300,000 demonstrate in Prague against right-wing Czech government

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An estimated 300,000 people protested in the Czech capital of Prague last Sunday against the right-wing government of Prime Minister Andrei Babiš. At what was the biggest demonstration in the Czech Republic since the so-called Velvet Revolution of 1989, protesters demanded the resignation of the billionaire founder of the right-wing neo-liberal party ANO.

After the approximately 750-meter-long Wenceslas Square was determined to be too small to hold the protest, the demonstration was moved to the Letná Plateau on the banks of the Vltava, the site of the mass protests against the Stalinist regime 30 years ago. Three decades later it has become clear that the restoration of capitalism in Eastern Europe has not brought the promised prosperity and freedom. Instead, unprecedented levels of social inequality are being overseen by a thoroughly corrupt, authoritarian elite.

For seven weeks, thousands of Czechs have protested against Babiš, who is accused of corruption and of using his political power for private, business purposes. The protests are also directed against Czech Justice Minister Marie Benešova, who is accused of obstructing investigations against Babiš. According to Forbes magazine, the assets of the Czech Prime Minister are estimated at around 3.3 billion euros, making him the second richest man in the country.

The participants in Sunday's demonstration were overwhelmingly workers, youth and pensioners, the majority of whom have suffered from the incessant attacks on social rights and benefits carried out by successive Czech governments. Posters at the demo read "Disappear" and "Babiš resign." Further protests have been announced for August, and could continue up to the date planned to celebrate the toppling of the former Stalinist regime in 1989.

The mass protests in the Czech Republic are yet another indication of the international resurgence of the class struggle. Particularly in Eastern Europe, more and more people have taken to the streets or gone on strike in recent months to protest against catastrophic living conditions, poor wages and corrupt governments. The recent strike by Polish teachers was the largest in Poland in 30 years, and a strike by Hungarian auto workers nearly paralysed European production at Volkswagen. In Serbia and Albania thousands have taken to the streets to vent their opposition to their corrupt right-wing governments.

While the Czech and European press crows about continuing economic growth and low unemployment, the reality for ordinary people is very different. Rapidly rising rents in the cities and price increases for food, electricity and gasoline are driving many families to desperation. Prague is already one of the most expensive cities in Europe. In 2018, around 17 percent of Czechs lived in poverty.

The precarious economic reality becomes clear once one examines the increase in private indebtedness. As Radio Praha reported, around ten percent of the population can no longer pay their debts and must forfeit their property and possessions. This total includes around 10,000 persons aged between 18 and 29, and around 400 debtors under 18. Against such a background of social misery the Babiš government has pledged to implement further social cuts.

A number of right-wing, pro-European Union forces are seeking to exploit the legitimate protests against the hated billionaire for their own purposes. These forces are opposed to toppling the government and any expansion of the protests. Several representatives of these organisations have openly declared they do not seek to reverse the outcome of the 2017 election, which resulted in Babiš's party as frontrunner. Instead they

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would be satisfied instead with his removal as head of government.

In particular, the organizers of “One Million Moments for Democracy,” who are close to social-democratic and conservative pro-EU forces, want to force the government to adopt a stronger pro-European policy. “We are not making a revolution, but rather returning to the legacy and values of 1989,” said one of the initiators, Benjamin Roll.

These forces base themselves entirely on the criticism of Babiš made by Brussels. A recent European Commission audit report concluded that Babiš exerted huge influence over his holding, Agrofert, which he officially outsourced to two trust funds. On the basis of numerous examples, the 71-page report explained how EU subsidies finished up in the coffers of Babis’ company. A demand has been raised for the return of over 17 million euros.

Babiš responded by calling the Brussels report an “attack on the Czech Republic,” raising the prospect that the Czech Republic may prove to be as difficult for the EU as Hungary under its right-wing Prime Minister Victor Orban.

The Babiš government typifies all those forces that committed themselves to capitalism thirty years ago and shamelessly plundered the economy at the expense of the people. The son of a functionary of the Communist Party, Babiš studied in Paris and Geneva. From 1985 to 1991 he was head of the Czechoslovak commercial agency in Morocco.

During this time, he is said to have worked under the code name “Bures” for the Stalinist secret service, a claim Babiš denies. The files kept in the Slovakian capital Bratislava have been falsified, he argues. What is clear is that he had close contacts to the former state leadership and in the early 1990s used his links to consolidate Agrofert into a billion-dollar company.

Babiš entered politics in 2011 with the ANO party, which is completely geared to his person and interests. Babiš founded the party after both the social-democratic and conservative parties had become increasingly discredited. He won the 2017 general election with a clear majority but less than two years later he faces the protest of hundreds of thousands.

It is no coincidence that Babiš rules in a coalition with the Social Democratic CSSD. Thirty years ago, this successor to the Stalinist state party played the key role in selling off public owned property, plunging thousands of workers into unemployment and poverty. Following extensive losses in the last election, the CSSD is threatened with collapse.

The government is supported by the Communist Party (KSCM). The KSCM still adheres to the tradition of the former Stalinist state party, which proceeded ruthlessly against the population when it thought its rule was endangered. The party refuses to support a vote of no confidence in Babiš and has stated it will continue to support the billionaire's government.

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