

Albanian government deploys military against striking air traffic controllers

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On Wednesday, the Albanian government ended a strike by air traffic controllers in the capital city of Tirana with a massive deployment of military and police force. Twenty-eight strikers were temporarily arrested. The air traffic controllers were protesting for an increase in their salaries and against the dismissal of colleagues.

A total of 65 air traffic controllers stopped work for 24 hours on Tuesday evening. As Tirana airport is the only international airport in the country available for passenger flights, the strike had an immediate impact. More than a dozen flights had to be canceled. Parts of the airport are also used for military purposes. To break the strike, the Ministry of Infrastructure hired air traffic controllers from Turkey and Greece.

The work stoppage was directed against the brutal wage cuts and dismissals that the operating company AlbControll had ordered last year. The company was founded in 1992 as a state-owned company and became a public limited company in 1999. Since the start of the coronavirus pandemic last year, it has cut air traffic controllers' salaries by almost 70 percent and most recently laid off five workers. The strikers demanded a return to the agreed pay level and the reinstatement of the dismissed colleagues.

The dispute began after five workers reported temporarily off duty due to stress. Immediately afterwards, two of them were dismissed. As a result, 30 other workers declared themselves unfit for work in solidarity.

Even before that, the company had repeatedly threatened the workers with sanctions if they did not accept the wage cuts. A week earlier, negotiations with the Ministry of Infrastructure and Energy failed to produce results because the government justified and supported the wage cuts.

The public prosecutor's office has opened proceedings for abuse of authority. At least 24 of the air traffic controllers were interrogated for hours by police, according to their lawyer Rezart Kthupi. Two are still in custody, and one is under house arrest.

Government and opposition parties alike condemned the strike. Several politicians called the walkout a "threat to national security." Prime Minister Edi Rama called it "illegal" and railed against the strikers at an event. "These destructive forces, these totally blind forces, these forces of the past that want to take the country hostage by any means, they have no chance to stop us."

Albanian President Ilir Meta expressed similar sentiments. Infrastructure Minister Belinda Balluku also declared, "No one will take our country hostage." She demanded the strikers be punished with full force, saying they had endangered the safety of the population.

On the other hand, the air traffic controllers' lawyer stressed that the workers had acted under applicable laws and guidelines. One air traffic controller told Fax News TV he felt threatened by Balluku's remarks. "I don't know how I can continue working like this." The Association of European Air Traffic Controllers (ATCEUC) said it was "appalled" by the events and called for the immediate release of their detained colleagues.

The brutal crackdown on the air traffic controllers is intended to make an example of anyone who dares to rebel against exploitation and oppression.

The vast majority of the population of the Balkan country is in a desperate situation. Even before the pandemic, the average wage in Albania was the equivalent of just 500 euros. Since then, thousands have been laid off or had their wages cut. Many of the

approximately one million Albanians working abroad because of the catastrophic situation have also lost their income and could not transfer money home to their families.

According to the official unemployment surveys, which are not very convincing, the number of unemployed increased by 36,000 people last year. Hundreds of small businesses were forced to close. There is no state aid for ordinary working people. The IMF recently revised its growth forecast downwards by 1.1 percentage points from October. In 2020, the economy contracted by 3.5 percent, and the GDP fell by 3.3 percent.

The ruthlessness of the political elite is particularly evident in the pandemic. Since November last year, the number of COVID-19 infections has risen steadily. In the country of 2.8 million inhabitants, it reached almost 1,200 a day in February. The country's already ailing hospitals were completely overwhelmed; only then did the government impose some measures to protect the population.

Even vaccinations have only recently been made available on a larger scale. But this is only because the tourism industry will be reopened in the summer. For this reason, workers in this sector are to be vaccinated as a priority. On April 11, 12 deaths and 529 new infections were still reported.

All the establishment parties are completely discredited. The campaign for the parliamentary elections on April 25 is essentially a political mudslinging contest. Although the parties have different roots, their election programmes hardly differ. None of them addresses the dramatic social situation. Instead, they all promise tax cuts, business support and the fight against corruption.

The Socialist Party (PS) of government leader Edi Rama won the last election by a large margin and was able to govern alone. The PD (Democrats) and the LSI (Socialist Movement for Integration) were punished electorally and have been in opposition ever since.

Rama's PS and the LSI have been playing the nationalist card. Rama again brought up the idea of unification with Kosovo that could lead to fierce conflicts and possibly a war with Serbia, which has never recognised Kosovo's independence. This was fuelled by the cancellation of EU accession negotiations with Albania last year after the Dutch

government opposed it.

The country's political elite fears strikes and protests by the working class. Last week, opposition leader Lulzim Basha (PD) therefore promised miners a new law on labour protection if his party won the elections.

In the last three years alone, 19 miners have died in Albania. The number of injured is not known because nonfatal incidents are not reported in the first place. Yet not a single company has been held accountable. In 2019, miners in Bulqiza had formed their own union and went on strike accusing the government and established unions of working in the interests of the private mining companies.



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