

New protests against Hungary's Fidesz government

Markus Salzmann
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On December 14-16 numerous protests took place against the government of Prime Minister Viktor Orban in Hungary. The immediate cause was the budget passed last Monday by the right-wing Fidesz government, which includes further massive cuts to social programs.

About three thousand people demonstrated December 14 in Kossuth Square in front of the parliament building in Budapest. On Monday, demonstrators blocked roads all over Hungary, and on the following day, thousands protested against the government in several Hungarian cities as well as outside the country.

The official spokesmen for the protests, including union representatives and teachers, criticized cuts to social security, retirement benefits and education. Several speakers at the rallies pointed to the high level of social inequality in Hungary. At the same time, European flags could be seen and anti-Russian slogans could be heard on the various demonstrations.

The budget passed by the Hungarian parliament stipulates a ten percent cut in social spending. Additional cuts amounting to two billion euros [\$US 2.4 billion] are planned over the next three years. The measures will have a significant impact on the working class, especially its poorest layers.

Social security is due to be cut to a minimum and partially replaced with “material assistance,” in the form of foodstuffs, for example. Family subsidies will only be paid to families in which at least one person is employed. Families in which children attend neither nursery school nor school will also be excluded from any social assistance.

The social situation in the country is already dire. While wages and retirement payments stagnate, the prices of basic foodstuffs are rising rapidly. In the past ten years, food costs in Hungary have risen by 164.6

percent, the second highest rate in Europe. Of Hungary's 19 districts, twelve are on the list of the poorest regions in the European Union (EU).

Poverty has grown dramatically under the right-wing Fidesz government. According to the Tárki research institute, about 50 percent of the population already live beneath the poverty threshold. The Hungarian Central Statistical Agency ceased publishing data on the number of people under the legal poverty limit after Orban entered the government in 2010. The most recent report on poverty by Eurostat—the EU's statistical agency—showed Hungary as the fifth poorest country in the EU, with only Bulgaria, Romania, Greece, and Latvia below it. Only in Greece did poverty grow faster than in Hungary between the years 2008 and 2013.

Parallel to the cuts, Minister of National Economy Mihály Varga plans a decrease to ten percent in the country's retrograde flat tax. This suggestion met with criticism even from neo-liberal economists, because it would lead to a dramatic decrease in state income and the budget could get entirely out of control.

Despite the announcement of deeper social spending cuts, the protests were visibly smaller this time than in the previous round of demonstrations, when up to 100,000 people rallied against the government. That mass participation made clear the degree of social opposition on the part of the working population. At the same time, the protests are politically dominated by petty bourgeois forces who criticize Orban's rapprochement with Russia and push for a reorientation of Hungarian foreign policy in favor of a stronger orientation towards the EU and the United States.

Notably fewer workers and ordinary young people came to the demonstrations last weekend. This is also related to the fact that the trade unions are working hard to bring the protest movement under their control and

strangle them.

The vast majority of the population of Hungary is deeply repelled by the policies of the unions. The latter either work closely with Orban or with the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP), whose right-wing, anti-social policies cleared the path for Orban to take power.

The conservative trade union centre, the Democratic Confederation of Free Trade Unions (LIGA), claims that it participated in the protests to pressure Orban to enter into “dialogue”. LIGA head István Gaskó even threatened the government with a general strike should it refuse to engage in negotiations with the unions.

Gaskó hastened to emphasize, however, that the unions preferred negotiations and did not want to strike. The confederation has already negotiated a number of shabby deals with the Orban government in the past. Shortly after the government placed major limitations on the right to strike in 2011, LIGA took part in the privatization of the country’s rail system.

Just how bankrupt and discredited the unions are was made clear on the Saturday before last. Only about 200 people took part in a demonstration organised by the public service workers union.

Along with the unions, extreme right-wing forces are attempting to exert their influence on the demonstrations. The well-known neo-Nazi activist György Budaházy appeared with several uniformed right wingers in Budapest, but was driven off the protests by participants. Individuals and small groups repeatedly appeared with fascistic symbols and flags.

While the unions and petty bourgeois groups are trying to divert the protests in a reactionary direction that does not pose a threat to the status quo, Orban’s policy of social attacks confronts growing opposition. According to a survey carried out by the Median research institute last week, Fidesz has the support of only 26 percent of the population compared to 38 percent in October. Orban’s own popularity has fallen from 48 to 32 percent over the same period.



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