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Slovenia

Impressive mobilisation at the edge of capitalist Europe

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Description:

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In November 2007, trade unions in Slovenia organised a major demonstration in their capital city, Ljubljana, to protest the effects of inflation, and to demand cost-of-living adjustments to salaries in this former Yugoslav Republic, which joined the European Union in May 2004.



Students at the University of Ljubljana occupy against 'the logic of market economy' Photo: Avtonomna tribuna

The 70,000 demonstrators (in a capital city of 280,000, in a country with less than two million inhabitants) demanded "European salaries to match European prices"

Slovenian trade unions have tried hard to develop regional solidarity links, and there were delegations of demonstrators from Croatia, Macedonia, Serbia, and from the Italian port of Trieste, one of the major gateways for Slovenian trade.

Slovenians have paid a heavy price for their country's entry into the European Monetary System. Inflation has increased (from 2.5% in 2005 to 5.8% in 2007). And while political and business leaders are proud that the country adopted the Euro at the start of 2007, Slovenia's average purchasing power is only 79% of the EU average. Two thirds of the population have low incomes, and 12.1% live in poverty, with a monthly income of less than 440 euros. Slovenia's minimum wage is 538.53 euros, but 19,202 workers officially earn less than this, and need a state subsidy to bring their wages up to the minimum.

The population is disappointed and frustrated that EU membership did not bring an increase in living standards. Particularly since a very small, very visible group of new rich have done very well in recent years. According to the national Statistical Office, wages increased 5.2% in the 12 months to June 2007, but profits increased 22%. These profits mostly go to fuel stock market speculation, and a sharp increase in consumption of luxury goods.

Three companies, Mercator, TUS and SPAR control 90% of the retail sector. The Slovenian government does not have the slightest intention to control prices by regulating profits of these monopolies, despite evidence that the three giants collude to keep prices high.

Foreign debt is also increasing steadily. Yugoslavia's growing debt was one of the reasons the Slovenian elite gave for seeking independence - the growing debt of independent Slovenia passes in silence

A range of social movements testified to popular unrest, even before the 17th November demonstration. Customs

officers implemented a work-to-rule, and there were work stoppages by drivers at the Veolia bus company and an abrasives company.

The major labour organisation, the Association of Free Trade Unions of Slovenia (ZSSS), succeeded in creating a broad coalition of almost all the country's labour unions, to protest the effects of inflation, and to demand cost-of-living adjustments to salaries, as well as increases that reflect recent increases in labour productivity. According to Duan Semoli?, President of ZSSS, and spokesperson for the united labour front, "it is important is that we inside the European Union are fighting for standards for all the workers. No matter which country we are living in. The European Union has more than 20 million unemployed. The European Union has many faces."

This wasn't the first major labour demonstration in Slovenia. In 2005 in deep snow, the unions gathered 40,000 people in Ljubljana, to protest against a government proposal that would have increased the Value Added Tax on essentials from 8.5% to 20%, while reducing and simplifying income and profit taxes to a single rate of 20%. The government was forced to abandon these proposals, and the minister responsible was obliged to resign

On the 17th of November 2007, it was not forty but seventy thousand workers who gathered in the capital city. An immense number, in this country of less than 2 million inhabitants, and testifying to popular rejection of neoliberalism and its perverse effects. The speech of Duan Semoli? was passionate and determined. "If we already have European prices, European management rewards, European profits and a European intensity of work, then we must also receive European wages! It is just not true that there is no money available to increase workers' salaries." Semoli? warned the country's new rich elite. "Gentlemen, alongside your massive incomes, alongside the loans you receive for buying up more companies, and alongside the money the state spends to support you in every imaginable way, there must also be enough money to increase salaries of working people. You are stealing from ordinary working men and women!" He threatened to organize a general strike. "Slovenia's trade unions will rebel, with all the means at our disposal, against any measure that increases poverty. We continue to hope that reason will prevail in the minds of the employers' organisations. If this reason does not come, if there is no progress at the negotiation table, we will be forced to start strikes, a general strike. Let those in power understand that they depend on the labour power of ordinary men and women, and that they have gone too far in exploiting working people! This demonstration is a final warning to the employers!"

A similar tone was adopted by Mateja Kozuh Novak, a retired gynaecologist, and representative of the Association of Retired People (which has 250,000 members). "We are the generation that in the second half of the 20th century created a high standard social state. We can not allow the small minority, who quickly became rich on the backs of all of us, to lower the standards of the social state.

"It's clear that workers have to fight. Our new rich are praising their big profits, but workers can hardly live. I'm very happy that solidarity between generations is present here. I was afraid that in this turbo-capitalism, people would forget that it is essential to work together to ensure a decent standard of living for everyone.

"The health system, schools and social care has to remain in the hands of the state.

"Since 1991, instead of improving the public health system, and building effective watchdogs for the health, school and social care systems, successive governments have opened health, school and social care to privatisation, hoping that private ownership would upgrade the system and solve the problems. The result is exactly the opposite.

"It makes me sad, because people in Yugoslavia lived quite well and that's the reason why it was necessary to destroy Yugoslavia in blood, otherwise it would never have fallen apart. The Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia and the other eastern countries fell apart easily, because people lived in bad conditions, but in Yugoslavia we didn't live

badly. For me, the process since 1991 has been pure neo-colonialism. That is clear now."

The demonstration on Saturday 17 November surpassed all expectations, particularly regarding attendance. The big demonstration in 2005 has assumed mythological proportions in people's memory - many Slovenians wondered if the trade unions could ever bring so many demonstrators onto the street again. In the end, the November 2007 demonstration was twice as large as the 2005 mobilisation.

Rastko Močnik, a Professor of Sociology at Ljubljana University, sees several reasons why the Slovenian trade unions are so much stronger than elsewhere in the post-Stalinist east of Europe. "The first factor is the rather brutal change in the relations of production here. We were a social state - I mean some sort of socialist system - with relatively solid social standards for the masses and with small social differentials, and we became a peripheral capitalism of the liberal type, by this I mean a brutal form of capitalism. Liberalism destroyed the previously existing workers' rights, and has brought new types of working relationships - without social security, and characterised by precarious and untraditional legal conditions and of course with intensive exploitation.

"The second reason for the strength of the trade union is that the memory of Yugoslav workers' self management is still alive. Workers' self management was far from perfect, and had all kinds of implications, but institutionally it offered working people a forum where they could express their demands and their expectations. It also made them share responsibility for the decisions adopted by management.

"What shocked most workers, and what has been most negative in this country's transition to peripheral capitalism is the increase in social injustice and the destruction of the social state.

The socialist system in Yugoslavia grew out of an authentic socialistic revolution, and tried to establish new forms of democracy, particularly direct participative democracy in industry, in factories and in public services. And the abolition of these hard-won achievements has been a shock for the majority of the working population.

"In the labour movement, there is a undeniable contradiction between tactical moves and strategic goals. Tactically, all trade unions represent themselves as partners in social dialogue, with orthodox trade union demands. But strategically, the fulfilment of those demands means changing the form of capitalism which was introduced, and forced upon Slovenia. It is not possible to fulfil trade unions demands in the framework of peripheral liberal capitalism. Labour demands - defence of the social state, education, health and decent retirement for all, implies a change in the capitalist system that has developed in Slovenia these last years."

The toughness of Slovenia's labour movement is unusual in Europe today. According to Semolič, "there is much more uncertainty and fear nowadays, and so basic rights are harder to achieve, in health care, education, and for senior citizens. Things have changed a lot. But we are determined to maintain the basis of a social state. The main values which are under pressure are solidarity between generations, solidarity between people, and social responsibility in general. A better life for all, not just for the few who are already living in paradise. These are our goals.

"We are simply convinced that we have more success if we are on the offensive. We don't only have to play the black figures in chess - sometimes we can make the first move. This has been proven to be the best strategy, and so this is what we do. It means you have to be very strong, and I think that the trade unions in Slovenia are strong enough to go on the offensive if that is required. This rebellious spirit comes from traditions of peasant uprisings, from the resistance movement during the Second World War and from present times. This is clearly reflected in the trade union movement. To be a rebel, but to a rebel with reason and with a heart."

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For Možnik, the spectacular success of the November 2007 demonstration is also a reward for the high degree of cooperation between the country's various unions and confederations. "The trade unions managed to establish a united front of demands: the various trade union groupings, which have different dynamics within the trade union movement, and also politically, managed to come together in a united front with a single platform of demands."

These demands focused on one of the main characteristics of capitalist growth in Europe's post-Stalinist periphery. Labour productivity is rising, but wages are stagnating. According to Možnik, "productivity in Slovenia is rising because people are working more, because the working day is significantly longer, because people are working for 12 hours a day. In other words, the capitalist class is not developing the technological resources of the society, but only increasing the production of surplus value through the increase of working time, which is a classical type of exploitation from the 19th century."

Two days after the November demonstration, the Slovenian government sat down to negotiate with the labour unions. Labour representatives rejected the government's initial offer of a national 1% wage increase as "completely inadequate," given the high level of popular expectations. However, most independent observers expect that unions in the public sector and elsewhere will, eventually settle for modest increases, and the overall result will be far below what demonstrators expected. If so, Slovenia may see a wave of strikes in early 2008, as more radical labour leaders predicted at the November demonstration.

Ljubljana, 2 December 2007

Translated by Adam Novak