

A letter from a reader on social conditions and the Fiat workers' strike in Serbia

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The three-week strike by autoworkers at Fiat in Serbia was officially ended last week. But not a single social problem which the workers went on strike to oppose was resolved.

On the contrary, in exchange for a pittance of a wage increase of €30 [US \$35] a month spread over three years, the unions agreed to a three-year strike ban with the government and Fiat-Chrysler management. Workers had demanded a wage increase from €316 to €416, as well as a reduction of hours, and overtime payments. They are the lowest-paid autoworkers in Europe and work at times 60 hours or more per week.

The WSWs, which reported on this important struggle in a series of articles, received a comment from a Serbian reader who lives in Hamburg and is currently travelling in Serbia, Bosnia and Croatia to visit relatives. He enjoyed the WSWs articles on the strike, as he wrote. The following are some of his remarks on social conditions in Serbia and the Fiat strike.

“The state is the biggest slave-driver”

“The difficulty for Fiat workers in Kragujevac is that they have to work 60 hours per week: 60 hours! They are completely at the mercy of the corporation. There is no more time to find an additional job to top up the low wages to feed one's family.

“In the old days of communist [Stalinist] Yugoslavia it was normal for someone to work for a company for part of the day and use the rest to earn additional money privately. At that time, the workers could work for 40 hours and then use an additional 20 hours to privately take care of gardens or offer some other service to make ends meet.”

But nobody has any time for that now working 60 hours per week, he continued. “The women also can't manage to assume responsibility for bringing up the children and tending the small garden, where they grow fruit or other things. Stress is inevitable.”

Fiat workers quite rightly demanded a wage increase and a reduction of working hours, he wrote. But the state, which owns 33 percent of the Fiat plant, is attempting “to suppress the people and keep the unions powerless to benefit the company,” our reader added. “The state is the biggest slave-driver.”

The role of the unions at the end of the strike gave him pause. “[Zoran] Markovic, the strike leader, broke off the strike without giving any reason worth talking about.”

In Serbia, skepticism towards politics is strong among the population. “The government is not seen by the people as the government of the common man, but as a big mafia organisation which only does business for its own profit. The gulf between rich and poor is pervasive. Those who can do so emigrate to other countries, and the others are left to struggle all the more.” People go to vote, but the predominant attitude is, “I have to help myself, I cannot expect any help.”

Prices for foodstuffs have reached the European level or in some cases have risen beyond that, making an additional income essential to survive. “For example, meat is three times more expensive than in Germany and articles for basic hygiene are twice as expensive. A normal deodorant, for example, costs €3, whereas in Germany you sometimes get it for 99 cents,” the reader added.

Electricity and rent costs have risen sharply. Only bread remains relatively cheap, as well as cheese, eggs and milk. The cheapest option is to shop at the baker on the corner who still bakes their own items, the reader continued.

Western companies have conquered the country since the dissolution of Yugoslavia. “One can see this with the so-called supermarkets, which did not exist in the past: the people hardly ever use these supermarkets, because they’re just too expensive.”

Prices for Western goods are sometimes three times more expensive there than in Germany. “For example, 500 grams of Basmati rice costs 369 Dinar. That is the peak! That means a pound costs €3. Chocolate and yoghurts cost around €2.”

“The European Union is nothing other than the principle: You open your markets and we will flood your market with our products. One sees effectively the same thing when one drives through the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary and finds only big foreign names. One wonders what the domestic countries actually have to offer? What products do they have apart from agricultural products? And it’s necessary to search for a long time before finding anything.”

At the same time, in agriculture the use of hybrid plants and weed killer products from BASF, Monsanto and other large producers is spreading without any consideration being given to their environmental or health impact. “They spray every damned thing they produce here,” the reader said.

Since the late 1990s, this market has grown rapidly and a number of companies have entered it. “They are not interested in the consequences. They only care about the classification, for example that corn looks good and they can sell it well. And the most cynical thing is: The fuller the shops and shelves are, the emptier the people’s pockets are. It is incredible!”

The profit-oriented industrialisation of agriculture also impacts livestock. “An uncle of mine has now become a large pig farm operator, who works for a major slaughterhouse. They give him good conditions so that he can fatten up his animals. His facilities are huge, with air circulation devices, so that the sulphuric and ammonia fumes can be removed. The pigs are confined to narrow cages, and there’s absolutely no possibility for them to roam freely.

“In the past, a farmer had ten to twenty pigs, and perhaps one or two cows. Now, a few farmers own massive operations, while the rest try to get by as best they can. They grow cereals, plants, fruit and have livestock only for their own consumption, while at the

same time going to work to the extent that this is possible for them.”

Serbia is now experiencing large-scale emigration from rural areas, according to our reader. Cities like Belgrade, Novi Sad and Niš are increasing in size and now make up around half of Serbia’s population. “Young people in particular are moving to the cities. But the cities can’t offer them any long-term perspective,” our reader said, referring to the growth of unemployment.

He reflected on the 1990s, when Yugoslavia fell apart. Even then it was difficult to make ends meet. But following the end of the Milosevic regime in early 2000 and the beginning of privatisation policies, the situation has deteriorated. “The ‘small’ difference between then and now is that the people are much more exploited now. In the 1990s, for example, a worker received breakfast, lunch and dinner from his employer. That was taken for granted.” Today, workers have to provide for themselves.

But conditions for workers in Hamburg are also getting worse, he noted in conclusion. “Not many people can still get by with one job!”



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