

Union shuts down Serb auto strike

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Just one day after Serb autoworkers voted by a large majority to continue their strike at Fiat (FCA) in Kragujevac, the strike committee leadership suddenly announced an end to the action on Tuesday evening.

After a two-hour meeting behind closed doors with Prime Minister Ana Brnabi?, strike leader Zoran Markovi?—without providing any explanation—informed the workers they would be back at work the following day.

In a Facebook message shortly after 10 pm, he commented blandly, “After 16 days of strike, we agreed today with the Prime Minister of the Republic of Serbia to begin negotiations with FCA management with the active participation of the prime minister at 12 pm tomorrow. The strike committee and the representatives of the independent trade unions subsequently agreed to end the strike and begin work on July 19.”

The same Markovi? Monday evening had called for a large rally in front of Kragujevac’s city hall. The demonstration, which was to have taken place Wednesday and include representatives from other factories, was also cancelled. Instead, Markovi? issued what amounted to a command on Facebook, “When you begin work tomorrow, I expect you to respect the norms and regulations of the company without exception and carry out your work to the highest quality and with workplace morale.” In addition, according to the trade union bureaucrat, the workers should tolerate no “disunity” among them, i.e. no criticism of the union’s decision.

Samostalni Sindikat (SSSS), Serbia’s largest union, whose members led the strike, has shut down the three-week strike at a moment’s notice against the express wishes of the majority of workers and without having obtained any concessions from Fiat-Chrysler management. The government, which owns 33 percent of the company, also made no offer.

Markovi? declared at the press conference after talks with the prime minister, “This sets a precedent in trade union struggles: the strike was ended without a conclusion.”

The strike committee’s decision to shut the strike down prompted anger and protest among workers. Workers accused the strike leadership of not being “real trade unions,” reported the web site Insider on Thursday. But Markovi? told reporters with a shrug of the shoulders, “That’s just Serbia.”

The union thereby acceded to a government demand issued Monday that the strike be ended within 72 hours. Otherwise, Fiat-Chrysler would shift production to another country, possibly Poland, government representatives threatened. However, the Fiat’s Polish plant in Tychy pays double the wages paid in Serbia.

Limited information is available on the first two rounds of talks, which together with the prime minister included Minister of the Economy Goran Kneževi? and Labour Minister Zoran Djordjevic. Insider commented that it had been agreed that a representative from the strike committee would be part of a special commission made up of company management and government officials to “optimise labour processes.” This is a euphemism for integrating the union into management as has been the practice in Western Europe for some time.

There has apparently been no sign of a proposal from management or the government to increase wages. A vague promise to negotiate overtime compensation for the night shift has been issued. Fiat workers currently have to work 60 hours per week for their low wages without any overtime bonus, and many of the overtime hours are worked at night.

The government has even opposed the union’s compromise proposal of a guaranteed minimum monthly wage of 45,000 dinar (around €370, or \$US432). The union initially demanded a wage

increase from 38,000 dinar (€316) to 50,000 Dinar (€416), which is lower than wages in any other European country and less than autoworkers in China earn.

A wage of 45,000 Dinar would be “economically impossible,” according to Brnabi?, who added cynically, “We would have to save these costs from other workers, meaning Serbia’s taxpayers.”

The prime minister, who is being celebrated in the media as the first lesbian head of government in a country formerly dominated by Russia, heads a government of extremely wealthy social climbers. While she condemns the workers to starvation and misery, her ministers and leading opposition politicians live in the lap of luxury.

Knezevic symbolises the government’s personnel. After the breakup of Yugoslavia, he completed a career which saw him go from being a basketball player to a government minister. As mayor of Zrenjanin he served time in prison for his involvement with the construction industry mafia and the siphoning off of public funds. Brnabi? herself only came to power thanks to the protection of the previous government of Aleksandar Vu?i?, after she defended his close confidant Nikola Petrovi?, the director of the state-run energy provider Elektromreža Srbije, against corruption charges.

In April, tens of thousands of people demonstrated in Serb cities against the rigged elections that secured the presidency for Vu?i?. Signs carried included “Vu?i?, the thief” and “We’re starving, the elite is enjoying themselves.”

Serbia’s economy is in the doldrums and poverty has been rampant since the NATO war at the end of the 1990s destroyed important infrastructure and production facilities. The shock therapy adopted by a series of governments since the dissolution of Yugoslavia has done its part in dismantling the last remnants of state-organised economic structures and transforming workers into a pool of cheap labour. In preparation for European Union (EU) membership, the government is determined to retain this exploitation paradise for foreign investors.

With the assistance of the pro-capitalist and pro-EU trade unions, the government suppressed the Fiat strike at the very point when it had inspired workers in other factories to take job action and was winning widespread support within the population. Students also showed

their solidarity, taking to the streets of Novi Sad, Serbia’s second largest city, last Sunday.

In their call to join the rally in front of the city hall, they wrote, “When the flame of the struggle for a better life is spreading among workers and other oppressed sections of Serbia’s population, we believe it is our duty to join together with and support them.”

The readiness of Fiat workers and their colleagues at other firms to fight against mounting poverty will break new ground and increasingly be directed against the existing unions. There is only one way forward for workers: An alliance with workers in every Balkan country and throughout Europe in a political offensive against capitalism, social inequality and nationalism.



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