

In Hungary, the deregulation of overtime triggers a social protest

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“Let’s all shout together,” we will not be slaves! “” Let’s not be afraid to tell them, we will not be slaves!””. Polar cold, but hot atmosphere, Saturday, January 5, in Budapest, the Hungarian capital, where a large parade of about 10,000 people marched from the Heroes’ Square to the monumental neogothic parliament that dominates the Danube. For the third time since mid-December, trade unions, political parties and civic organizations were demonstrating in close co-operation with the nationalist government of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who has been in charge of Hungary since 2010.

“We go to the factory, they to the castle”. This slogan written on a sign brandished in the procession is explicit: the crowd protests both against a law of “flexibilisation” overtime and against the growing authoritarianism of power. After a third consecutive election victory in the April 2018 legislative elections, he was able to renew the two-thirds “super-majority” that allowed him to govern unhindered since 2010 and relaunched his controversial bill to which he had given up a year and a half ago under trade union pressure.

Paradox in the land of “illiberalism”, it is a very neoliberal law of inspiration, adopted in a chaotic atmosphere by the Parliament on December 12 and effective January 1, which caused anger. It plans to raise the maximum threshold of overtime from 250 to 400 hours per year, as well as the possibility for employers to pay them only after three years. Viktor Orbán has defended it as a means of “lifting stupid administrative obstacles” to allow those who wish to “work more to earn more,” according to the antiphon of former French President Nicolas Sarkozy, with whom he maintains the best relationships.

The “society of work” against the welfare state

The unions do not share this view . The largest trade union center in the country, MASZSZ (Magyar Szakszervezeti Szövetség), considers that it “will in practice lead to excessive employee vulnerability and an even greater imbalance in the balance for the benefit of employers”. The four and a half million Hungarian employees (for a mere ten million inhabitants) already work forty hours a week and fear that they will have to do even more in the future, for wages still far below those in the west of the country. ‘Europe. After an increase of 8% on 1 January, the minimum wage is 149,000 forints gross for non-graduates (460 euros) and 195,000 forints for graduates (610 euros).

Quickly, all the political parties in the opposition have protested against what they call the “slave law”.

Divided according to ideological and generational lines, the opposition leaders put the differences and the egos aside to make a common front: at the beginning of the year, the Socialist Party (MSZP), the small left-wing party Dialogue , the Youth Party Momentum , the Social Democrats of the Democratic Coalition (DK), and even Jobbik (a far-right party that has refocused) sealed their new alliance against Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz , promising him “a 2019 year of opposition”. Suffocated by an

aggressive identity propaganda, they seized this opportunity to become audible again on the social ground.

Liberalism has failed, Western liberal democracies have failed, the 2008 crisis has shown. This is the conclusion of Viktor Orbán. Hungary, for its part, “will be based on a society of work”, not a welfare state. This is his project, unveiled at the end of July 2014, in the speech passed to posterity since, in which he announced the advent of “illiberalism” in Hungary, which spreads today in Europe. This “labor society” does not pay much attention to workers’ rights. A new Labor Code, which came into force on 1 July 2012, reduced the protection of employees, restricted the right to strike and marginalized the role of trade unions in social dialogue.

German industry in the viewfinder

The Fidesz is trapped. Hungary, like other Central European countries, is desperately short of money to run its economy. Economy Minister Mihály Varga estimated in the summer of 2016 that the country has “an urgent need” to import 200,000 foreign workers and the situation has deteriorated further since then as a result of emigration to the country. West of the continent. The Hungarian Demography Institute estimates that 600,000 Hungarians have left the country since the beginning of 2010, mainly for Austria, Germany and Great Britain. But the leaders refuse to appeal to immigrant workers, as Prime Minister Orbán repeated many times, “Hungary must rely on its own resources”. Left to work more Hungarian employees.

The Socialist Party and Jobbik accuse the government of selling off the interest of Hungarian workers to German investors, by far the largest in Hungary (a quarter of its foreign trade is with Germany, its main economic partner). They do not have the proof, but are convinced that the “slave law” is a lift from the car manufacturer BMW who announced, at the end of July, the construction of a factory near Debrecen in the east of the country, for a total investment of one billion euros.

“Behind the great speeches, Fidesz betrays the people to the profits of the multinationals”, declares a man of about fifty years, in unison of his party the Jobbik, of which he holds a flag which emerges from the crowd.

At the root of this charge is an unfortunate statement by Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó, who stated during a trip to Düsseldorf on 26 November that the bill was “welcomed by enterprises of Baden-Wurttemberg” and waited for several years by the German employers. Particularly exposed to the deregulation of overtime, assembly line workers at the Audi plant in Győr, in the west of the country, had retorted a “Nein, danke! (“No thanks!”) To the government project.

The law on overtime has indeed catalyzed a more general social discontent. Several public service unions are calling for a general strike, as teachers, government employees and police officers are already under a lot of overtime. The victory of Audi employees who won a salary increase of 18% this year on January 31, after a week-long historic strike in Hungary, showed them the way forward. “This government is horrible, it truncates on the rights of workers and on the rights at all Lajos, 65, a retired biology teacher, said in the small crowd of 2,000 who gathered at the foot of Buda Castle, at an umpteenth event, Saturday, January 19. A day of action during which the unions failed to “block the country”, as they wanted, but which saw the spread of protest in dozens of small towns and along the roads. In places where we had not shown for a decade.

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