

Thousands protest austerity measures in Hungary

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Several thousand people marched through the Hungarian capital Budapest on Saturday to protest against the austerity policies of the government led by Victor Orban. Held under the slogan “Your life is at stake,” the protest was organised by the Forum for the Cooperation of Trade Unions (SZEF) and was aimed mainly against the education and health policies of the government.

The call to demonstrate by the SZEF had been supported by four other trade union federations—the National Confederation of Trade Unions, the Autonomous Trade Union Confederation, the Democratic League of Independent Trade Unions and the Confederation of Unions of Professionals. At the same time, protests were carried out by police officers, firefighters and other public servants against the brutal austerity measures introduced by the government.

Prime Minister Victor Orban and his Fidesz party are facing increasing popular discontent due to the cuts the government has carried out at the behest of the International Monetary Fund and the European Union. Last year, the government raised taxes on small and medium incomes, and reduced or completely eliminated in some cases pensions and welfare benefits.

Last Thursday, demonstrations were held against a new law criminalising the homeless that entered into force December 1. Protests were held against the inhuman law in 16 different locations, and more demonstrations are planned. The first demonstration against the legislation had taken place on November 21.

Even the director of the Fidesz-affiliated think tank

Nezopont, Agoston Mraz, has been forced to admit recently that Orban’s government has lost much of its support. According to a report by his institution, the 52 percent approval rating for Fidesz in the federal elections in April 2010 has now dropped to 32 percent.

Within the official political spectrum, there is no force seriously capable of opposing the right-wing policies of Fidesz. The Socialist Party (MSZP) and the Greens (LMP) have been unable to profit from the collapse in support for Fidesz. According to polls, support for MSZP had risen to 24 percent in the summer, but in the meantime, this figure has fallen back to just 13 percent. Polls also record that support for the opposition LMP, which has 16 seats in parliament, has declined from 8 percent to 3 percent.

Only the far-right Jobbik has registered slight gains in the polls. Many voters, however, have declared their intention to boycott future elections altogether.

The MSZP, which had served two terms in power before Orban’s government took over, has since split. In October, former Socialist Party prime minister Ferenc Gyurcsany set up the Democratic Coalition and is seeking to attract right-wing Socialists, neo-liberals and conservatives.

The new party won 1,500 registered members in the first month of its existence. Another 3,500 are said to have expressed their willingness to join. According to surveys, half of the MSZP membership have expressed their confidence in Gyurcsany, even though many are refraining from joining the Democratic Coalition at this point.

Plagued by internal squabbling, the MSZP has just 59 of the total 386 seats in parliament. It constitutes the third strongest force after Fidesz and Jobbik. Numerous MSZP members hope to regain lucrative jobs by switching to the Democratic Coalition. Although Gyurcsany is widely hated, he continues to have considerable influence—not least thanks to the extensive fortune he had made during the so-called “wild privatisation” years in the 1990s.

The Hungarian trade unions are playing a particularly odious role in the current situation. On Friday, Minister of Economy Gyorgy Matolcsy said that he had signed an agreement with employers and trade union representatives on those parts of the new Labour Code that deal with the collective rights of workers. Amongst the signatories were the National Association of Trade Unions and the Democratic League of Independent Trade Unions, which issued the call for the protests on Saturday.

The new labour law practically abolishes the right to strike. Wage cuts and tougher working conditions will be easier to enforce, and the influence of the trade unions is curtailed.

Since the reintroduction of capitalism in 1989, the unions have worked closely together with all of the respective Hungarian governments—albeit nominally socialist or right-wing conservative—and have been in the forefront of enforcing welfare cuts, wage cuts and layoffs. They have frequently positioned themselves on the far-right side of the political spectrum. Union leaders were even prepared to discuss proposals for new austerity measures with the Orban government.

The widespread rejection of the established parties has resulted in the emergence of protest movements such as Szolidaritas, which draws its name from the Polish Solidarity movement. At a rally in June, Szolidaritas mobilised around 10,000 demonstrators against the government’s pension policy.

Szolidaritas was launched earlier this year by Lt. Col. Peter Konya. Despite his criticisms of the government, Konya advocates a strong state and supports the capitalist system. He is particularly critical of cuts

made in the police and the military. He does not question the austerity measures, but rather criticises the manner in which the cuts are distributed.

The German online daily *Pester Lloyd* characterised the organisation as follows: “Szolidaritas recruited its followers from the trade union umbrella organisation, but also from those institutions regarded to be the pillars of a national-conservative, law-and-order government, similar to Fidesz: army, police, fire and the various security services,”



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