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Austria

Renewal of struggle

- IV Online magazine - 2003 - IV353 - September 2003 -

Publication date: Friday 19 September 2003

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The strikes are over, with the votes of the Ö-VP- FPÖ- [1] coalition Parliament has adopted the budgetary laws which include the controversial pensions "reform". However, for the first time in 50 years Austrian trades unions have organized strikes, blockades of highways and borders, mass demonstrations and radical actions. It is the beginning of a change of political culture, whose consequences are not yet visible.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/22austriamap.jpg>]

The government led an intense agitation against the mobilizations across the media, primarily through the television - without effect! The polls show that the majority of the population supported the strikes and rejected the proposed 'reform'. This latter was based on the same neoliberal logic as the reforms in France or Germany. The government incessantly evokes the threat of no longer being able to finance pensions and instead of introducing a socially equitable system, it proposes to lengthen the years spent at work and cut the amount of pensions. These measures affect women in particular, because of their precarious status in the workforce. The reform adopted will lead to a reduction of pensions of as much as 40% in some cases. The social democrats (SPÖ) and the Greens - the two parties of the parliamentary opposition - were very reserved. They broadly accepted the postulate that it would be impossible to finance pensions and had their own reform proposals, which differed only in detail from those of the government.

A union learns to struggle

The mobilizations called by the Ö-GB have changed Austria's political climate: before, the majority of the population accorded to the government an 'economic competence'; since the strikes, the majority is against the government's neoliberal proposals.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/22austriademo.jpg>]

After a long internal debate the Ö-GB union confederation [2] decided to organize a 'defensive strike' against the reform of the pensions system. The pressure of the union rank and file was already very strong when the chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel (Ö-VP) provoked the 'social partners' - and above all the unions - with his obstinate attitude. Nonetheless, the decision to call the strike was a surprise for most Austrians and even for union activists.

The Ö-GB was an integral part of the system of 'social partners' since the 1950s. Integrated in the 'pre-parliamentary space' of the bourgeois political system - especially in the period of social democratic governments - the trade union leadership has gained in power while growing more distant from its base.

Workers' struggles were reduced to a means of pressure in negotiations and numbers of left union activists doubted that the Ö-GB could still be capable of organizing strikes and workers' actions. People spoke of a 'sleeping giant'. All the radical left demonstrations on Mayday took place under the slogan "For an Ö-GB which fights"! The pensions reform was the straw that broke the camel's back.

On May 6, 13 and 20 the Ö-GB called for 'days of action' and strikes. On May 6 and 13 many enterprises were on strike. The rail workers, the private sector and council employees were at the heart of the actions and guaranteed their success. They were the spearhead of the first strikes and demonstrations and organized numerous radical actions - many small demonstrations which blocked traffic, blockades of borders and highways, public meetings,

strikers' picnics in the public parks made sure that everyone, even those who worked in a non-striking enterprise or were unemployed, could participate in these actions. On May 13, the ÖGB called for a demonstration in Vienna - 200-300,000 people supported it.

In mid-May the president, Thomas Klestil [3], proposed 'round tables' to save 'social peace' within the logic of 'social partnership', although this has been moribund since the social democrats are no longer in the government. Chancellor Schüssel seized the chance to open negotiations while deciding to yield on nothing, to paralyze the unions. The leadership of the ÖGB pursued the farce of negotiations up to the last moment. When the president of the ÖGB announced the failure of the 'round tables' and a new day of strikes, he was already too late - the movement, tired of delay, in part demobilized, had been divided.

A defeat, but a new climate

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/23austriademo.jpg>]

The verdict on the strike of May 20 witnessed to the division of the movement. While public transport and the rail were on strike for 24 hours, like many public enterprises and the airport at Vienna, as well as the high schools and universities, there were not enough participants to carry out the planned street blockades and participation in public meetings was disappointing. This was the result of the interruption of actions during the 'negotiations' and the demoralization of union activists who had hoped to win something from the 'round tables'. Moreover - something very serious - inside the union rumours spread that the president of the ÖGB was preparing to denounce the actions planned after the vote on the proposed law in Parliament.

These rumours had a real basis - after May 20 the ÖGB leadership voted unanimously against new actions and strikes. The ÖGB wanted to 'influence' the deputies on the national council of all the parties not to vote for the reform. Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel made small concessions to internal critics in the ÖVP and the FPÖ. Then on June 6 the ÖVP and FPÖ voted for the laws which would be the basis of the pensions reform.

The ÖGB fought - and suffered a defeat. But it has created a new political situation. In the debates on the forms of actions and strike, left militants (including the SOAL) had the possibility of arguing for a general strike. A combative situation developed. The defensive debate of recent years, around the question "if the sleeping giant could still be woken" has been settled in practice - of 2.3 million employees and civil servants, more than a million were on strike and participated in actions of resistance and more than 18,000 enterprises were on strike. Most strikers are also supporters of social democracy. And the forms of struggle which had been attacked and denounced by the bureaucrats while the social democrats ruled are now more accepted than ever.

The consequences for the union bureaucracy are unpredictable. There are still forces favourable to 'social partnership' who hope for the end of the struggles and a new form of negotiations after the show of force. But there is also a new generation of unionists, who take part in the Austrian Social Forum, who support the social movements and are capable of self-criticism [4]. For the first time in Austria union activists appear to be learning from their colleagues in Italy - a week after a great number of Italian pilots declared themselves 'sick' Austrian pilots came down with the same illness to defend their jobs.

In the coming weeks all the unions are organizing internal debates to draw a balance sheet of the strikes and actions. For the militants of the radical left - including the SOAL - there is a new situation; they can now intervene in these debates, be heard and even listened to, whereas previously the social democrats refused any contact with the radical left, including in the trade union framework. Today a new subject is debated inside the union movement - we have the experience not only that another politics is possible, but also another leadership.

[1] (Austrian political life was for a long time dominated by the conservative Österreichische Volkspartei (ÖVP, Party of the Austrian People), which lost the government to social democracy in 1970, then, following the electoral erosion of social democracy, to social democratic governments supported by the Greens (represented in parliament since 1986). On the far right, the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ, Austrian Liberal Party, founded in 1955 and a receptacle for ex-Nazis), a far right populist party, made slow electoral progress, accelerated in the 1990s. In 2000 Wolfgang Schüssel, leader of the ÖVP, formed for the first time a government with the FPÖ, leading to big anti-fascist mobilizations.

[2] Austrian unions are structured by branches and are all in the ÖGB. The leaderships are in their great majority social democratic, except for those in the civil service union, who are closely linked to the conservative party (ÖVP).

[3] Thomas Klestil was the candidate for the presidency of the ÖVP, but was opposed to the coalition with the FPÖ. He remains fairly critical of the Wolfgang Schüssel government.

[4] For example the 1st Austrian Social Forum (May 29-June 1) discussed the racist policies of the ÖGB towards immigration (above all from eastern Europe) with the participation of union activists.