

Protests against new Hungarian constitution

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Some 100,000 people demonstrated in front of the Budapest Opera House last Monday against the new Hungarian constitution that came into force on January 1. The constitution undermines basic democratic rights, curtailing the rights of opposition parties and the judiciary, and lays the seeds of armed conflict with neighbouring countries. It follows the traditions of the fascist dictatorship of the 1930s and 1940s under the Regent Miklos Horthy.

The demonstrators called for the resignation of the right-wing government of Victor Orban, who was attending a ceremony for the new constitution at the Opera House. His government had passed the constitution in April of 2011, when he enjoyed a two-thirds majority in parliament.

The protests were preceded by numerous rallies in December, which were directed against the massive restrictions on press freedoms. Orban's party Fidesz (Hungarian Civic Union) controls the media regulatory authority NMHH, which had withdrawn the broadcasting rights for the opposition radio station Radio Club. The protesters also expressed their solidarity with trade unionists at the public television channels who have been on a hunger strike since December 10 to protest against the manipulation of the media.

The previous constitution dated from 1949 and was changed along Western lines in 1989, after the collapse of the Stalinist regime. After his election victory in April 2010, Orban announced plans for a new constitution, which he described as "completing the revolution in the voting booth".

The new constitution begins by paying homage to God, Christianity, king, crown and pride in the thousand-year history of Hungary. The text refers back to Hungary's "historical" heritage. The term "republic" has disappeared from the name of the country. Last year Orban announced that the new

constitution would put an end to the historic phase in the twentieth century during which "Hungarians [were] systematically suppressed".

As well as passing the new constitution, parliament also introduced many laws in double-quick time. Overall, it adopted 213 new laws last year, including the new constitution, with its two-dozen so-called "cardinal laws". This required just 98 days sitting, meaning that on average more than two laws were read, revised, debated and decided by the parliamentarians each day they sat.

Fidesz party leader János Lázár has announced that it will continue like this in 2012, saying the government will "complete the legal objectives it pursued by June 2012."

The criticism of the Orban government and its right-wing course by Hungary's official opposition, like that of various European politicians, is pure hypocrisy. They are not concerned about the erosion of democratic rights or the social attacks on working people, which are also part of government policy. Rather, they are worried that Orban's economic policy will isolate Hungary in Europe, exposing them to the wrath of the European financial elite.

In September, Fidesz enacted a law that requires banks to convert loans denominated in foreign currency into Hungarian forints at a fixed rate. Any difference with the current exchange rate must be borne by the banks. This measure, which was heavily criticized in Brussels, contributed largely to the fact that the Hungarian currency and government bonds came under pressure. The downgrading of Hungary by rating agency Moody's did the rest.

The new law on the Hungarian central bank intensified the conflict with the EU. It gives the government more influence over the central bank. In protest against the law, the EU Commission and the IMF stopped talks in Budapest in December over an

auxiliary credit amounting to €15 billion to €20 billion.

The protests on Monday, like previous ones, were organized mainly by the opposition parties MSZP (Social Democrats) and LMP (liberal Green). Both support the austerity measures prescribed by the International Monetary Fund. Their main concern is that Hungary may come into conflict with the EU and its most powerful states.

Some veteran politicians and former dissidents have also spoken out at the New Year. In an open letter, they criticize the undemocratic policies of the government and call on European governments to put pressure on Orban. They warn against the open social conflicts that the mixture of austerity and authoritarian measures can produce. The letter states: “Instead of leading to stability and prosperity, such a policy can only lead to conflict, oppression and turmoil.”

A look at the signatories of the letter makes clear what political line stands behind it. Many of them are—or were—members of the Liberal Party (SZDSZ). This party has its origins in the 1980s among the right-wing opponents of the Stalinist bureaucracy. Imre Mecs, Roza Hodosan, Balint Magyar and other SZDSZ members who have signed the open letter are among the most ardent advocates of free-market policies.

After the end of the Stalinist regime in 1989, the first president came from the SZDSZ. With the MSZP, successors of the Stalinists, the SZDSZ formed a coalition government from 1994 to 1998 and from 2002 to 2008, pushing through privatization, massive layoffs and wage cuts.

Typical is the career of another co-signer of the open letter, Gábor Demszky. In his youth, he spent several years as a member of a Maoist group before he became an ardent anti-communist in the 1980s. Before 1989, he joined the SZDSZ and in 1990 was elected as mayor of the capital, Budapest, holding this office for 20 years.

During his tenure, in close cooperation with private companies, he reorganized entire neighbourhoods to benefit a small group of the wealthy. This drove up rents and made homes in these parts of the city unaffordable for many blue- and white-collar workers. Funds from grants were used in luxury projects in the city centre, while working class neighbourhoods on the outskirts of the city decayed.

Orban’s authoritarianism—despite the protests of self-styled democrats like Demszky—is the inevitable

consequence of these anti-working class policies. The introduction of capitalism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union has brought only unemployment, poverty and social decline, while a small privileged layer has been enriched immeasurably. This cannot be reconciled with democracy.

Criticism of Orban from the European Union is accordingly muted. Fidesz is still a member of the European People’s Party (EPP), to which most of the major conservative parties in Europe belong. Orban is the EPP vice chair. Commission President José Manuel Barroso, a political friend of Orban, has raised hardly any criticism of his authoritarian course.

Within the EPP, there are even those supporting Orban. They believe that brutal attacks on the living standards of broad sections of the population can only be implemented with dictatorial measures. In Germany, Karl Holmeier, the rapporteur of the Christian Democrats Parliamentary Group with responsibility for Hungary in the European Affairs Committee, recently justified Orban’s policies on the grounds that the “projects made necessary”—i.e., austerity measures—could only be implemented by a two-thirds majority.



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