

Social protests spread in Eastern Europe

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The wave of social revolts that rocked the Middle East, the US, Greece, Spain and other countries last year has now reached Eastern Europe. The large demonstrations against the Orban regime in Hungary, strikes of railway workers and miners in Bulgaria, and two weeks of angry protests in Romania testify to this.

As yet the movement has a heterogeneous and confused character. Apart from workers fighting to defend their jobs, wages and basic rights and rallies for democracy, there are outbursts of rage by middle-class careerists, whose hopes of advancement have been dashed.

Politically, the protests include all the colours of the rainbow. Some occur spontaneously, while others are organised by rival wings of the ruling elites. Ultra-right tendencies have also sought to intervene.

The driving force of the protests is the deep social divide that has opened up in the twenty years since the restoration of capitalism. The promises of democracy and prosperity used to justify the restoration of capitalism in 1989 have given way to a social nightmare.

The last twenty years were marked by political conflicts between the old Stalinist cliques and the *nouveaux riches* who fought over the division of the spoils. The struggle often assumed fierce forms. The old Stalinist apparatchiks—who had “privatised” state-owned property into their own pockets while styling themselves “socialists”—alternated as heads of government with the new rich, who called themselves “Democrats”, “Liberals” or “Conservatives”.

The masses paid with the loss of their jobs, the destruction of a once-extensive education and health

care system, the collapse of housing and infrastructure.

Entry into the European Union in 2004 and 2007 did not improve the situation, but made it worse. Prices soared, as wages stagnated and purchasing power slumped. Even factories relocated to Eastern Europe because of low wages (such as Nokia in Cluj, Romania) are now being closed and production shifted to Asia and the former Soviet Union, where wages are even lower.

The international financial crisis of 2008 and its aftermath proved the final straw. The European Union and the International Monetary Fund insist that Eastern European countries restructure their budgets by smashing up all that remains of social spending. Although they have not benefited from the euro, they must now pay for its crisis.

The result is a social crisis of revolutionary proportions. The countries of Eastern Europe are among the most unequal in the world. While a small class of property holders, politicians and officials with relations to the EU wallow in luxury, the vast majority of people are fighting to survive.

A worker in a large factory in Bulgaria earns less than €200 a month. In Poland and Hungary, the salary of a primary school teacher—even taking into account the differing purchasing power—is less than a third of the salary of a German colleague. In Romania, a skilled worker earns €300 to €500 gross per month, and educated professionals earn little more. Six thousand doctors have left the country since EU accession.

The extent of the social crisis and the lack of prospects for any improvement ensure that the protests will continue, expand and radicalise. The diverging

social interests will become clearer, and the real class issues will emerge. But the historic problems of political perspective, program and leadership will not be automatically solved.

Four decades of Stalinist rule have left their mark. While the bureaucratic regimes installed in Eastern Europe after the defeat of Hitler's armies expropriated capitalist private property, thus creating the conditions for limited economic progress, they were organically hostile to the working class and a genuine socialist perspective.

The Stalinist regimes used their control of government and industry to secure their own privileges and implacably opposed any independent initiative of workers. Just as ruthlessly as the rulers in Moscow, they suppressed and persecuted the ideas of Trotsky and the Fourth International, which had defended the program of international socialism against Stalinism. Their nationalist perspective of "building socialism in one country" cut workers off from their international class brothers and intensified economic problems.

The role of the Stalinists in the pivotal year of 1989 only increased the political confusion. Under the pressure of growing protests, the Stalinists quickly came to an agreement with the petty-bourgeois leaders of the "democratic" opposition, organising "round tables" to facilitate the transition to capitalism. Exploiting their control of the economy and state, they were the first to enrich themselves.

This was most pronounced in Hungary, where the Stalinists had already brutally crushed a workers' uprising in 1956. In 1989, the Hungarian Stalinists played a key role in the political changes in Eastern Europe.

The opening of the border to Austria by Prime Minister Gyula Horn in April contributed significantly to the destabilisation of all the other Eastern European regimes. Horn had actively participated in the persecution of insurgent workers in Budapest in 1956.

In 2004, Ferenc Gyurcsany, a former Stalinist Youth Secretary and now one of the richest men in the

country, became prime minister. The cynicism with which the "socialist" Gyurcsány implemented social cuts played directly into the hands of the right wing. It is only against this background that one can explain the electoral success of the right-wing Fidesz and the fascist Jobbik parties.

The Hungarian working class, which has a long tradition of militancy, has not spoken its first, let alone its last, word. Support for the Fidesz government of Viktor Orban is waning fast. Despite its nationalist rhetoric, it is in deep crisis and entirely dependent on the International Monetary Fund.

Future developments in Hungary—and in all the countries of Eastern Europe—will depend on the working class once again finding access to the traditions of genuine socialism. It must draw vital lessons from its historical experience with Stalinism and familiarize itself with the perspectives of Trotsky and of the Fourth International.

It must break with all the political organisations that seek to lead it into a nationalist dead end or subordinate it to the dictates of the European Union. Its goal must be the establishment of the United Socialist States of Europe. Its allies are the workers of Eastern and Western Europe and the entire world.

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