

Romanian bus drivers stage wildcat strike over pay and conditions

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On January 20, bus drivers and personnel in Bucharest, Romania refused to go out on the road in a wildcat action against Bucharest Transport Society (STB) management and city hall. The strike mobilized all STB personnel, including drivers, mechanics, welders, and cashiers. The strike continues, despite pressure on drivers to return to work.

Court rulings were issued on Thursday and Friday, deeming the strike illegal. The city administration threatened to sack the striking workers as well as impose punitive police measures for defying a court order, but workers refused to be intimidated and continued their action.

The strike took place largely outside the control of the trade unions, the largest of which is the Bucharest Transporters Union (STB). Vasile Petrariu, the head of the STB union, is a Social Democratic local councilor and is close to former PSD (Social Democratic) mayor and current Family Minister Gabriela Firea.

The union has attempted to defuse and deflect workers' grievances with backroom maneuvers with city officials and company management. It is attempting to suggest that the present crisis is the fault of the current STB general director, as opposed to the previous leadership, which had the blessing of the PSD mayor.

In fact, the attacks on the workers are bipartisan and deep-rooted. The main concerns of the workers, as have been expressed in numerous interviews and on social media, are travel safety, chronic underfinancing which has led to a lack of spare parts and faulty vehicles, poverty wages, as well as a disastrous amount of debt accumulated by the company that could lead to further downsizing and layoffs. None of these problems were any way improved during the previous administration.

There is little doubt however, that the union would

present a change at the helm of the company, followed by a few empty promises, as a victory for the workers.

The STB union is seeking to end the struggle as quickly as possible, having refused to make any appeal to other sections of workers. Vasile Petraru is the also the president of the Public Transport Unions Federation, which includes the subway workers unions. Like the bus drivers, subway workers also face mounting problems and were locked in a bitter struggle against the government last year. The struggle was betrayed by union officials, who attempted to use the workers protest to bargain for trinkets shops, that they held stakes in, not to be demolished.

Highlighting the corruption and state ties of these organizations, Vasile Petrariu is a shareholder at the STB Health Center. The center, owned jointly by the company and the union, has had many of its functions privatized or handed off to private contractors over the years.

Part of a resurgence of the class struggle internationally, Romanian workers are entering into struggle against the Grand Coalition Government. Yet in this they find their greatest obstacle in the corporatist trade unions.

Railway workers stopped trains all over the country at the end of last year, after a wildcat protest of depot repairmen spiraled out of the control of union officials. The union scrambled to end the strike and a so-called deal was reached with the PSD transport minister. The "deal" contained nothing more than a promise to uphold an already agreed-upon meager increase of a portion of workers' wages.

Romanian teachers, meanwhile, are struggling against trade unions that are complicit in the criminal school reopenings. The country's schools have become virtual incubators for the Omicron variant, with over 3,000

cases among children officially registered every day. The trade unions have worked closely with the Government to reopen schools for in-person learning and to neuter any existing mitigation measures, including vaccinations. As pressure is mounting from teachers and parents, the unions organized a toothless two-hour protest, where teachers were instructed to look after students but not conduct classes.

Regardless of the treachery and corruption of these anti-worker organizations, there is a layer of middle-class charlatans that will stop at nothing to prop them up. Parties like The Romanian Socialist Party, Demos and numerous pseudo- left groups are desperately trying to promote illusions in the unions and prevent workers from breaking from their straitjacket.

A series of articles published in the *Libertatea* magazine, widely disseminated by these layers, purported to demonstrate that anti-union sentiment, increasingly and justifiably felt by wide layers of workers, is the work of right-wing social media networks.

Workers must break from the trade unions, which function as nothing more than industrial police of the capitalist state, and organize independently into rank-and-file committees to carry forward their struggles. Only in an international network of such rank-and-file committees can workers organize to mount a counter-offensive against exploitation and the homicidal response of the ruling class to the COVID-19 pandemic.



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