

Romanian workers protest privatization, demand resignation of union leaders

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Hundreds of workers have protested in Romania this month against the government's plans to privatize state-owned companies as part of a deal agreed with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the European Commission.

On September 5, over 300 workers at the Oltchim chemical works in Ramnicu Valcea, one of the largest industrial concerns in Romania, gathered in front of government buildings. In its letter of intent to the IMF, the Romanian government of Prime Minister Victor Ponta agreed to finalize Oltchim's privatization by the end of September.

As the deadline approaches, the government is withholding essential funding, causing production to be stopped as the result of 150 million euros [\$US 196 million] owed to the state-owned electrical company Electrica SA. Oltchim workers are demanding that the government resume funding to reopen the plant and pay wages they have not received for two months.

The company management agreed to negotiate with six representatives of the protesters, but over 100 workers stormed the office building, forcing the resignation of the entire board of directors, including Constantin Roibu, general manager at Oltchim since 1991. Ponta condemned the protests saying: "I want to believe that people understand that we must not frighten investors now".

Protesting workers returned to the company on September 6 demanding the resignation of their union leadership and accusing them of being responsible for the collapse of the company. Mihai Diculoiu, the leader of the union, the Free Oltchim Union, speaking from the economics ministry in Bucharest, replied that he had no intention of resigning.

Protests continued throughout the following week with more workers taking part to demand the

resignation of union leaders and that their jobs be retained despite the privatization. Fifteen workers started a hunger strike and on September 13 Liviu Pop, the Minister for Social Dialogue and a former union leader himself, arrived at Oltchim to speak to the 600 protesting workers.

Pop promised that corruption allegations would be investigated and appealed to the hunger strikers "not to turn an economic into a union question; the union leadership problems can be solved in an organized manner, and I say this as a former union leader". He was met with booing and retreated into a nearby building with the help of riot police. He promised that the government would look into the workers' concerns, but refused to acknowledge the workers' demand to depose the union leadership.

On September 14, hundreds of workers from the Mechel steel works in Campia Turzii marched through the city against mass layoffs and the dismantling of the factory. Workers are accusing the Russian group Mechel, which also operates other steel works and repair workshops in the country, of systematically dismantling and selling the factory for scrap.

Last winter production was halted at the plant and 800 were laid off in March. The company has announced plans to sack another 800 workers. Once again, Social Dialogue Minister Pop went to Campia Turzii and stated that "there is nothing further we can do... because the company has adhered to the privatization contract".

The Ponta government, supported by the Social Liberal Union (USL—a coalition between the former Stalinist Social Democrats and the pro-market National Liberal Party) came to power following mass protests in January that brought down the conservative government of Emil Boc. Ponta, who professed his

admiration for France's Socialist Party president Francois Hollande, presented himself as a proponent of growth measures.

Like his French counterpart, however, Ponta continued the outgoing government's program of cuts and prepared further attacks on the working class. Despite a political crisis engendered by a referendum to oust conservative President Traian Basescu, which USL leader Crin Antonescu said was necessary to avoid "social violence this fall even more intense and violent than (the protests) in January", the continuation of policies between the two main parties of the bourgeoisie was assured.

In the letter of intent agreed with the representatives of the IMF and the European Commission, Ponta has pledged to introduce private management to all state-owned companies and mass sackings at the national railway (CFR), national airline (Tarom), post office and in the mining sector. The government has also committed to reducing costs by renegotiating contracts at Tarom and by continuing the reduction in personnel and maintenance expenditures at CFR. In the case of Electrica SA, they plan to conclude the privatization by the end of 2012 and reduce personnel at the same time.

These measures represent the deepest attack on the working class since the mass privatizations of the 1990s and cannot be implemented without arousing widespread popular opposition. In order to carry through these attacks the government is relying first and foremost on the trade unions.

Since the fall of the Stalinist regime in 1989, the latter organizations have acted as a fifth column on behalf of the new bourgeoisie and international capital, overseeing the systematic destruction of former state-owned property. Romania's unions were directly involved in managing and driving state companies into the ground, before being privatized or sold for scrap. The union functionaries became indistinguishable from local and state politicians, who in turn were inextricably linked to a new layer of Romanian multimillionaires.

The filthy role played by the unions has driven millions of workers away from these organizations. Union membership has fallen dramatically, from 80 percent of the workforce in 1990 to just 32.8 percent in 2008.

The process which took place in the former Soviet

Union and the former Stalinist states of Eastern Europe, resulting in a huge growth of poverty and destitution and devastating whole cities, is now to be repeated at Ramnicu Valcea, with the privatization and inevitable shutdown of the factory. The livelihoods of thousands of families are dependent on jobs either at the plant or related industries and services. As workers defend their jobs against the attacks of the government, they inevitably come into direct confrontation with the union.

Various middle class organizations, such as the CriticAtac protest group or the Socialist Alliance Party, promote the unions as a means of pressuring the main capitalist parties to change their policies. These organizations represent political traps for workers and young people and deliberately try to prevent the independent mobilization of the working class.

The attacks of the Ponta government will bring ever-wider sections of the working class into struggle. Nothing can be defended outside of a break with the trade union bureaucracy and the construction of new rank-and-file organizations, armed with a socialist and internationalist program.



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