

Thousands of Austrian metal workers on strike

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Since the beginning of last week, several thousand workers have been striking in the Austrian metal industry. Hundreds of plants across the country are affected by temporary work stoppages. A total of 130,000 workers are employed in the Austrian metal industry. They are striking for higher wages and against the tightening of labour laws by the right-wing government.

Company representatives broke off the pay negotiations for a collective agreement two weeks ago. Even during the talks, the chairman of the Association of Metallurgical Industry (FMTI), Christian Knill, announced to the media that he did not expect an agreement and that the companies were prepared for “combat measures.” As a result, the Production Union (Pro-Ge) and the Union of Private Employees, Printing, Journalism, Paper (GPA-djp) called for warning strikes. Since then, company representatives and trade unions have met several times, but without reaching an agreement. This week could lead to full-time strikes.

The unions are calling for a 5 percent wage increase and a mitigation of the new working time rules, with measures such as higher overtime pay increases. The government, a coalition of the right-wing conservative People’s Party (ÖVP) and right-wing extremist Freedom Party (FPÖ), has tightened labour legislation since September 1. Now, companies are allowed to work their employees up to 12 hours a day, 60 hours a week. The government had passed the amendment in close consultation with the companies.

The industrialists had initially offered a wage increase of 2 percent and then raised this to 2.7 percent, which is still a provocation. The annual inflation rate in Austria is 2.4 percent.

The government has arrogantly brushed aside any criticism of the tightening of labour laws. Minister of

the Economy Margarete Schramböck (ÖVP) even claimed in parliament that workers would benefit from longer working hours. According to unconfirmed sources, the government is already planning further tightening of labour laws.

After pressure from workforces inside the plants, the unions responded with a warning strike. The trade unions, which are closely linked to the Social Democratic SPÖ, continue to move to the right with their accelerating decline and strictly reject a confrontation with government and business. With his assumption of office in June, the new head of the trade union federation (ÖGB), Wolfgang Katzian, had signalled the readiness of the ÖGB to cooperate and declared: “We are not a thorn in the side of the government, the economic chamber or anybody else.”

Although the union speaks of “compensating” for the effects of tightening the law in collective agreements, it strictly rejects a fight against the anti-social legislation.

In recent decades, there have rarely been major industrial disputes in the Austrian metal industry, and they have mostly been suppressed and sold out by the SPÖ and the trade unions. The biggest metal strike took place in May 1962. In 2003, opposition to the government’s pension reform (also an ÖVP and FPÖ coalition) led to the largest mass protests since 1945. In that year over 10 million working hours were lost in Austria due to strikes.

The last major strike in the metal industry took place in October 2011, when collective bargaining faltered. The workforces of almost all metal companies participated in work stoppages. The mass strike potential of the then more than 200,000 workers shocked the ÖGB. They stopped the strikes after a few days and started new negotiations, ultimately agreeing to a moderate wage increase.

As in many other European countries, protests against low wages and poor working conditions have become increasingly common in Austria. Tens of thousands of social workers took part in a warning strike in February. They called for a reduction in working hours with full pay compensation. Shortly before the beginning of a major strike wave, the union agreed with the employers' camp and negotiated a ridiculous wage increase of 2.5 percent. The demand for shorter working hours was swept aside.

The unions are unwilling to tackle the ÖVP-FPÖ government's social attacks. Under the guise of small-scale, superficial criticism, the ÖGB and its affiliated unions have increasingly adapted to the right-wing, anti-working-class policy of the government. Ex-ÖGB leader Erich Foglar, who was in office until the summer, had even publicly called for cooperation with the right-wing extremist FPÖ at the highest level. Josef Muchitsch, the head of Bau-Holz trade union, is also seen as championing close cooperation with the far right.

Preparing for a violent confrontation, the government is exploiting the unions' sabotage of a growing willingness among workers to fight. Just a few weeks after its swearing-in, the government launched the "security package" that undermined basic democratic rights and created authoritarian structures. Now they are preparing further surveillance and censorship measures on the Internet.

Federal Chancellor Sebastian Kurz (ÖVP) and Vice-Chancellor Heinz-Christian Strache (FPÖ) have announced their intention to introduce a "digital anti-mask law" to make "association on the Internet more respectful." Strache said they wanted to better define "hate speech" and "swiftly hold perpetrators to account." He did not say anything more concrete. Since the FPÖ maintains close ties with neo-Nazis and the identity politics milieu, one can easily imagine how they will define the term "hate speech."

According to the *Wiener Standard*, the government is considering extending the already existing duty of disclosure. Currently, Internet platform operators are required to provide user information when it comes to prosecuting criminal charges. The storage and disclosure obligations of the operators could now be extended. In addition, the government in Vienna wants to introduce a network enforcement law based on the

German model, which obliges Internet platforms to censor far and wide. Chancellery Minister Gernot Blümel (ÖVP) told Austrian Broadcasting Corporation that the feasibility of a network enforcement law in Austria is currently being examined.



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