

Further protests against Orbán government in Hungary

By Markus Salzmann
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On Saturday, in freezing temperatures, about 10,000 people demonstrated again in the Hungarian capital Budapest against the right-wing government of Prime Minister Victor Orbán. In the last weeks, thousands had already protested against the so-called “slave law.”

The protests in Budapest and other cities in the country were triggered by a tightening of labour law allowing companies to demand up to 400 hours of overtime per year from all employees. Orbán’s governing party Fidesz, which has a two-thirds majority in parliament, passed the law in mid-December.

Meanwhile, the protests are directed against the government’s entire right-wing, anti-social policies, which have systematically eliminated press freedoms and democratic rights since it took office nine years ago. The recent restructuring of the judicial system is designed to ensure that the government has full control over the courts. On Saturday, the crowd chanted “We won’t be slaves,” “Dirty Fidesz” and “Orbán, get out!” among other things.

So, it was hardly surprising that the pro-government media in Hungary either barely mentioned the protests or uncritically repeated the reactions of government representatives. As before, Fidesz declared that the demands of the demonstrators would not be met under any circumstances.

At the same time, the government is continuing its anti-Semitic campaign by claiming that US billionaire George Soros was behind the protests. On Saturday, a Fidesz spokesman said Soros was mobilising forces everywhere that were attacking anti-migration governments, such as in Hungary, before the European elections in the spring.

In the meantime, almost all opposition parties and trade unions have joined the protests. They are seeking

to bring them under their control and direct social opposition into a political dead end. The Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP), whose right-wing policies paved the way for Orbán, the hysterically anti-Communist Greens (LMP) and the trade unions have allied themselves with the neo-fascist Jobbik party, which has repeatedly supported Orbán’s xenophobic government policies.

The MSZP, which emerged from the former Stalinist party of state, has used the protests to forge a right-wing alliance with Jobbik. Bertalan Tóth has emerged as the new party leader from months of fierce in-fighting in the MSZP. He has pledged his party to a radical turn to the right and cooperation with the ultra-right Jobbik. In this year’s local elections, the opposition parties want to nominate only one candidate in each region, who will then compete against the ruling party’s candidate.

The unions are threatening a general strike if the government does not respond to four demands they have made. According to the daily *Nepszava*, they are demanding the overtime law be revoked. In addition, the minimum wage should be raised, pensions improved and the right to strike amended. Laszlo Kordas of the Federation of Trade Unions said, “We are preparing for strike action.”

Andras Földiak, chair of another trade union federation, told Inforadio that he expected nationwide strikes in early February. A nationwide protest is already planned for January 19.

The trade unions and opposition parties fear the protests against the government will expand and take an independent direction if they do not bring them under their control. That this fear is not unfounded is demonstrated by the growth of protests on an international level. For weeks, the “yellow vests” in

France have been protesting against President Emmanuel Macron. The protest wave has already spread to Spain and Portugal. Now, more and more protests are developing in southern and eastern Europe.

For several weeks, thousands have been demonstrating against President Aleksandar Vučić in Serbia. His ruling Progress Party (SNS) is implementing brutal austerity dictates and is acting increasingly violently against the opposition forces.

When 10,000 people participated in a demonstration at the beginning of December, Vučić declared contemptuously, “March as much as you like. I will not meet your demands, even if five million should come.” By the end of the year, the number of participants had quadrupled.

The same Saturday, more than 15,000 people came to the demonstration in the capital Belgrade, despite snow and icy temperatures. There were smaller protests in Novi Sad, Niš and Kragujevac. While the crowd shouted, “Vučić, you thief!” banners read, “It has begun.”

Student protests have again broken out in Albania where they had boycotted lessons for two weeks in December and announced they would resume the protests in January. They are opposing the catastrophic conditions confronting pupils and students in the poverty-stricken Balkan state. The education system is chronically underfunded and ailing. Walter Glos of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation told *Deutschlandfunk* radio that the mood of protest had since spread to other parts of the population.

Bosnia is also in “turmoil,” as the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* recently noted. Since the death of a student eight months ago, more and more people have been protesting against the government.

The movement was triggered by the death of the 21-year-old student David Dragičević. While the police portrayed the death as an accident, everything points to torture and murder. In the eyes of his father, a waiter and war veteran, his son was the victim of a plot involving criminals, the police and politicians.

This was the trigger for thousands to take to the streets against the right-wing nationalist government. In social media networks, the protests are supported by tens of thousands. In the area formerly blighted by civil war, the government is deliberately seeking to fuel ethnic tensions, however, in the protests against the

government, Muslims, Serbs and Croats are showing their solidarity.

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