



Austria: 100,000 demonstrate against 12 hour day

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Last Saturday, June 30, saw the biggest mobilisation yet against Austria's right wing government since it took office in December. More than 100,000 demonstrated in Vienna against a new law extending the maximum working day to 12 hours, or 60 hours per week. In the run-up to the demonstration, which was called by the Austrian Trade Union Confederation, ÖGB, there were works' council conferences in all regions and more than 700 workplace meetings. Buses and trains to Vienna were organised from across the whole country. The Austrian section of the League for the Fifth International, together with the youth organisation REVOLUTION, joined the demonstration with a common bloc.

The new law would not only extend the working week but also remove the power of works' councils to veto employers' demands for extra hours. Despite this, the government insists that overtime will remain voluntary, which is a mockery given the power situation in the workplace.

In his speech to the closing rally at the demo, the President of the ÖGB, Wolfgang Katzian, said it would resist the new law "by all means at our disposal". However, there was no call for strike action by the ÖGB or its affiliated unions. On the demonstration itself, however, placards demanding strikes were to be seen far and wide. They were a recognition that a coordinated, general work stoppage, a general strike, would be the only realistic way to stop the onslaught of the government.

It would also create the conditions for unions to go on the offensive to fight for a reduction in working hours and bring down the government of the rich and capitalists. Indeed, this prospect was actually raised by the head of the Postal Union, whereupon the ÖGB chief Katzian stressed his acceptance of the democratically elected government. The truth is that it is most unlikely that any unions will call strikes; the law will be adopted next week and then Parliament goes into its summer recess. While that is not in itself an obstacle, if the ÖGB were serious it would have mobilised earlier and already prepared strikes to stop the law.

Instead, Katzian demanded a referendum, while the union leaders seem to prefer delaying a fight over working hours until their annual collective bargaining negotiations. Both "strategies" are a betrayal of the movement. As the size of the demo showed, the working class is mobilised and on the offensive right now, a referendum, or waiting for the different unions' annual negotiations, can only have the effect of demobilising, and even demoralising, the movement. In addition, relying on collective bargaining means that the struggle will be fragmented and uneven. It would mean each union fighting separately to fend off capitalist attacks at every round of negotiations.

Such an approach is therefore a retreat to a weakened position and already more than halfway to a capitulation. This is not surprising, after all, the Social Democratic union leaders still think in terms of the social partnership, their aim is negotiations not class struggle. As a result, the union bureaucracy wants to avoid a confrontation with the government in order to allow Social Democracy (ideally with a compromise) to participate in the next government on the back of the workers.

The mobilisation of a strike movement against the 12-hour day is thus dependent on a political struggle against the Social Democratic trade union bureaucracy by a union-based grassroots movement. In the next few days and weeks, pressure on the union tops will have to come from below. For this purpose, currently planned works' assemblies are a good starting point, for example, on the national railway, ÖBB, but also in numerous other companies organised by the traffic and service trade union, vda, or the production trade union, PRO-GE.

At these meetings, workers need to discuss the prospects of a labour dispute, the election of strike committees, and the coordination of a general strike that can stop the 12-hour day. This would give the entire working-class movement in Austria a huge boost and give the workers of all countries an example of how to fight back against the neoliberal attacks all over the world!

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