

Serbia: General Strike

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Many social actors called a general strike on Friday 24 January (called officially by students and secondary school pupils), which was marked by mass rallies that continued on Saturday and Sunday, bringing the number of demonstrations to over 150. At least 22,000 people demonstrated in Novi Sad, 15,000 in Niš on Sunday and 6,000 in Kragujevac. In Belgrade, an estimated 35,000 people gathered near the government building, while another 20,000 gathered at the roundabout near the municipality. Belgrade has a population of 1.3 million and Serbia 6.60 million.

The protests, which began in November, are calling for the authorities to be held to account and for justice to be done for the collapse of the Novi Sad station canopy on 1st November, which killed 15 people. The protest has become the biggest challenge facing the authorities since the Serbian Progressive Party took power in 2012. President Aleksandar Vucic has called for “severe punishment” for those responsible for the station tragedy, but nothing has been done.

But for many, the corrupt leaders, through whom relatives of civil servants placed the orders to build the canopy, are symbols of a regime they can no longer stand. They are also calling for Vucic himself to be held accountable.

The students have been mobilised continuously since November 2024. As they explained last December: “We have suspended our studies, organised general assemblies and voted on demands, and set up working groups. We occupied faculty premises and adapted them to our daily lives. We set up kitchens, dormitories, pharmacies, workshops, cinemas and classrooms where we can teach during the strike. In just three weeks, almost every university building in Serbia has become a 24-hour centre of political self-organisation. We receive support from our fellow citizens, whose donations allow us to live. Every day, other vulnerable groups in society join our struggle... We put the principle of direct democracy into practice. At these meetings, everyone has an equal voice and the right to decide on all issues”.

For its part, the independent union of educators, numerous schools and people employed in education opposed the decision of the “representative” unions to continue negotiations with the Ministry of Education. Theatre groups in Belgrade, as well as the Serbian National Theatre in Novi Sad and the National Theatre in Sombor, cancelled their performances and read out a statement protesting the attempted murder of a student, in reference to the car that crashed into a student rally on 16 January.

Earlier on 15 January, the TENT trade union decided to go on strike, demanding “satisfaction of the students’ demands, determination of who is responsible for the disastrous situation in the electricity industry - but also the dismissal of the Director General of EPS AD, the entire Management Board, the Supervisory Board, the EPS Assembly, and the Minister of Mines and Energy”. Three days later, between 53,000 and 55,000 people took part in a demonstration in front of Television Rodio de Serbia (RTS), under the slogan “Our right to know everything”, which, according to a Serbian daily, was one of the largest gatherings in Serbian history. In the wake of the student movement, other sectors of Serbian society have also taken to the streets, culminating in this weekend’s general strike.

Following these protests, Serbian Prime Minister Milos Vucevic resigned on January 25. “In order to avoid further increasing tensions in society, I took this decision,” he said. A first victory for the student movement.



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