

# Hungary hit by strikes in public sector and auto industry

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Hungary is currently being hit by a wave of strikes. On Thursday, nearly 10,000 public sector employees went on strike. Following January's strike at the Audi plant in Győr, which ended with workers achieving an 18 percent wage increase, thousands of workers in the supply industry have now gone on strike as well.

Workers are responding to their poverty wages and the right-wing policies of the Orban government. The main demand in the public sector is for an increase in basic salaries, which have stagnated for 11 years. Lower income workers sometimes receive less than €800 per month for working full-time.

The public sector unions are known for their close collaboration with governments of all stripes. Now they see themselves forced to demand a minimum wage for public sector employees. However, union representatives have yet to announce what this minimum wage demand will be.

Added to this is workers' anger over the so-called "slave law." Above all, the Orban government has used this law to respond to the needs of the auto industry. The law raises the number of possible overtime hours from 250 to 400 a year. For public sector employees, it means an increase in daily working hours from 8 to 9 hours and a reduction of five days leave per year.

The strikers held a rally in front of the parliament in Budapest and called for a demonstration on May 1. They were supported by numerous workers and young people. According to media reports, the strike met with great popular sympathy.

Audi workers in Győr in western Hungary have partially achieved their demand for an increase in wages. When production in several European locations was threatened, the carmaker agreed to an 18 percent increase in wages and the Audi internal union AHFSZ broke off the strike. Previously, workers at the Daimler

plant in Kecskemét had won an increase in wages of over 20 percent. The stoppages by Hungarian workers are part of a growing strike movement throughout Eastern Europe. In recent years, auto workers in Romania, Serbia and Slovakia have also been on strike.

On Tuesday, workers at Korean tire manufacturer Hankook in Dunaújváros, where 3,400 workers are employed, went on strike. In the face of extremely low wages and onerous working conditions, they are demanding an 18 percent salary increase, an extra month's salary and additional bonuses. Last week they held a two-hour protest strike. As a result, management offered a low wage increase, which was rejected. Hankook has been producing tyres in Hungary since 2007.

Other automotive suppliers are also affected by strikes. At Westcast in Oroszlány, 1,500 workers held a two-hour protest strike calling for a wage increase of 18 percent. They threatened to shut down operations if management failed to meet their demands.

Workers at German auto parts supplier Conti in Veszprém also supported their demand for more wages by holding a protest strike. At a Bosch Group plant in Miskolc, the ETMOSz union organized a protest strike with more than 500 participants. They are demanding a 12 percent salary increase and other salary components that are usual for workers at the company in other countries.

Other plants are also threatened with strikes. As a result, carmaker Suzuki has already announced that it will not apply the government's new labour code, to avoid protests. Previously, the Esztergommassiv factory came under criticism after a worker who tried to build a union in the factory was fired.

The strikes must be seen in the context of the increasing social crisis in Hungary. Despite official

claims of full employment, the country is one of the poorest in the EU. The differences between the city and the countryside are enormous. In villages, 40 percent of people live below the subsistence level, and the average net wage is just under €700.

The health and education systems face collapse. Well-educated young people are moving abroad in search of a future, for example to Austria or Germany. In the meantime, there are huge campaigns in industry to recruit workers from the Balkans or Ukraine.

At the same time, the government promises to further improve business conditions by keeping wages and taxes low. According to statistics agency Eurostat, in 2017 an average working hour in Hungary cost around €9; by comparison, the rate in Germany was €34.

For example, automotive supplier Bosch recently announced plans to massively expand its plant in the northeastern city of Hatvan. According to *Die Zeit*, electronic components will be produced there from 2020. With a total investment of around €30 million, the government in Budapest is investing just under €4 million. Hungary offers the “lowest corporate taxes EU-wide,” said Foreign and Foreign Trade Minister Péter Szijjártó at a press conference with Bosch management.

The Munich-based carmaker BMW also announced last year it planned to open a new plant in the eastern part of Debrecen. The total investment there is around €1 billion. This project, too, is being supported by the Hungarian state and local authorities, which want to spend more than €500 million on the necessary expansion of road infrastructure and similar projects. As the napi.hu web site reports, the government plans to invest more than €400 million over the next few years to this end.

As workers become more and more involved in struggles, the unions are trying to stop a broad movement at all costs. Especially the MKKSZ, which has called for the strikes in the public sector, is known for its subservience to the government. Union representatives had earlier stated that a general strike in Hungary was not possible. After tens of thousands took to the streets at the end of last year against the government and the labour code, the unions are now not calling for further protests.

Instead, they are openly revealing how far to the right they really stand. On the Hungarian national holiday, opposition parties and unions jointly demonstrated

against the Orban government on Friday in central Budapest. Significantly, the campaign commemorating the 1848-49 revolution was organised under the motto, “National Unity.” Representatives of the ultra-right Jobbik party, the Social Democrats and the unions sang the national anthem together.



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