

The significance of Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán's enabling act

Peter Schwarz
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Hungary's parliament passed an emergency law on Monday that grants Prime Minister Viktor Orbán unrestricted dictatorial powers. Orbán's critics have labeled it an enabling act, a reference to Germany's Enabling Act of 24 March, 1933, which cemented the dictatorship of Adolf Hitler and the Nazis.

The law allows Orbán to rule by decree for an unlimited period of time. He is allowed to ignore existing laws and suspend the rights of citizens. He has the right "to suspend the application of specific laws by decree," and "introduce other extraordinary measures to guarantee the security of life, health and the personal and material security of citizens and businesses."

Parliament is effectively being suspended. It has no right to review the government's emergency measures, and elections and referendums will not be held so long as the emergency situation remains.

The law threatens government critics with draconian punishments. The spreading of so-called fake news will be punished with five years in prison, while breaching quarantine rules carries a maximum sentence of eight years. The criminal offences are so vaguely formulated that they could be applied to virtually any oppositional opinion or activity.

The government justified the law with the need to combat the coronavirus pandemic, but this is a transparent pretext. Orbán is exploiting the pandemic to implement dictatorial plans he has been pursuing for some time. After returning to power 10 years ago, Orbán brought the judiciary and media directly under his control and altered the electoral law so that his Fidesz Party could obtain two thirds of the seats in parliament on just 48 percent of the vote. Only the facade of bourgeois democracy remained, and even that is now being torn to shreds.

Orbán has no reason to fear any objections from the

European Union, of which Hungary has been a member since 2004. The new EU Commission president, Ursula Von der Leyen, was elected in part thanks to the votes of Fidesz. Orbán's party is a member of the conservative European People's Party, which also includes Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU), the Christian Social Union (CSU) and many other parties represented in European governments.

Orbán is the trailblazer for the path being followed by the entire EU. If Italy has demonstrated the horrific medical consequences of the pandemic, Hungary reveals its political results. The ruling elite is well aware that a social explosion is inevitable and is preparing to brutally suppress it.

After decades in which a tiny minority has enriched itself at the expense of the majority, the coronavirus pandemic is more the trigger than the cause of explosive social tensions. Millions are directly confronting in their own life experience the political and moral bankruptcy of a social system whose only goal is to enrich the wealthy by driving up the value of the stock market. Although scientists have long warned of a global pandemic, health care services were cut to the bone everywhere. The most elementary preparations were neglected.

The ruling elite is now responding to the crisis as it has always done: it showers billions on the financial markets and large corporations, while workers and small business owners are confronted with the alternative of starving or dying from COVID-19. Although the danger of infection grows by the day and medical personnel in hospitals and care homes lack basic protective equipment, the call from big business for a return to work grows louder every day.

The ruling elite is well aware that this will be possible only through bitter class battles. Protests and strikes by

workers forced to work without adequate protection are on the rise around the world.

In a guest comment for German news magazine *Der Spiegel*, Free Democratic politician Marco Buschmann blurted out what the ruling class really thinks. The €750 billion bailout package approved by Germany's federal parliament on 25 March has "the goal of giving the citizens and businesses some breathing space to respond to the external shock of the coronavirus crises," he wrote. "But the little bit of time the state can buy for society and business, in spite of the vast sums expended, will soon run out." Nobody should be in any doubt: "The people won't accept this for very long. To put the matter bluntly: revolution could soon be in the air if it goes on like this."

Mehring Books, the publishing arm of the Socialist Equality Party (US), is proud to announce the publication in epub format of Volume 1 of *COVID, Capitalism, and Class War: A Social and Political Chronology of the Pandemic*, a compilation of the *World Socialist Web Site's* coverage of this global crisis.

This is the reason for Hungary's dictatorial measures. In the Eastern European country, where capitalism was restored 30 years ago, social contradictions are particularly sharp. Orbán embodies the social type that opposed the Stalinist regime, not because it oppressed the working class, but because it blocked individuals from enriching themselves at the workers' expense. He began his political career as the leader of a Stalinist youth organisation at high school, then transformed himself into a liberal student leader immediately prior to capitalist restoration, and increasingly turned to nationalism and fascism as social tensions grew.

Today, Hungarian workers are exploited by transnational corporations for starvation wages. Labour costs per hour, including additional non-wage expenses, are less than one-third of the EU average. The once well equipped health care system lies in ruins and will collapse in the coming days if the official number of coronavirus cases, which currently stands at just 500, increases.

Three years ago, a report by the German public broadcaster MDR examined the terrible state of health care, noting, "Anybody unlucky enough to get sick in Hungary will see straight away that the health care system is chronically underfunded. Hospitals are often

in a terrible state, there is a shortage of staff, and patients have to bring their own basic items such as toilet paper. Horror stories regularly make it into the headlines... A total of 32,000 deaths could have been prevented in 2014 had the health care system been in a better state."

The transition of Hungary to an open dictatorship must be taken as a warning. Governments throughout Europe are preparing to follow in Orbán's footsteps. The German government, for example, is planning a major domestic deployment of the military.

The coronavirus demands a social response that is incompatible with the capitalist profit system. The capitalists' response to the crisis is mass poverty, millions of deaths and dictatorship. The response of the working class is a socialist society, which will expropriate the major corporations and banks and utilise all resources to meet social needs.

This requires the building of an international socialist party in the working class—the Socialist Equality Parties and the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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