



Call a general strike to repeal Hungary's slave law

Jeremy Dewar, redflagonline Thu, 10/01/2019 - 13:10

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On 5 January, tens of thousands of workers and students flooded into Budapest's Heroes Square to demand President Victor Orbán's Fidesz party is 'swept from power'.

If Orbán thought that the winter break would kill off the anti-government movement, this emphatic response instead killed off any hope of that. A trio of dictatorial laws has drawn opposition parties, trade unions, students and intellectuals into a mass street movement, mainly in the capital Budapest but also, for the first time, across the country.

Now, the trade union federation, MASZSZ, which has 150,000 members, has threatened a general strike on 19 January. 'The government has abandoned us,' said László Kordas, head of MASZSZ, 'The country must come to a halt at the same time on the same day.'

Another union official admitted to the German newspaper *Handelsblatt* that this was due to rank and file pressure, 'Some of our members are asking us to shut down the country.'

The movement started in November last year, when Fidesz, which has a two-thirds majority in Parliament following its landslide election victory in April and so can pass any law it likes, moved to shut down the Central European University, which was founded and partially funded by Orbán's hate figure, the billionaire George Soros.

Slave Law

Then, on 12 December, car and chemical workers, meatpackers and teachers joined the students and academics on the streets, when parliament passed the so-called 'Slave Law'.

This law allows employers to roster their workers for an extra 400 hours overtime a year, to pay for this additional labour time at the normal rate and to withhold payment for up to three years. Workers rightly fear that they would be sacked if they refuse to do the 'overtime', effectively making it compulsory.

Just think about it for a minute. Four hundred hours equates to two whole hours extra a day or one extra working day per week.

There is a certain irony in all of this. Fidesz was elected on a platform that almost exclusively centred on eliminating immigration; a policy that is coveted by right wing politicians in the UK ranging from Jacob Rees-Mogg and Nigel Farage through to the fascist Tommy Robinson.

Yet this policy has produced an acute labour shortage in Hungary, especially in the all-important car industry, which is dominated by multinationals like BMW, Audi and General Motors, where workers are paid on average €900 a month, a third of a typical German car worker's wage. An estimated one million, mainly young, workers have left the country since 2006, when Orbán came to power, and have not been replaced. Workers have even nicknamed the new law the 'BMW law'.

Other authoritarian laws passed at the end of 2018 include the setting up of new 'administrative courts' to deal with corruption cases and the like. These courts will be under the direct control of the ruling party, thus ending the independence of the judiciary, very handy since the Fidesz government is increasingly mired in financial scandal.

Another draws the mainstream media, which are already largely in the pocket of Fidesz, into one consortium. Many fear this would signal the final end of independent journalism.

Repression and resistance

The initial response of the government was to violently repress the movement, unleashing teargas on the demonstrators on 12 December, arresting over 50 protesters and wounding many more. It has called off its dogs since then, taken aback by opinion polls that regularly suggest that 80 per cent of the population disapprove of the slave law and fearing the type of street movement that brought Orban himself to power on a pro-democracy ticket in 2006 .

Now, the opposition parties have joined the fray, with MPs partially occupying the state TV centre to demand the right to read out a statement supporting the protests. Until now, only the government line on the protesters, essentially that it is all a plot concocted by Soros, has been broadcast. This broadening of the movement, however, also brings its dangers.

Firstly, the mainstream parties, including the Socialist Party, MSZP, cannot be trusted. They have proved no friends to the workers in the past and have remained quiet amid the rising tide of racism, especially antisemitism. Their main goal is to secure a level playing field for themselves in May's important European elections.

Worse, the fascist Jobbik party, currently polling at 8 per cent support, has opportunistically positioned itself as a defender of workers' rights. Yellow vests have even started appearing on some of the more recent demonstrations. As a defender of zero immigration, violently antisemitic and a promoter of authoritarian dictatorship, the presence of Jobbik is a clear threat to workers, migrants, and women. Within the movement, socialists should link workers' rights with the women's movement and campaigns in solidarity with migrants and against racism. Raising anti-racist and pro-women slogans, alongside self-defence committees, is the first step to isolating the far right and driving them out of the movement.

The workers have had to wring the call for a general strike on 19 January out of their union leaders. But the unions are weak, with fewer than one in ten workers belonging to one. To overcome this limitation, workers must build councils of action in every district of Budapest and in all cities and towns, drawing in all workplaces, unionised or not, students and rural workers. The running of the general strike and direction of the movement must be placed in the hands of such action committees.

Orban doesn't fear the opposition, let alone trade union leaders. What he does fear is that the movement could escape their control and develop into one that, as is already happening spontaneously, threatens his rule. If he survives, with one or two minor concessions, he will simply come back and pick off workers and students piecemeal.

To prevent this, the workers must inscribe on their banners the repeal of all Orban's dictatorial laws, demand he is ejected from office and that a general election is called, under the control of the working masses. To end the growing dictatorship of Orban's Fidesz party and prevent Jobbik from filling his shoes, a new party of the working class is needed, a revolutionary party that can resolve the crisis engulfing Hungary in the interests of all workers, be they Hungarian, Roma or immigrant, Christian, Jewish or Muslim.

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