areas. The labor plan will free up workers to be exploited in forced labor schemes for major state works programs related to infrastructure and agriculture. Hungarian media have cited the construction of soccer stadiums, road works, maintenance of drainage systems and the construction of dams as examples of the new "community service".

400,000 Hungarians are immediately eligible to carry out such labor. In a recent interview Orban made clear that, in his view, such forced labor was urgently required. In future dams will be constructed "not with the technology of the 21st century (...), but by hand."

The plan envisages that the unemployed can be used either for state projects, or "loaned out" to private companies. It is probably no coincidence that these plans were announced during the recent visit of Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao to Hungary. In addition to buying up large quantities of government bonds, China also plans to invest in industrial and infrastructure projects in the country.

In order to increase the army of potential forced laborers the duration for the payment of unemployment benefit is to be reduced to 180 days from the current 270 days. In a parallel action, the Health Ministry announced that the records of about 220,000 disability pensioners are to be reopened. They will be examined to check their health status. Those regarded as capable of some sort of work will then lose their disability status, making them eligible for forced labor.

At the same time, the new law provides a number of benefits for employers, which, as the Wall Street Journal declared, will give "entrepreneurs more elbow room".

The rules governing the unemployed have been dramatically tightened up. If the distance from their homes to the site of their forced labor exceeds a journey time of two hours, they are to be housed in local barracks.

Those hardest hit by the measures which will be the Hungarian Roma minority, which accounts for nearly 8 percent of the population. Due to pervasive discrimination, unemployment in the Roma community averages more than 50 percent, and in many areas is close to 80 percent.

According to the government, gangs of forced laborers are to be monitored by retired police officers. Thousands of retired police officers who are barely able to make ends with their miserly pensions and being more or less forced to return to work.

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No resistance to the "labor plan" can be expected from the opposition Socialist Party (MSZP). Three years ago, the previous government, led by the MSZP, had put forward similar plans. At that time the trade unions had criticized the government, but only from the standpoint that the slashing of regular, full-time jobs weakened the "bargaining power" of the unions.

Encouraged by the complicity of the unions, Orban has undertaken further steps towards an authoritarian state structures. The government recently filled all five vacant posts at the Constitutional Court with its own candidates. All the new judges are loyal to the government, and some are even leading members of Fidesz. The new Constitutional Court judge Istvan Balsai was formerly a Justice Minister and is currently a Fidesz deputy, while prosecutor Peter Szalay represents many party leaders on legal matters.

The appointments are based on a new law that increased the number of Constitutional Court judges. A previous vacant post was filled by Istvan Stumpf, the former cabinet head of the Orban government.

The Parliament also agreed a provision in "special cases" allowing for the police to interrogate "suspects" for 24 hours without the provision of a legal representative. This represents a reduction in the period original proposed by the government (48 hours), but that does not alter the fact that an member of the European Union, which chaired the EU for the first half of this year, now permits the interrogation of people without witnesses and legal protection.

Mid-July also saw a sharpening up of the Hungarian Media Act. This measure has been accompanied by a veritable purge of journalists. Last week over 570 of the total 3,400 staff members at four state-run media concerns - Magyar Radio, MTI, Duna TV and MTI - were sacked. The layoffs were made public between July 6-8, and are to be continued this week in the regional studios in five major cities. Hundreds more dismissals are planned for later this year.

The president of the European Federation of Journalists, Arne Konig commented: "This looks like a real purge taking place literally days after the end of the EU Presidency of Hungary and as the new media law is now fully effective….We are alarmed by the number of jobs concerned and also by the suspicion that some of these layoffs may be politically motivated".

In addition pressure is being increased on private TV and radio stations. They will no longer be allowed to apply for broadcasting frequencies, if they have debts to the Media Authority NMHH. Such debts can take the form of fees or fines. In line with the law passed last December fines can be imposed by the NMHH for what it regards as anti-government editorial content.

In addition, the NMHH is allowed to decided on a yearly basis which state TV and radio stations continue to operate. The news production of the state broadcasters MTI and Duna TV, radio and the news agency MTI has been already been subjected to the control of a so-called "news center".

Such measures to close down any potential outposts of critical opinion have been deliberately undertaken by the Fidesz government in anticipation of broad social opposition to the social attacks it is carrying out.

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