

Hungary: the opposition joins forces to resist labour law amendments

Łukasz Frynia

Fidesz, the governing party in Hungary, passed a controversial act modifying the Labour Code on 12 December. It increases the admissible level of overtime from 250 to 400 hours annually and extends the period within which the employer must settle overtime from one year to three years. The new regulations were passed despite the opposition's attempts at obstruction. Finally, the parliamentary speaker chaired the meeting from the bench, which the opposition claims is contrary to the regulations, as with voting without the use of identification cards, which also took place.

After the act was passed, people took to the streets in Budapest and some smaller cities; the protests are still underway. Some of the street protests were organised in a coordinated manner by opposition parties and non-governmental organisations, others are taking place spontaneously. The protesters are criticising the amendments to the Labour Code and also the administrative judiciary reform and the picture they can see in the state media. The first protests met with a firm reaction from the police, who on 12 December used tear gas against people and detained 34 individuals. The largest demonstration took place on 16 December in Budapest, where thousands of people marched through the city's streets, held a meeting near the parliament and then moved to the MTVA (state-run media) building. Thirteen opposition MPs went inside and made attempts to read their demands on air but were prevented from doing so by TV workers. The next day the MPs left the building (some of them were removed by force). One MP was injured and was taken to hospital. Viktor Orbán and other politicians from Fidesz condemned the opposition's moves and emphasised that they (Fidesz) took "the side of employees to whom the act offers new opportunities if they want to work more." The opposition has announced that further large demonstrations will be held on Friday, 21 December. In addition to this, the vice president of one of the trade union confederations has warned that workers will go on strike if the president signs the act on overtime. According to the opposition's initial announcements, the protests it held will continue until Christmas. However, non-governmental organisations are planning further demonstrations also in January.

Commentary

- The recent developments are very unlikely to convince the government to withdraw from amending the Labour Code. The continuing street protests are relatively small (several

thousand people are taking part in them) and do not put the government's position at stake. In 2014, Orbán's cabinet abandoned its attempts to push through the so-called 'Internet tax' under pressure from demonstrators, but on that occasion around 100,000 people took to the streets. It is only a general strike, which has been announced by the trade unions, that might persuade the government to make the tiniest amendment to the adopted regulations. To avoid this, the governing camp may delay the entry into force of the amendments, for example, by resorting to a presidential veto and reconsidering the changes in parliament. If public dissatisfaction spills outside Budapest, this will pose a certain risk to Fidesz, but the opposition's protest potential is much weaker outside the capital city. During the most recent election, the governing party won only six out of eighteen parliamentary seats in single-member constituencies in Budapest, while outside Budapest it lost in only three constituencies.

- The joint response to the new regulations is a success for the opposition, which has been unable to coordinate its moves against the governing camp for a long time. Representatives of almost all opposition parliamentary groupings, with the exception of Mi Hazánk (a right-wing grouping formed a few months ago by politicians who were expelled from Jobbik or who left voluntarily) and most independent MPs have taken part in the street protests. Non-parliamentary parties and Péter Márki-Zay (whose election for mayor of Hódmezővásárhely in February 2018 became a symbol of success for the opposition's joint efforts) are also engaged in the protests. The non-governmental organisations which previously stood up in defence of the Central European University (CEU) and trade unions are increasingly open to co-operation with opposition politicians. At present, the protest will contribute to the creation of a platform of compromise for most opposition parties. This is especially important in the context of the pending talks concerning coalition lists during the election to the European Parliament, the primary election for mayor of Budapest scheduled for February, and the initiative of the mayor of Hódmezővásárhely to put forward common candidates in local elections next year. However, the pro-government media are trying to discredit the critics of the Labour Code amendments branding them as 'hired by Soros' and accusing them of 'anti-Christian moves'. Fidesz has also harshly condemned acts of violence committed by the demonstrators and opposition politicians breaking the law (they were fined by the parliamentary speaker for obstruction).
- The recent Labour Code amendments have been branded as a 'slave act' by its critics. International corporations which have their production plants in Hungary stand to benefit the most from it. The low unemployment rate (3.7% in October according to Eurostat) and the increasing demand for a qualified workforce mean that larger employers (both foreign and domestic) are putting pressure on the government to change the labour market. The solution introduced by Orbán's cabinet has met with satisfaction from German firms, which was emphasised in Düsseldorf by the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Péter Szijjártó.