



Czechia: Invisible experiences

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In the industrial zone “Triangle” in the far west of Bohemia, a strike took place at the end of January and the beginning of February. Workers at the Nexen Tire factory, which is owned by a South Korean company and produces tyres for global car brands, were reacting to the long-term stagnation of wages. The local OS KOVO organisation was also in its fourth year of unsuccessful efforts to reach a collective agreement.



As the union chairman [stated](#) in a letter to the company’s director at the beginning of last year, cumulative inflation has climbed to 18.8% over four years, but wages have not increased by a hundred crowns in individual grades. Between February 2022 and the beginning of 2023, when the strike began, annual inflation reached another 16.5 per cent. The fall is also evident from a comparison of nominal wages: while the basic salary for an operator’s position at Nexen Tire at the beginning of this year [was](#) CZK 22,700 (about €960; however, it has been reported that the company is [offering](#) three hundred euros more to new hires), the [average salary](#) in the region is around CZK 37,000 (€1,560). Workers in a comparable position at a competitor, such as [Barum Continental](#) in Otrokovice, at the other end of the country, earn even more.

It would seem that wage misery would trigger rapid mobilisation. But when a [demonstration](#) was held on the factory grounds last March, only a few dozen workers took part. Some time later, the union [announced](#) that a ballot on the planned strike had garnered 437 votes, of which only seven were against. But as in Slovakia, a legal strike in the Czech Republic must meet a number of conditions. At least half of the workforce must take part in the vote, and with around 1,100 people working at Nexen, there were just over a hundred votes to be won. In the period that followed, the union continued to exchange views with management, which managed to prolong negotiations through various obstructions. The unions’ demands that wages should increase by 8.3% from 1 March 2023 and by 6% thereafter, or that night and weekend pay should be increased, were not even accepted by the state-appointed mediator. It was only after these vicissitudes and the successful completion of the ballot that a sharp strike could begin at the end of January 2023.

We don’t know much about what happened in the factory during that time. The union initially reported that about 190 workers were “actively” involved. It is not clear whether this meant work stoppages or participation in the strike patrols and rallies that accompanied the strike. On the

second day, production was virtually paralysed as - again according to union information - the bulk of the shift concerned joined in. Later it was said that the factory was only able to maintain minimal production because non-production personnel were called in to the hastily-constructed shifts. The “active participation” obviously had to be considerably higher than at the beginning.

After a week, on 7 February, the strike ended with an agreement to increase wages by 8% from 1 March 2023. The workers also received a “compensation package” of 20 thousand CZK (about 845 €), a one-off contribution to cover the stagnation of wages over the past period. They were also promised that the company will sign a collective agreement by the end of June this year, the content of which will be the subject of further negotiations.

The last [strike](#) in the Czech car chain was probably in 2015, at the smaller IG Watteuw factory near Brno. The recent strike was the first in the sector for years and was one of the longest in duration since 1989. Perhaps that is why it received considerable attention in the Czech media. Unlike several previous cases (IG Watteuw, but also [Hyundai](#), [Dymos](#) and [Grammer](#) in 2009), it not only provoked a wave of solidarity declarations from trade union organisations from all over the country (or [Slovakia](#)), but also intense interest from various parts of the Czech left. On Monday, 6 February, about three hundred people, mostly “outsiders”, gathered in front of the factory to support the strike. Similar actions had taken place earlier, including in front of the Korean embassy in Prague. Alongside the strike, a broader campaign of symbolic solidarity was launched to put pressure on the company through the Ministry of Labour and the Korean state representation.

It is certainly good news that workplace struggles are once again taking centre stage on the left. The mobilisation in support of the strikers is also to be welcomed. On the other hand, the left-wing organisations that have reported on the strike have largely reproduced trade union reports of the ‘handling of the situation’ by the labour minister, union bosses and diplomatic or political top brass. Missing were information from the factory, the views of the strikers themselves, but also a sensible opposition to the dominant rhetoric, which stressed the ills of the “South Korean mentality” and appealed to the “decency” of European social dialogue. The [perception](#) that workers should rely on influential individuals, the support of activist groups and the effect of the media in struggles for better conditions was reinforced.

One of the ways the left can relate to workers’ struggles takes the form of impact campaigns. They represent a chance to make oneself visible and score points with the target group: today at Nexen, tomorrow among the couriers and courtesans of the [Volta](#), the day after tomorrow perhaps among the nurses. This activist strategy, however, does not help workers much to discover their own [potential power](#). Nor does it help to maintain continuity and the transmission of the experience of conflict. If, on the contrary, we assume that the working class can (only) liberate itself, workplace struggles should be understood more as an opportunity to trace processes of collective learning and class unification. They are also a source of lessons for future struggles because they allow us to learn what worked and what did not, what conditions were behind this or that success or failure, what divides people and what unites them, what acted as a catalyst and what acted as an obstacle.

It cannot be done without a sober perspective, which must rise above the [euphoria](#) of the first strike in the sector in over seven years. In this case, that means admitting that it will not prevent real wages from falling in the factory. It has also brought about a “deal for the future” which gives the company time to think about the next course of action. The unions are also [aware](#) of these pitfalls, but they are also suggesting that they will renew the conflict if bargaining gets complicated again. Whether such a thing is possible - and how (if at all) the balance of power in the factory has changed - depends on the invisible but all the more valuable results of the strike, which are waiting to be examined.

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P.S.

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