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Protests against new labour law in Hungary

Braving freezing temperatures, several thousand workers have taken to the streets of Budapest on a daily basis since last Wednesday to protest against the tightening up of labour law by the Hungarian government. One week ago, 10,000 people protested against the new “Slave Law.” Police used tear gas and water cannon to brutally repel the demonstrators.

On Wednesday, parliament passed the new bill proposed by the right-wing Fidesz party led by Prime Minister Victor Orbán. On Friday and Saturday, riots took place with more than 50 participants arrested and many wounded in clashes with police. According to media reports, 14 police officers were injured. The media described the protests as “the most violent protests in more than ten years.” The initial protests were limited to the capital city, but protests also took place on Friday in Pecs in southern Hungary.

The law reform is designed to increase the annual overtime employers are allowed to demand from their workers from 250 to 400 hours. At the same time, companies no longer have to compensate or pay overtime within one year, but only within three years.

The protests not only included calls for the repeal of the new labour code, but also for the resignation of Premier Orbán and for basic political changes. In the 10 years Orbán has been in power, he has led Hungary towards dictatorship and strengthened the most right-wing elements in the country.

The protests are also directed against another law passed Wednesday, which subordinates the judiciary to even more control by the government. The law places new administrative courts directly under the justice minister, Laszlo Trocsanyi, a close ally of Orbán.

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The tightening of the Labour Code serves the interests of international corporations operating in the country, especially the auto industry, which accounts for about one third of all Hungarian exports. Nearly all international carmakers, such as Audi, BMW and Opel, produce in Hungary. They are attracted in particular by wages that are around one third of what the auto companies pay in countries like Germany. Hungary is considered a “location with low labour costs, well-trained workers and weak unions,” the *Wiener Zeitung* notes.

As in other eastern European countries, massive emigration and the decline of the education system is beginning to affect the labour market. That is why companies are having increasing difficulty finding skilled workers. Orbán’s law means that such skilled workers can in future be compelled to work much longer hours.

Union representatives rightly refer to the law as a backdoor to the introduction of a six-day working week. Foreign Trade Minister Péter Sijjártó recently stated that investors have welcomed the proposals of the Hungarian government, because they will increase competitiveness.

In all of the protests, many participants wore yellow vests. They were expressing their solidarity with the protests in France, where the opposition to President Emmanuel Macron has assumed the dimensions of a mass movement of the working class against the capitalist system. The latest protests in Hungary have been supported by students and school pupils, as is the case in France.

Although the unions have increasingly adapted to the government line in recent years, they felt obliged to respond to workers’ pressure for the protests. The MASZSZ trade union group even threatened a general strike if the government did not withdraw the law. Other unions, such as the teachers’ union, also joined the protests. The Internet portal *nepszava.hu* published a survey by the polling institute Pulzus according to which 81 percent of respondents agreed with the protests.

The majority of protesters are expressing genuine anger at the right-wing government, but far-right forces are trying to exploit the protests for their own ends. The neo-fascist Jobbik party has called for rejection of the new labour law, and far-right-wing forces are using social media to mobilise against it. The Jobbik leadership called upon its regional organisations to travel to Budapest on Friday to participate in the protests.

A particularly vile role is being played by the so-called “left-wing” opposition parties. They are using the current situation to ally themselves with the ultra-right. When in power,

the Socialist Party (MSZP) had also implemented policies attacking the working class and its rights. Now it is calling for collaboration with Jobbik.

MSZP MP Agnes Kunhalmi said that this was necessary to fight the Orbán government. She raised the possibility of an alliance for the European elections in the coming year, arguing that otherwise Orbán would ban all opposition parties.

A similar position is held by the right-wing neo-liberal Momentum movement, which supports the European Union. Its deputy, Anna Donáth, called for “solidarity” with all parties and groups opposed to the new the law.

The Orbán government is responding to the protests with an extremely aggressive, right-wing campaign. As was the case when the government took a fierce stance against refugees, Orbán raises the cudgel of anti-Semitism. According to Balazs Hidveghi, the communications director of the governing party, the Jewish US billionaire George Soros “organised the violence in Budapest.” Soros and his network were only interested in riots, and provocation and protests had been deliberately planned, as was the violence against policemen, Hidveghi explained, according to the Hungarian news agency MTI.

Recently, Hungary’s head of government initiated the bundling of media outlets favourable to the government in a new consortium. In early December, he signed a decree stating that this measure was of “strategic importance” and in the public interest. The measure permits Orbán to increase his influence over the press in Hungary and neutralise any media opposition. This explains why many of the Hungarian media outlets refuse to report on the protest or do so only to portray the protesters as “rabble.”