

Hunger strikes spread in Montenegro

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Since the beginning of the year many people have gone on hunger strikes throughout Montenegro, the smallest of the states emerging after the breakup of Yugoslavia. It has a population of around 620,000.

The spate of hunger strikes reflect the desperate situation facing layers of the population amid rising social deprivation and a complete loss of confidence in the political establishment—both the judiciary and the official trade unions.

The main cause of widespread poverty and the widening social divide in Montenegro and neighbouring Balkan states is the restoration of capitalism in Eastern Europe 20 years ago. It was accomplished through a privatisation process in which formerly state-owned factories and infrastructure were sold off to private investors at fire sale prices. Most production in Montenegro has since been discontinued, with plants closed and equipment sold off.

A prime example of this process is described in the Montenegrin weekly *Monitor* of July 15. The article deals with the social situation in the city of Berane in the underdeveloped northern region of Montenegro. Even though the city itself has only 11,000 people—and the whole municipality around 35,000—*Monitor* estimates that around 10,000 jobs were lost in the “transition” since the closing down of the region’s larger companies. Currently, only 300 people in the town are employed in the private sector!

The consequences for the living standards of Berane’s citizens is shown by the example of the Arslani family, who have been poor for generations and live on meagre welfare payments. When one brother succumbed to the grinding poverty and took his own life a month ago, the other brother had to take out a loan to bury him.

The family has to bake their own bread three times a day, since they can afford very little but flour. They take their turns bathing in a tin tub after they’ve heated

the water on the stove. The mother of the house exclaims, “Sometimes I don’t know which century we are living in”.

The situation is similar in another northern city of Bijelo Polje, once an industrial hub of the region. In the last couple of months, the city has seen hunger strikes at the Lenka shoe factory, the Krisma Bjelasica bakery, and by disabled workers from a number of different companies. Krisma Bjelasica workers have announced they will extend their protest by trying to block the main railway connecting Montenegro with Serbia in the north.

The president of the striking committee of Krisma, Ratko Furtula, expressed the workers’ outrage and utter loss of confidence in the management and the trade unions—while also showing the limits of his perspective—by declaring that they now “only believe in the state (the government) and God”.

The situation is not much better for workers in central Montenegro. Hunger strikes have broken out sporadically in Niksic, a city that formerly had many heavy industry plants and mines. Hunger strikes have also taken place at the steel plant Zeljezara, bauxite and coal mines in the region, the Nikpek bakery, the Autoprevozno transport company and Duvankomerc tobacco producer (all in Niksic).

There are also hunger strikes in the south—a region with slightly higher income levels due to tourism. In the seaside city of Herceg Novi, workers from the construction firm Novi Prvoborac were on hunger strike for almost a month before management agreed to some of their demands.

More and more workers resort to these drastic measures because they regard such hunger strikes as the only way to draw attention to their plight. They rightly feel abandoned by their unions and have learned from experience the futility of waiting for any reaction from the slow-working and corrupt judiciary.

One of the major demands in many hunger strikes is unpaid wages. In neighbouring Serbia *B92* reports that only 20% of employers pay wages on time. The rest receive their wages on average a month and a half late! Although precise figures are hard to come by, there is little reason to suspect the situation is much different in Montenegro. However, unlike in neighbouring Croatia, it is not illegal to withhold payments to workers in Montenegro—and there are powerful interests fighting to keep it that way.

The Croatian financial portal *Limun.hr* of July 20 quotes Rumica Kostic from the Employers Federation of Montenegro, who declared, “[T]he introduction of such a norm (paying wages on time) into Montenegrin criminal law would be inappropriate...[because] such an initiative...would bring employers that became non-liquid for justified reasons into an unenviable position”.

An employer being required to pay wages on time apparently creates an “unenviable position”. Workers, on the other hand, who need 56% of the inflated figure given as the official average pay check just to pay for food are presumably in a more enviable position!

The Montenegrin Employers Federation is not alone in its opposition to pay workers’ wages on time. This is also the position of the local trade unions. *Limun.hr* quotes the Montenegrin Federation of Trade Unions, which also opposes changing the regulation because it “would not ensure better respect of the workers’ rights [sic]”.

Underlining its complete disrespect for members and workers in general, Federation of Trade Unions of Montenegro General Secretary Zoran Masonicic was reported by *South European Times* of July 20 as saying that with regard to the many hunger strikes, he is “aware that people are losing patience and certain problems’ solutions linger for years, but still, I do not support the most extreme methods”.

Masonicic claims workers have at their disposal laws and legal institutions to protect their rights and to protest. At the same time he neglects to mention that his own federation opposes regulations to make employers accountable for withholding workers’ wages!

The workers of Montenegro have largely realised the futility of appealing to the management or the trade unions, who both have completely opposing and hostile agendas. The next step is to understand that they can

achieve nothing of consequence without a politically independent struggle of the working class. They are engaged in nothing short of a political struggle for state power and the redistribution of wealth, which can only be successful if linked with similar struggles carried out by workers in Greece, throughout the Balkans and internationally.



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