

Austria: 100,000 demonstrate in Vienna against labour “reforms”

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5 July 2018

Last Saturday saw the biggest demonstration in the Austrian capital since the 2003 protests against pension reforms. More than 100,000 demonstrated against the working time reform being introduced by the government of Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, Austrian Peoples Party (ÖVP), and Vice Chancellor Heinz-Christian Strache of the right-wing extremist Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ).

The government wants to permit a maximum working time of twelve hours a day and a working week of up to 60 hours. Previously, the standard working hours in Austria were eight hours a day and 40 hours a week. In special cases, companies can employ their staff for up to ten hours a day or up to 50 hours a week.

The Austrian trade unions called for Saturday’s demonstration under the slogan “For a Better Life.” In addition to trade unionists, prominent social democrats, such as party leader and ex-chancellor Christian Kern and Vienna’s mayor Michael Ludwig also participated.

It was the first major demonstration since the right-wing government took office at the end of 2017. According to the government, the number of hours allowed is to be increased to give companies more flexibility. The Austrian parliament votes on the bill today, but the majority enjoyed by the ÖVP and FPÖ means its passage is considered safe.

The Working Hours Act reform is considered the first step in planned social attacks by Kurz and Strache. Further, deep-going “reforms” in pensions, health and education are also planned.

In order to suppress resistance, the government has already launched the so-called “security package.” Under the auspices of the ultra-right Interior Minister Herbert Kickl (FPÖ), surveillance is being massively expanded. The spying on private computers is being legitimized as is the construction of so-called Citizens Defence Leagues.

Another fundamental attack on democratic rights was the closure of several mosques and the expulsion of

imams and their families.

Large sections of workers and young people are unwilling to give up their social gains and accept this right-wing policy. Tens of thousands had already demonstrated in January against the government’s right-wing course when Interior Minister Kickl demanded that asylum seekers be “concentrated” in the future—an open link to the concentration camps of the Nazis.

But while government policies are rejected by most of the population, the unions and the social democrats are working to divert social opposition and anger into harmless channels. In principle, they support the right-wing policies of the Kurz and Strache government.

As recently as January, the Austrian Trade Union Federation (ÖGB) and its affiliated unions had expressly refused to support the protest against the government. In fact, there is a significant section within the Austrian trade unions that supports FPÖ policy. “Even in the chamber of labour and in the unions, contacts with FPÖ officials are cultivated,” noted the news magazine *Profil*.

The Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ) has been in a coalition government with the FPÖ in Burgenland since 2015 and was open to a coalition with the far right at the federal level during last year’s election.

The fact that the protest on Saturday mainly served to let off steam and protect the government’s flank was highlighted by government spokesman Peter Launsky-Tieffenthal. He emphasized that it was good “that we live in a country where there is freedom of expression and assembly, and where everyone can exercise these fundamental rights.”

This statement is noteworthy, as several editors-in-chief published articles in their papers on Sunday and Monday warning against attacks on the press and freedom of opinion. This was mainly directed against Interior Minister Herbert Kickl of the FPÖ, who attacked investigative journalists head-on in an ORF program last

week.

At the closing rally, the unions' attitude to the Kurz government became clear when the chairman of the post union, Helmut Köstinger, rhetorically called for the “overthrow” of the anti-social and unjust government. Immediately following, several ÖGB leaders spoke out to distance themselves from him. ÖGB leader Wolfgang Katzian stated that the ÖGB accepted every democratically elected government. Before that, ÖGB vice-chair Norbert Schnedl had spoken against Köstinger and stressed that he was not in favour of overthrowing the government.

At the demonstration, the ÖGB then focused exclusively on the Working Hours Act. Not a single speaker mentioned the rigorous sealing off of the country's borders against those seeking help.

A few days earlier, the government had provocatively conducted a patrol exercise on the border with Slovenia. Several hundred policemen and soldiers practiced sealing off the border against refugees. The exercise was above all a signal to Germany. “The background is formed by the debate on internal European border closures, triggered by Germany, as well as current developments on the refugee routes in the Balkans,” said FPÖ chief Strache.

Following the agreement of the CDU and CSU in Germany in the asylum dispute at the beginning of the week, Austria is preparing its own national measures to protect its borders.

Notably, hostility towards refugees is not new to the Austrian trade unions. Two years ago, former ÖGB President Erich Foglar agitated against immigration. “Control of the labour market has been more or less lost,” Foglar told the *Presse* newspaper. He had previously spoken out in favour of “redefining” relations with the FPÖ and seeking close cooperation with it.



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