

Strike wave hits Kosovo

Paul Mitchell
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Kosovo has been hit by a strike wave with workers demanding better wages and conditions and opposing a new salaries law.

The strikes are the beginning of a resurgence of the class struggle in the Balkans. Along with the last Assembly elections in 2017—in which the turnout was just 41 percent—they indicate growing disaffection with the “independent” regime created in 2008, following the bloody imperialist-backed war of 1998-99 and run by corrupt former Kosovo Liberation Army figures.

Life for workers and youth remains desperate. Wages, averaging €360 (\$410) a month, are among the lowest in Europe. Unemployment is around 30 percent (youth unemployment is over 50 percent) and a similar percentage of the population lives in poverty. Nearly 10 percent are recorded as living in extreme poverty, surviving on less than €1.70 (\$1.90) a day.

Over the last weeks, virtually the entire public sector has experienced industrial action. Healthcare workers ended 2018 with a two-day nationwide strike and surgeons continued their action into January, demanding they be treated the same as judges and prosecutors who saw their salaries doubled last year by Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj. Haradinaj doubled his own salary and those of his cabinet members at the same time.

Imri Jashari, director of the Cardiology Clinic at the Kosovo University Clinical Center, told reporters about the “miserable” conditions for experienced doctors, who earn just €600 per month. “There is huge dedication and great investment by healthcare workers, while on the other hand the appreciation of our society and state for this category [of work] is just miserable,” Jashari said.

Miners staged a nine-day strike from January 3 to demand a 20 percent pay rise and only agreed a temporary return to work pending talks with the Ministry for Economic Development.

Teachers began a stoppage on January 14, seeking a 30 percent pay rise at all education levels. Sejdi Rexhepi, a professor of economics at Pristina University, said the new salaries law “may lower the salaries of some teachers... By our calculations, a regular professor will have a fall in salary of €100—and, depending on their academic title, some salaries may fall by up to €200.”

Last Friday—the day before the law was passed in the Kosovo Assembly—the head of the Union of Education, Culture and Science of Kosovo (SBASHK), Rrahman Jasharaj, announced an agreement with the government claiming it “has brought us closer to our demands, so congratulations to all, the school year will commence on Monday.” SBASHK deputy head, Vjollca Shala, disagreed, saying “As for now, there is no deal reached, and the moment that we reach an agreement, we will release a communiqué.”

Municipal workers in the capital Pristina have been on strike and others in Mitrovica, Vushtria/Vucitrn and Rahovec/Orahovac and elsewhere have warned of possible strikes over their 30 percent pay claim. Union leader Mehmet Bajrami said the new salary law could actually lower their pay by up to 40 percent.

The union representing workers at Kosovo Telecom has warned of strikes if their salaries are cut. Once the most profitable company in Kosovo, it has been starved of around €500 million in investment since 2010 when the government, then led by Hashim Thaci, now Kosovo’s president, said it would be privatised. Talks on finding a new owner are continuing.

Workers in the energy sector, airport control and customs have threatened to strike.

The Kosovan government is determined to prevent workers seeking to overturn years of stagnant or declining wages. Erol Belegu, one of Haradinaj’s advisers, said large pay increases would starve the country of investment. “We have already had criticism

from the IMF [International Monetary Fund] that the budget is heavily weighed down by salaries.”

In December, the IMF, following its last visit to “advise” the Kosovo government what to do, insisted, “To lower wage and non-wage cost and improve productivity, it is critical to restrain wage and social benefit growth... Fiscal initiatives such as the public salary law and excessively generous maternity/parental benefits, as well as a large minimum wage hike, would not only be costly but also undermine these efforts, providing another reason why they should be avoided or redesigned.”

The IMF, warning that a further onslaught is in the offing, declared, “structural challenges remain largely undented, and should be at the forefront of the policy agenda... plans to restructure public enterprises need to move ahead.”

The IMF has been offering such prescriptions for nearly two decades, but Kosovo, a country of just 1.8 million people with abundant natural resources, remains an economic, social and political disaster.

The country is a product of the tragic consequences of the deliberately engineered break-up of the Yugoslav federation in the 1990s by the major imperialist powers, particularly the US and Germany. Serbia was targeted as the regional power considered the main obstacle to the West’s control over an area of geo-strategic interest. Russia’s influence in the region had to be rolled back.

The resulting civil war and new ethnically-based states proved incapable of providing a progressive solution to the problems facing the Balkan people. Kosovo, the protectorate of the Western powers, became the most glaring example of the subservient status of these new states.

Following the 2008 financial crash, the European Union’s promise of membership as part of moves to keep the Balkan countries firmly on side against Russia floundered. No one now talks about a date for Kosovo to join the EU.

Moreover, the concept of a union in Europe has been thrown into crisis with the impoverishment of Greece through EU savage austerity, Britain’s vote to exit the EU, and the Trump administration’s attacks both on the EU and on Germany in particular, as a trade competitor.

Kosovo remains in limbo over its attempts to gain

international recognition. Some 90 out of 193 nations refuse to recognise the 2008 declaration of independence, including UN Security Council members Russia and China, Serbia and five EU members—Spain, Greece, Cyprus, Slovakia and Romania—who fear the precedent the border changes might set for their own countries. Last November, the boast by Foreign Minister Behgjet Pacolli that Kosovo’s bid to join the global policing body Interpol would be successful, was dashed.

Kosovo’s relationship with Serbia remains at a knife-edge. At one moment there is talk of a land swap, at another trade war blows up with threats of a military war.

The declaration of independence left some 120,000 Serbs as a minority around Mitrovica in Kosovo’s north, which continues to function as a de-facto independent enclave. About 50,000 ethnic Albanians remain in the Presevo Valley in Serbia’s south.

Last year, Thaci raised the possibility of an exchange of territory between Kosovo and Serbia in an article published in the *Financial Times* and supported in an editorial. Donald Trump’s national security adviser, John Bolton, made it known that Washington “would not weigh in” on the matter. However, such an exchange could have profoundly negative repercussions throughout the Balkans, particularly in Bosnia which is divided into a mosaic of ethnic cantons.

In November 2018, a trade war broke out when the Kosovan government imposed a 100 percent customs tariff on goods coming from Serbia. Haradinaj declared he would only reverse the tax if Serbia discontinued its “campaign against Kosovo’s aspiration as a sovereign state.”

In December, tensions escalated further when the Kosovan Assembly voted to transform the Kosovo Security Force (KSF) into a regular army. The Serbian government called the decision the “most direct threat to peace and stability in the region” and warned that armed intervention was “one of the options on the table.”



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