

Right-wing demonstrations against Roma in the Czech Republic

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Agitation by right-wing forces in the Czech Republic against the country's Roma minority reached a high point last weekend. Violent clashes between neo-Nazis and police took place at a number of demonstrations organized by the neo-fascist "Workers Party for Social Justice" (DSSS). The protests took place in Rumburk and Varnsdorf in north Bohemia, a region plagued by unemployment and poverty.

After the rally in Varnsdorf, DSSS supporters fought street battles with police, who prevented them from beginning a planned march to a Roma settlement. Six people were injured, and police arrested a total of 41 people. About 600 police officers and three helicopters were deployed in the biggest police operation in the Czech Republic since the International Monetary Fund meeting in Prague in 2000.

Prior to the demonstrations, police had seized a number of weapons while searching cars in several villages, and on the German-Czech border. One right-wing extremist was arrested for carrying a gas pistol.

The recent riots had been sparked by an incident in Rumburk three weeks ago, when Czech youth were beaten by Roma after visiting a disco. In early August Roma were also involved in violent scuffles with visitors to a gambling hall.

The region is marked by unemployment, poverty and poor education. The district of Decin, in which Rumburk is located, has the third highest level of unemployment (13.7 percent) in the Czech Republic. Unemployment and poverty among Roma is particularly pronounced, standing at over 50 percent. Recent cuts in social assistance by the right-wing

government of Prime Minister Petr Necas have exacerbated the situation.

The DSSS, which called the demonstrations, is the successor organization to the Workers Party, which was notorious for its rallies against Roma settlements and attacks on minorities. The party was banned in 2010. At a recent demonstration, a DSSS representative advocated violence against Roma, saying: "The politicians at City Hall are idle so we have to take the law into our own hands."

Groups such as the DSSS can conduct their activities brazenly because of the support they receive from the media and established political circles. After the incident two weeks ago, the Czech media mounted an hostile campaign against the Roma, accusing them of racist violence. In such reports little or no mention is made of the systematic social exclusion of Roma, who confront violence and hostility on a regular basis.

Several mayors of Bohemian towns had actually joined calls for the latest demonstrations.

In May the mayors of Rumburk and Jiřetín pod Jedlovou, sent an open letter to the right-wing prime minister Petr Necas. In their letter they complained about the increasing influx of Roma from other parts of the country and Slovakia. Municipal agencies like social services and schools were overburdened and crime was increasing, they complained.

Following a rally in Rumburk two weeks ago attended by local politicians, about a thousand residents surrounded houses occupied by Roma in order to provoke them.

Together with the country's conservative parties, the

Czech Social Democratic Party has long pursued a policy aimed at the social exclusion of the Roma.

Many Czech communities benefit from EU funding officially aimed at improving the situation for Roma. The weekly *Tyden* reported recently, however, that these funds are being used for other purposes. According to the magazine, it is being used to improve urban centers and neighborhoods inhabited by high earners.

Most of the 250,000 Roma in the Czech Republic live in slums or are driven into selected, highly impoverished areas.

Real estate companies offer the Roma severance payments or relief on debts if they leave lucrative downtown locations and move to small communities. In these communities the Roma are expected to move into empty houses, where landlords demand exorbitant rents. Czech municipalities encourage this operation in order to receive official EU funding.

Šimáek Martin, director of the State Agency for Social Integration, called this behavior “exploitation.” The behavior of the real estate managers was leading to social unrest and caused frictions, Šimáek said in Czech radio.

The relationship between growing right-wing violence and the politics of the Necas government is obvious. Necas’ Civic Democratic Party (ODS) is trying to suppress any opposition to the austerity program which the government is currently enacting in response to the economic crisis. In this process it is relying on far-right forces.

The ODS has appointed Ladislav Batrora, an avowed anti-Semite and nationalist, to the post of personnel director of the Ministry of Education. Batora is in close contact with President Vaclav Klaus, who broadly shares his reactionary views.



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