

Anti-government protests continue in Hungary

By Markus Salzmann
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Protests against the right-wing government of Premier Victor Orbán have continued this week. Thousands had taken to the streets in Budapest and other big cities last week. The demonstrations were triggered by a new law that increases the number of overtime hours that employers can demand from their workers from 250 to 400 per year.

The protests are also directed against a judicial reform decided at the same time, which opens the way for new government-controlled administrative courts. Another target of the protests are the xenophobic and antisocial policies of the Fidesz government.

Last Sunday witnessed the largest demonstration so far, with 15,000 protesting against the government's "Slave Law." Slogans on banners included "Orbán, get lost!" "Strike, strike, strike" and "We have had enough!" The protests drew from virtually all layers of the population, with more and more students taking part. The initial protests were met with the widespread use of tear gas by the police, but the more recent protests have remained largely peaceful.

On Sunday, demonstrations took place outside the main building of the state television station, MTV. The broadcaster is under government control and is known for its one-sided government propaganda. A group of opposition MPs had gained access to the building Sunday night and occupied it for 24 hours.

In Szombathely, western Hungary, 1,000 people marched to the editorial offices of the local newspaper, *Vas Nepe*, to protest against the pro-government line taken by the paper. In Hungary, the government controls a large part of the press and independent media outlets are muzzled.

The government has maliciously denounced the demonstrators. Zoltan Kovacs, a spokesman of Fidesz, claimed in the *New York Times* that the protests have

"no popular support." The leaders of the protests are "desperate" opposition politicians and "celebrity activists," he said.

In reality, support for Orbán is plummeting. According to a new poll, 80 percent reject the new labour law. Two thirds of those who formerly voted for Orbán oppose the law, with workers fearing layoffs if they refuse to work overtime.

Orbán has governed the country with an absolute majority since 2010 and gradually erected authoritarian state structures in Hungary. He owed his majority not to any broad support on the part of the population but rather to profound discontent with all the other establishment parties, most notably the Socialist Party (MSZP). Last Wednesday, when parliament passed its labour law, the pent-up anger spilled out onto the streets.

According to a poll by IDEA this month, only 34 percent support the governing party. That is 3 percent less than in the previous month. According to the same poll, the second-ranked party in parliament, the far-right Jobbik, is only supported by 8 percent. In 2014, Fidesz was polling at over 50 percent. This means that support for these two parties has almost halved since 2014. In 2019, European and local elections will be held in Hungary, and all of the parties fear massive losses, especially Fidesz.

The reformed labour law primarily serves the interests of international corporations, in particular the European auto industry. At the beginning of his term in office, Orbán restricted the right to strike, and Hungary now has one of the lowest corporate tax rates in the EU. Until now, Orbán could rely on the tacit support of the trade unions, but they are currently threatening to call a general strike in the new year.

"We say yes to the general strike. This is our last

chance to demonstrate our power,” a union representative told the German *Handelsblatt* newspaper. He made clear that this was solely due to massive pressure from the workforce. “Some of our members are asking us to shut down the country,” he admitted. Workers in the auto industry earn on average between €900 and €1,000 per month for a working week of over 40 hours.

The unions are growing increasingly fearful that the protests could spread to the factories and lead to strikes. The rate of trade union organisation in the factories is traditionally low, averaging between 10 and 20 percent. Hungary is a favoured location for the auto industry. In addition to low wages and low taxes, the trade unions have always faithfully followed the line of government and big business.

The German carmaker BMW recently announced plans to build a new auto factory in the eastern region of Debrecen, where more than 1,000 employees are expected to produce up to 150,000 cars each year. It is understandable that some critics have called the new labour legislation the “BMW law.”

Sixteen different unions are currently discussing a possible strike in January. Last year, workers at Tesco stores went on strike in Hungary and there were strikes in the car industry in other parts of eastern Europe, including Volkswagen in Slovakia and Fiat in Serbia.

The Hungarian economy is currently growing due to the activities of these international companies and a gross domestic product increase of 3.8 percent is expected this year. The Hungarian government has predicted annual growth of between 4 and 4.2 percent by 2022. However, this has brought little in the way of benefits for the vast majority of the Hungarian population.

Both the government and opposition parties fear that the current protests could spread. While the opposition MSZP is teaming up with the far-right Jobbik, the government is preparing a brutal crackdown on the protests. Orbán’s chief of staff, Gergely Gulyás, accused protesters of showing “open anti-Christian hatred.” He said that citizens had the right to protest only as long as no laws are broken. At the same time, the government announced Wednesday that it would make no concessions regarding its “Slave Law.”

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