

Prague: Mass protest against war and inflation reveals crisis of political perspective

Markus Salzmann, Peter Schwarz
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Seventy thousand people demonstrated in the Czech capital of Prague on 3 September against rising energy prices and the NATO war in Ukraine, and demanded that the government resign.

They are rebelling against a social catastrophe that is dragging large sections of the working and middle classes into the abyss.

The former Eastern bloc country's economic and social crisis, which has been simmering for years, worsened dramatically following the imposition of European Union sanctions against Russia. Before the sanctions, the Czech Republic used to get 90 percent of its gas and 50 percent of its oil from Russia. Now it is dependent on gas supplied from Germany, which is charging horrendous prices. Germany itself is in the midst of a huge energy crisis.

Czech electricity prices are among the highest in Europe and are driving masses of small and medium-sized enterprises into bankruptcy. The country's official inflation rate was 17.5 percent in June and is expected to exceed 20 percent by the end of the year, according to the Czech National Bank.

The working class is being impoverished at a breathtaking pace. According to figures from the Czech Statistical Office, real wages in the second quarter of 2022 were 9.8 percent lower than a year ago. At the end of 2021, 9 percent of Czechs received an income below the official poverty line. This figure is now already 16 percent. Some 750,000 of the country's 10 million inhabitants are bankrupt and can no longer pay their debts.

Although outrage at these untenable conditions drove tens of thousands onto the streets, the crisis found no progressive expression at the demonstration. The rally was dominated by nationalist and right-wing slogans. It began with the playing of the Czech national anthem

and was submerged in a sea of national flags. Its official slogan was "The Czech Republic First".

The speakers and organisers were mainly from the right-wing and ultra-right camps. ANO, the party of oligarch and former prime minister Andrej Babiš, supported the protest, as did Tomio Okamura's far-right SPD. Corona deniers and smaller far-right parties were also prominently represented.

Sections of the country's trade unions, citizens' initiatives as well as the Social Democrats (CSSD) also called for support for the rally, and the Communist Party (KSCM) even provided its own speaker, leading many commentaries to refer to a "cross party front" of the left and right. The Czech head of government, Petr Fiala, against whom the rally was directed, denounced it as a "Russian propaganda and disinformation campaign" organised by "pro-Russian persons close to extremist positions".

In reality, Fiala and the five parties in his governing coalition bear the main responsibility for allowing the right and far right to exploit social discontent. Fiala's ODS party has its origins in the Civic Forum, which played an instrumental role in the so-called Velvet Revolution that led to the fall of the Stalinist regime in 1989.

The velvet glove of the "revolutionaries" of that period quickly revealed its iron fist directed above all at the Czech working class. They rejected Stalinism not because it oppressed the working class, but because it prevented them from making a career and enriching themselves as the middle class had done in the West.

Under its first leader, Vaclav Klaus, the Civic Forum moved rapidly to the right. It competed with ex-Stalinists in the social-democratic CSSD to see who could seize the largest share of former state-owned property. Under conditions of unbridled avarice and

greed, Civic Forum and CSSD governments and coalitions broke up time and time again over corruption scandals, only to emerge anew in a different composition and form.

In 2017, Andrej Babiš, the country's second richest man, came to power, using his wealth and right-wing populism as political weapons, much like Silvio Berlusconi in Italy and Donald Trump in the US. In 2019, in one of the largest demonstrations in the country's history, 250,000 demanded Babiš resign over corruption. He was able to remain in office, however, for two more years until the current government replaced him.

The Fiala government is a coalition of five parties: the ODN, the Christian Democrats, the liberal TOP 09, the Pirate Party and the local mayoral party STAN. Their common feature is opposition to Babiš and support for the EU and NATO and its war against Russia.

The Czech Republic has supplied Ukraine with large quantities of weapons, and Fiala was one of the first heads of state to travel to Kiev after the war began, together with the Polish and Slovenian heads of government. His Defence Minister Jana Černošková rejoiced at the murder of Darija Dugina, a Russian close to Putin, comparing her death to the murder of Reinhard Heydrich, Hitler's governor in occupied Czechoslovakia. Five days before the mass demonstration, the German Chancellor Olaf Scholz gave a militaristic speech in Prague at Fiala's invitation, advocating the militarisation of Europe under German leadership.

At the same time, the Fiala government has only contempt for the social misery of the Czech population. The chairperson of TOP 09, Markéta Pekarová Adamová, advised citizens to put on an extra jumper in winter as a measure against the impending lack of energy, while other government members have philosophised about the health benefits of poorly heated rooms.

The Fiala government is also even more corrupt than the predecessor regime led by Babiš. A leading politician of the STAN party, which won a fifth of the vote at its first showing based on its anticorruption campaign against Babiš, was arrested by the anticorruption police in June. "The sums illegally raked in by Hlubužek and another ten people with

connections to the STAN party make Babiš look like a saint," commented the German daily *taz*.

The central political problem in the Czech Republic is the lack of an independent perspective to guide working class opposition to the untenable social conditions and corrupt bourgeois parties. Decades of Stalinist repression and anti-socialist propaganda have left a legacy of confusion and disorientation.

A major contributor to this situation was the falsely named "communist" KSCM, which, like the social-democratic CSSD, emerged from the Stalinist state party and maintains relations with the German Left Party at a European level. The KSCM adhered to a pseudo-socialist rhetoric and achieved its best election result in 2002 with 18.5 percent of the vote. In some regions it was on occasion the strongest party.

In fact, the KSCM is pro-capitalist and nationalist and has repeatedly cooperated with the most right-wing forces. For example, from 2017 to 2021 it helped the oligarch Babiš gain a parliamentary majority with a tolerance agreement. At the recent rally in Prague, KSCM speaker Josef Skála explicitly advocated a cross-party front with the far right. "We need to join forces, we on the left of the political spectrum, and we also need a patriotic democratic right, and vice versa," he roared.

The deep crisis of capitalism, intensified by the NATO war against Russia and the confrontation with China, is provoking fierce class struggles worldwide. This creates the objective conditions to unite the international working class on the basis of a socialist programme to overthrow capitalism.

The subjective precondition is the building of a party consciously based on the lessons and strategic experiences of the last century, a Czech section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, which has fought Stalinism from the left, from the standpoint of world socialist revolution, since the founding of the Trotskyist Left Opposition 99 years ago.



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