

The political issues confronting the Bulgarian protests

By Christoph Dreier
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Last Sunday once again saw mass demonstrations in Bulgaria against the horrendous energy prices and the country's corrupt political parties. While participants protested against the austerity measures dictated by the European Union (EU) and International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the bitter poverty they have produced, the organisers are mainly petty-bourgeois forces seeking a share of the spoils.

Two weeks ago, mass protests brought down the conservative government of Prime Minister Boyko Borisov (GERB). Demonstrators attacked the offices of the big energy companies and tens of thousands flocked onto the streets. Once again, tens of thousands assembled on Sunday in 25 cities across the country.

These protests represent a fundamental social revolt. Bulgaria is the poorest country in the EU. In January, unemployment was officially 12.4 percent, and 28.3 percent among young people. According to the charity Caritas, 40 percent of children do not have enough to eat.

This humanitarian crisis is the direct result of the government's austerity measures, which have been dictated first by the IMF and later by the EU. At 16.3 percent of GDP, Bulgaria has an extremely low level of debt, but the EU is demanding still more reforms and deregulation. The electricity companies were privatised in 2005 and the new owners promised a 16 percent guarantee. Shortly after joining the EU in 2008, the country reduced all taxes to a flat rate of 1 percent.

The protests are primarily directed against the desperate social inequality. Politically, however, they are dominated by wealthy members of the middle class who incite nationalism and use the movement to improve their own position within the existing political and economic structures. These forces are hostile to the social interests of the vast majority of workers in

Bulgaria.

Since the protests in February became a mass phenomenon, these tendencies have been trying to push social questions into the background and bolster the issue of citizen participation, a change in government and regulation of monopolies.

On February 24, a group of protesters, including many of the initiators of the protest, wrote an open letter to President Rossen Plevneliev, which was eagerly seized on by the media and has since become regarded as the programme of the demonstrations.

While the vast majority of the demonstrators have taken to the streets because they are not prepared to pay the horrendous bills, and are calling for the nationalisation of the companies, the open letter merely refers to the privatisation of the electricity supply "in line with EU norms and directives". The legal proceedings against defaulting electricity customers are not to be halted, but merely postponed until the legitimacy of their bills is determined.

The authors of the open letter are asking for the opening up of the energy sector to the free market. The letter also speaks explicitly against subsidising coal production, upon which thousands of jobs in the country depend. These are all claims that have been addressed by the EU to Bulgaria for years and are directly opposed to workers' social rights.

This right-wing, anti-working class programme goes hand in hand with attacks on democratic rights. The letter opposes the dissolution of the hated parliament following the resignation of the government. Rather, the parliament should remain and support a so-called programme government to implement policies agreed on by a "civic council of experts".

The open letter regards the most important task of the government to be the abolition of elections based on

proportional representation and the introduction of a new electoral law based on majority voting, or winner-takes-all system, which would permit local candidates to stand independently of party lists, with so-called civic participation in public agencies and ministries. A majority voting system would reduce the chances of smaller parties and minorities from being represented in parliament and would dramatically strengthen the major parties.

President Plevneliev has responded to the open letter by agreeing to the formation of a citizens' council. The "social council" he has launched includes entrepreneurs, academics and trade unionists, as well as representatives of the protests. Of ten invited protesters, only three refused to participate in the committee.

Civil rights activist Yanko Petrov, the environmental activist Angel Slavchev and Doncho Dudev declared they were not prepared to negotiate with the oligarchs, and left the council at its first meeting last Friday. However, all three supported the demands formulated in the open letter.

On Monday, some of the activists constructed a small protest camp outside the parliament building, in order to add weight to the demands in the open letter. They announced their intention not to dismantle the tents until the demands were met.

The camp's organisers, which include some of the members of the civic council, have called themselves "Eagle Bridge", after one of the main bridges in the Bulgarian capital where numerous protests have taken place in the last weeks. The group has called a national "protest conference" for March 9 at the Armeets Arena, the largest and most modern multimedia centre in the city, which has already led to speculation about the well-off figures pulling the strings. Representatives from 25 cities around the country have been invited to come up with a programme for the movement.

The central objective of this event is to stabilise the situation and strangle any serious protests against the social disaster. The resistance is to be subordinated to parliament. Yanaki Ganchev, an organiser of the protest camp, said: "We are saying that we are the employers of this National Assembly. They should work until the 12th [of May, the date of Bulgaria's early elections precipitated by the current political crisis] to get these things done."

With petty-bourgeois forces politically dominating

the demonstrations, the ultra-nationalists see the chance to use the protests for their own propaganda. Although some individual members of the fascist Ataka were driven away by demonstrators, they could move freely in a sea of Bulgarian flags. The organisers consciously held the last major demonstration on the national holiday of March 3, repeatedly stressing they would not accept foreign monopolies in the energy sector.

The programme of the petty-bourgeois tendencies that have the political upper hand in the protests is diametrically opposed to the interests of the working class. They are often small business owners or employees of EU-funded non-governmental organisations (NGOs), which have close links to the European elite, and regard the dominance of the oligarchs and political caste as an obstacle to their own progress in Bulgaria. On the other hand, they support the EU policy of austerity and the social attacks.

They have headed off the widespread popular anger against all political parties to enforce an extremely undemocratic and anti-working class programme. Now, they are playing a key role in bringing the protests under control and steering them into harmless channels.

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