

Slovenia: Nationwide public sector strike intensifies government crisis

Markus Salzmann
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A nationwide public sector strike largely paralyzed Slovenia on Wednesday last week. The walkout by about 100,000 workers deepened the crisis of the right-wing government of Prime Minister Janez Janša, which faces collapse after only 12 months in office.

The strike meant that schools, kindergartens and universities were closed. Also, staff at the public service broadcaster RTV Slovenia had joined the strike, so there was only limited news coverage. In the health care sector, both doctors and nurses took strike action, meaning only emergency care was provided. In welfare centres and pharmacies there was only emergency service.

Customs officials followed a “work to rule”, as did police officers, who had gone on strike 12 days ago. They refused to impose fines for minor infringements. Firefighters, court officials and prison guards, as well as veterinary officers were also involved in the strike. Some 100,000 of a total of 160,000 public sector workers took part in the one-day strike, which was accompanied by demonstrations in major cities.

In addition to the public sector strike, about 14,000 workers in the metal and electrical industries stayed at home. Across the country, the strike affected 101 of a total of 189 establishments.

It was the second general strike in the public sector within a year against the government’s austerity measures. In April 2012, civil servants went on strike in protest against the €1.25 billion austerity package, which was then passed a month later. It was the largest strike in the public sector since Slovenia declared independence in 1991.

Last year’s austerity measures have already shifted the main burden of the cuts onto public sector workers. In the austerity budget for 2013 and 2014, the government has once again directed massive cuts in the public service. Funding for salaries will be reduced by 5 percent, meaning more wage and job cuts are on the agenda.

For months, Slovenia has been a candidate for the euro rescue fund. In 2007, the public debt ratio stood at just over 20 percent; in 2013 it rose to about 45 percent of GDP. Unemployment has more than doubled in this period and the EU and international financial institutions are demanding radical austerity measures.

There had already been massive protests against the austerity policies of the previous government under the social democrat Borut Pahor, which led to his government being voted out in December 2011. Pahor had previously lost a confidence vote in parliament after several ministers resigned over corruption scandals.

Today the situation is similar. Just one year after the right-wing Janša government assumed the reins of government, it is “clinically dead,” as the daily *Delo* recently headlined. The main coalition partner of Prime Minister Janša’s Democratic Party (SDS), the Civic List (DL) headed by parliamentary speaker Gregor Virant, has renounced its allegiance.

Virant demanded the resignation of the prime minister after he was unable to explain the origin of €210,000 in his personal bank account. This was followed by two other coalition partners. Foreign Minister Karl Erjavec of the Pensioners’ Party (DeSUS) announced plans to quit the government should Janša refuse to go. He is already talking of possible elections in May.

Economics Minister Radovan Zerjav said his People’s Party (SLS) wanted to ensure the labour market reforms were put in place in February. If Janša remained in office, he said, they would also leave the coalition. Only the small, ultra-conservative Catholic NSi spoke out against new elections, because they would have little chance of re-entering parliament. Also, the SDS would probably lose 30 percent of its seats in new elections.

Currently, it is uncertain what political camp would emerge victorious from the elections. A recently published report into corruption also points the finger at

opposition leader Zoran Jankovic (Positive Slovenia). According to the latest polls, Positive Slovenia would get the most votes (18 percent), followed by Janša's SDS with 12 percent. Both the conservative camp and the social democrats advocate strict austerity measures.

Under these conditions, the unions have the role of keeping discontent with the established parties under control, and of preventing an independent political movement of the working class. Last month, representatives of the major union associations declared that they would not seek a referendum against the massive budget cuts planned for 2013 and 2014.

The unions are submitting to an undemocratic decision of the Supreme Court, which had unceremoniously declared that a referendum against the cuts would be illegal. The announcement by the court was made just before the start of several demonstrations in the capital Ljubljana and in other major cities. There had already been weeks of demonstrations against the government in numerous other cities.

To prevent a broad strike movement developing on Wednesday, the largest union representing metal and electrical workers (SKEI) had called only for a limited protest strike. It called on its members to stay at home, thus isolating them from the public sector employees. The protest was expressly not directed against the government, but was aimed solely at enforcing wage demands. About 85,000 people are employed in the Slovenian metal and electrical industries, of which 35,000 are members of SKEI.

The public sector unions are not in principle opposed to the right-wing policies of the government. Their protest is directed mainly against the fact that the government has adopted the cuts unilaterally, without any negotiations. The first of their six strike demands is therefore that the unions want to be recognized as equal "social partners".



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