

Escalating protests in Montenegro

By Ognjen Markovic
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Following an initial protest in January, another large demonstration against declining living standards and corruption took place in the Montenegrin capital of Podgorica on March 18. The protest was organised by the same alliance that called the January protest: the Union of Free Trade Unions of Montenegro (UFTUM), the NGO MANS and the Students' Union.

According to the UFTUM web site, around 20,000 people took part in the protest. This is a large figure for the tiny state of Montenegro, which voted for its independence from Serbia in 2006, and has a total population of around 625,000. The latest protest was around twice the size of the demonstration in January and reflects growing popular anger at social polarisation and government corruption.

Alluding to last year's uprisings in the Arab world, the organisers and the media claimed the arrival of a "Montenegrin Spring."

The government's response to the rally revealed its increasing nervousness in the face of growing popular anger. The MANS web site records diverse attempts to obstruct the organisation of the protest. Bus companies were pressured to cancel their services, and local administrations made the protest day—Sunday—a workday, obliging public employees to show up for work.

The seat of the government building, the finishing point of the January protest, was barricaded, even though the organisers of Sunday's march made clear they would not proceed to the government headquarters, but instead disband the crowd at the main city square. Attempting to play down the significance of the event, the Montenegrin authorities claimed just 7,000 took part.

For their part, the organisers of the demonstration went to considerable lengths to contain the protest and imposed their own restrictions. In addition to curtailing the route of the march and avoiding the parliament, the

organisers also ensured that the event ended just an hour after its official start. In statements, organisers insisted on the supposed apolitical character of the demonstration, while at the same time persevering with their bankrupt perspective of pressuring the government to change its austerity policies and end systemic corruption.

One of the main aims of the organisers of the demonstration was to encourage illusions in the European Union (EU) and its institutions under conditions where popular support for the country's membership in the EU is on the wane.

Under conditions in which the EU has emerged as a central instrument of the banks and financial elite for the imposition of austerity and the destruction of workers' rights across Europe, Vanja Calovic, executive director of MANS and one of the main speakers at the rally, exclaimed: "Europe means equal rights for all...right to liberty, dignity, right to work."

Prior to the demonstration, Calovic had even gone so far as to call upon right-wing prime minister Igor Luksic to join the protest, a call she repeated during the rally. The task of the prime minister was to demonstrate whether he was "with us, or is a puppet of organised crime", she insisted.

In a particularly cynical part of her speech, Calovic hailed public employees who joined the protest, asking for them to be applauded. These are the same public employees the UFTUM stabbed in the back last December by striking a treacherous sell-out contract with the government, in which the UFTUM agreed to job and wage cuts and surrendered the right to strike.

The role these organisations see themselves fulfilling is best summed up by Srdja Kekovic, general secretary of UFTUM, which was founded in 2008 as a supposed leftist alternative to the thoroughly discredited CTUM trade union.

Already in 2008, the UFTUM had issued a manifesto

in which it pledged its fidelity to the EU. The UFTUM programme reads: “The vital interests of employees and the Union of Free Trade Unions of Montenegro require participation in appropriate international institutions and projects: regional, sub-regional and wider European cooperation, especially within the European Union.”

In an interview with Radio Free Europe, Kekovic made very clear that his main concern was to prevent a social explosion. He told the radio station: “Social revolt in Montenegro can no longer be contained. It is extremely important for Montenegro and its future that we are leading that revolt, as organisers, with our partners...rather than it happens in a disorderly manner.”

He continued: “We have been warning the government for a long time...that social explosion can occur any moment...[and] that the government has to at last take a stand as the government of citizens, and not as the government of foreign investors, tycoons and employers.... We think a boiling point has really been reached, and no one can stop this social revolt anymore...unless the government starts doing what is demanded of it by Europe, and above all by us.”

Last September, Kekovic acknowledged to the *Vijesti* newspaper that his own income was more than twice the average wage. His own wage does not include the significant perks that come with the position of the UFTUM general secretary.

In short, Kekovic and company are demanding a redistribution of wealth within the top 10 percent and improvement in their status quo. In exchange, they are prepared to play the leading role in neutralising further protests.

In a country with one of the lowest wage rates in Europe—the current average monthly wage in Montenegro is just €480 (US\$653) and the average pension just €280 (\$370), with most people receiving far less—Kekovic represents a small layer of the privileged middle class. The pitiful rates of pay for the vast majority of workers are entirely due to the close collaboration of the trade union bureaucracy with successive Montenegrin governments, which have invariably been involved in various forms of corruption.

A recent Stratfor report released by WikiLeaks called upon its operatives to closely observe the development

of organised crime (OC) in the Balkans.

The Stratfor report reads: “We need to be kept abreast of any events in the Balkans that are OC related. The countries to watch in particular are Croatia (high OC), Macedonia, and Montenegro (the entire country is OC, including the government).”

It is under these conditions that Kekovic and the trade union bureaucracy offer their services to attempt to provide a political platform for the crony government and the European Union, while at the same time striving to ensure that social protests do not become “disorderly”.

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