

Over 150,000 teachers on strike in Romania

Andrei Tudora
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More than 150,000 Romanian teachers are engaged in a national strike that started on May 22. The strike is part of a growing upsurge of the class struggle across Europe. Romanian teachers join workers in the UK, Spain, Portugal, France and Germany, who are engaged in mass protests and strikes against austerity. Health care and railway workers in Romania are also engaged in protests against low wages and dangerous working conditions.

These struggles pose sharply the questions of political organization and perspective. Teachers are confronted not only by a Grand Coalition PSD-PNL (Social Democratic Party-National Liberal Party) government but also by the corporatist union apparatus, with the strike developing increasingly against the trade union federations.

Thousands of teachers have gathered in towns and cities across Romania to protest. On the 30th of May, a large rally took place in Bucharest, with over 20,000 teachers as well as many workers and pensioners from the city who joined in support. The rally started in Victory square, the seat of the government, and ended in front of the presidential palace.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to workers at the rally, who expressed their anger at the situation facing educators and their determination to continue the strike.

Georgeta and Mihaela work in a special needs school. They were protesting the low wages and the desperate situation of special-needs education, which is starved of funds and threatened with closure.

Gherghina, a retired teacher, lamented teachers' declining living conditions over the past decades and said of government politicians that "austerity should begin with them."

Bogdan, a teacher from Bucharest, explained that the government is not paying teachers their bonuses or correctly applying the salary law. He said that the strike should continue and that "it is not the union leaders that

get to decide when the strike ends. The teachers will decide."

Bogdan and Suzana came more than 170 miles from Iasi. They are tired, they said, of the way teachers are treated and of extremely low wages. They were among the teachers that remained in the square into the evening hours.

Union executives went inside to discuss with the president and came up with a scheme of "political guarantees" that they attempted to present as a victory for the workers. Workers shouted down the union bosses and refused to return home at the agreed hour. A few hundred protesters remained in the square for several more hours, in defiance of the unions and the police.

Romanian workers confront a government that is deeply involved in the imperialist war drive against Russia and is determined to impose the costs of the crisis onto the working class.

The grand coalition government, formed officially at the end of 2021, has already presided over the deaths of tens of thousands of people in the ongoing COVID pandemic, and has turned the country into an open-air barracks for the NATO war against Russia in Ukraine. It has built up fascistic forces in the form of the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) party and elevated them to the status of main political opposition. Romania has made plans for a massive increase of its military, including the purchase of F-35 fighter aircraft, Abrams tanks, submarines, drones and helicopters, at the cost of billions of dollars.

According to *Ziarul Financiar*, the number of millionaires in Romania has increased sharply since 2016. The country has over 1,800 "super-rich" individuals, the most in the region.

The vast majority of the country's population, however, has been economically devastated by the cost-of-living crisis that is hitting workers across the world.

Romania's official inflation rate was 16.7 percent last year and 15.5 percent this January, with the highest utilities price increase in the EU, according to Eurostat. According to EU figures, basic food prices rose up to 40 percent from 2021 to 2022.

A starting teacher's salary in Romania is around €500 and can go up to €850 for senior teachers. Rents in major cities in the country average around €400 for a one-bedroom apartment, with utility prices easily going over €150.

The government has recently passed an austerity law freezing wages, new hiring and spending in the public sector.

The coalition government also passed a new set of education laws, which introduce further standardized testing and impose the implementation of various police measures in schools.

While educators are determined to face off against the government, the greatest obstacle for their struggle remains the trade union bureaucracy.

Union executives like Marius Nistor or Simion Hancescu make thousands of euros a month. Their unions, the FSLI (The Federation of Free Education Unions) and the FSE "Spiru Haret," have for decades acted as an industrial police arm of the state. The union bureaucracies have refused to organize strikes for 18 years, including in 2011 when teachers were victims of a police campaign during national exams, and in 2021, when school reopening during the COVID pandemic led to a deluge of infections in schools. Hancescu cynically commented at the time for *coala9* that the system "lost a lot of value" along with the teachers that died of COVID.

Since the first days, union leaders have scrambled to sabotage the strike. They attempted to end the strike for a one-time bonus of €500, but were contemptuously rejected by teachers, who widely shared calls on social media for a mass exit from the unions.

The government maintained an obstinate and defiant attitude throughout. It has repeated the mantra that there is "no money" and has made a "final offer"—an insulting increase of between €50 and €200 pre-tax, with any further increases to be set over following years. It proceeded to sign the increase into an emergency law on Thursday and announced an end to negotiations.

On June 1, President Iohannis, speaking from Mimi

castle in Moldova, where EU leaders had gathered to advance their war aims against Russia, threatened the teachers, implying the government will use strike breakers against them: "How dare they threaten national exams ... After the government gave them everything they asked for, what basis could they have to continue the strike? ... I believe that a lot of educators, who already considered that it [the strike] was too much will go back to school and they are doing a very good thing."

At the same time, union leaders increased the pressure and announced in the media that their mandate has been "successfully carried out." They have bitterly denounced teachers and blamed the influence of the fascist AUR party and "political agitators" infiltrating social media for the teachers' determination to continue the strike.

The trade union federations in health and rail are also working out plans to delay strikes and isolate the teachers. The rail unions have set a date for the strike as no closer than the first of July, while Sanitas, the largest nurses' union, is in constant talks with the government and aims to squash the strike completely.

Under these circumstances, the role of the various Stalinist and pseudo-left forces in Romania to keep workers tied to the unions is politically criminal. They are providing a pseudo-left cover for the union bureaucracy, as it comes into ever more open conflict with the rank and file.

Teachers can only advance their demands in an open rebellion against the trade union bureaucrats—both at the national and local level—by forming independent rank and file committees and linking their struggles across sectors and countries. To put an end to the government's policies of war and austerity, workers in Romania need above all a clear perspective that unites them with the international working class in the struggle for a socialist reorganization of society. This requires the building of a Romanian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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