

Poverty and hunger on the rise in Hungary

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A social catastrophe is looming in Hungary. Immediate responsibility for this rests with the right-wing government of Viktor Orban, and the austerity program dictated by the European Union and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Orban came to power in 2010 following widespread disillusionment with the previous coalition government headed by the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP). The MSZP had begun its own program of social cuts in order to obtain IMF loans. In the autumn of 2008, the MSZP administration received a standby loan of 20 billion euros from the IMF and other institutions. In return, it commenced a wave of major public-sector cuts and other measures aimed at reducing the country's budget deficit. The discredited MSZP then suffered a debacle in the 2010 election.

In flagrant contrast to the demagogic promises of social improvement he made during the 2010 election campaign, Orban has continued and intensified the austerity policies introduced by the MSZP. This has had devastating consequences for the most vulnerable sections of Hungarian society.

Official statistics are not to be trusted since Orban's national-conservative Civic Union (Fidesz) assumed power and proceeded to fill nearly every public institution with pro-government representatives. At the same time, critical media outlets and organizations have been suppressed by a new media law. Only a handful of public organizations and media reports deal with the increasingly perilous situation of many Hungarians hit by the austerity measures.

The previously approved cuts affect every area of social life. Education, health care, pensions and wages have been cut while working conditions have deteriorated considerably. The consequences of this policy are now evident.

Recently published reports indicate that more than 100,000 school children in Hungary are poorly or under nourished. Some 20,000 children do not receive enough food to live on. They are subject to permanent hunger. For

many of these children, their nurseries and schools are the only places where they receive hot meals or other vital foods. Less than half the children drink milk at school, and two-thirds of students do without bread for their school breakfasts.

The public schools are in a disastrous condition. Due to the desperate financial situation in the region, the administrative district of Pest is unable to pay its outstanding bills. As a result, about 40 schools currently lack heating and hot water. The gas supplier TIGÁZ has accumulated over 100 million forints (335,000) in debt. The private company refuses to resume deliveries before its bills are paid.

Instruction is often no longer possible due to the increasing cold, and teachers are being encouraged to skip lessons or postpone them to the spring.

This trend will only be exacerbated by the plans of the Orban government to reorganise local government.

Fidesz is currently working with representatives of the IMF on a municipal reform aimed at reducing the debt accumulated by the Hungarian regional authorities (estimated at about 620 million euros). This is to be achieved by cuts in the public sector, involving wage cuts and redundancies and by halting both the renovation of public buildings and any new construction.

A recent article in the *Pester Lloyd* reveals the role played by the IMF in the cuts already implemented. The article points out that the IMF advised the Hungarian government as it recently passed new labour laws, and concludes that "it was not only Orban and his corporate state, which, under the slogan 'A competitive country in Central Europe by 2014' used the crisis to govern Hungarian workers back into the 19th century and finally reduce so-called citizens into what they are already in practice. Slaves."

The article explains that the head of the IMF delegation, the 38-year-old Ukrainian Irina Ivaschenko, had considerable experience in the flexible treatment of workers' rights in her own country. "When necessary one rewards workers with a selection of peas in a jar when

there is not enough money. Why shouldn't it work in Hungary?"

The government in Budapest has reacted to the growing social desperation with the criminalization of the poorest and most vulnerable members of society. In December new regulations are to be introduced aimed at the homeless. Those who are not prepared to reside in shelters can be arrested and punished with a fine. Cynically described as "protection from hypothermia," the measures will be coordinated by the hard-line right-winger Mate Kocsis, who has already criminalized homeless people by decree in his district.

Kocsis is mayor of the VIII district in Budapest. He was made commissioner for the homeless by the government with a mandate to take a harder line against the growing number of people living on the streets.

In the capital at least 800 beds are lacking for homeless people. Last year the government terminated its cooperation with aid organizations as part of the cost-cutting measures. Fidesz spoke of a "new system" and awarded the grants to groups organised primarily by the church. Only one major NGO with any proven expertise is still involved in the process.

Last winter, the authorities reported 84 deaths due to the cold in Hungary, a significant decline from the year before, but first and foremost a product of statistical manipulation.

It is estimated that about 2,500 people in Budapest are homeless, but this is likely a significant underestimation of the real extent of the problem. Due to the soaring rents—above all in Budapest—increasing numbers can no longer afford their own home and seek other forms of shared accommodation to avoid landing directly on the streets.

Over the past few years, homesteads have emerged in the forests in and around Budapest, where families live in huts built of wood and cardboard. In every major city in Hungary people are now living in dilapidated allotments and summer houses lacking electricity and water.



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