

Yugoslavia enters new stage of crisis

by Luba George

The Yugoslav government's killer austerity policy adopted in May, with wage cuts averaging 40-50%, demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as conditions for new credits, has triggered the biggest strike wave in Yugoslavia's history, and has accelerated fragmentation of the country along regional lines.

While the strike wave is national in dimension, the center of mass unrest is in the westernmost Republic of Slovenia, the country's most prosperous region. Strikes in Slovenia protesting the federal government's austerity have served as the gathering point for a mass protest which is taking an increasingly pro-separatist character. In Slovenia's capital, Ljubljana, protests were held against the Yugoslav Army leadership. Slovenia's second largest city, Maribor, has been paralyzed by a strike of its largest enterprise, the TAM auto plant, and the Slovenian government is in a head-on collision with the federal government over plans to drastically increase federal powers at the expense of each republic's autonomy.

The government's austerity program, its response to the strike wave, and its intent to stage a showdown with Slovenia, guarantee a very hot summer.

The strike and protest wave

In the wake of the government's capitulation to the IMF's demands for vicious wage cuts, the Yugoslav industrial and construction workforce has been slammed with average wage cuts of between 40 and 50%, as a result of the government's latest austerity package passed in May. Squeezed between such wage reductions and an inflation now (under-) estimated officially at 170% (actually above 200%), life has become unbearable.

These actions were met with mass strikes and protests in the last two weeks of June. Over 10,000 people, including some 5,000 farmers, marched on the Federal Parliament in Belgrade to protest against these measures. This occurred against a backdrop of smaller such marches on city halls in small towns throughout Yugoslavia.

In the town of Maribor, Slovenia, 5,000 auto workers went on strike on June 21, and over 4,000 of them rioted

before the city hall. The workers, who make up two-thirds of the workforce at the TAM auto plant, are demanding restoration of the cuts, and above that, a 50% wage increase. Other protests were staged by workers, mostly women, from the MTT textile factory, and workers from the Elektrokovina appliances factory. The next day, June 22, about 3,000 striking workers again marched on the city hall in protest. When Ivan Cuk, the president of the city government, tried to explain the cuts, he was met with jeers, and narrowly escaped being physically assaulted.

The Yugoslav government has announced that it will not give in to strike demands. On June 22, Deputy Prime Minister Janez Zemljarić told the Yugoslav news agency Tanjug that "thanks to the forced savings program [i.e., the wage cuts and austerity], \$1 billion in new credits" have already been acquired. He added, "Now, far-reaching structural reforms must be adopted"—code-language for the policy of shutting down "unprofitable" enterprises, which promises to massively increase unemployment, already at 20% nationally.

In Ljubljana, over 25,000 Slovenians marched on the evening of June 21 to protest the arrest in May of two Slovenian journalists writing for the youth paper *Mladina*, and one soldier, accused by the Serb-dominated Yugoslav Army of having "betrayed secrets" from official Army documents. The three face a military trial and stiff sentences, and the Army has been demanding the right to conduct a mass "roundup" of liberal and opposition figures in Slovenia. Indicating the growing separatist mood in Slovenia, in Maribor, the Republic's second largest city, groups of people throwing stones at soldiers is an almost daily occurrence.

In addition, a showdown is building between Slovenia and Yugoslavia's eastern republics, led by Serbia. The conflict is expected to erupt soon, when Slovenia will veto a Serbian-sponsored move to change the Yugoslav constitution to severely limit each republic's autonomy. In Serbia itself, a process that began last summer when Serbian chauvinist hardliners defeated those who had advocated a moderate course on dealing with the growing separatist threat from the Autonomous Region of Kosovo, has taken its course, with the June 23 expulsion of seven leading moderates from the Serbian Central Committee. They include Ivan Stambolic, the former President of Serbia, and Bogdan Bogdanovich, the former mayor of Belgrade.

Threat of military coup

More explosions in Yugoslavia are certain. The threat of a military coup was even raised in a June 22 speech by Deputy Defense Minister Adm. Peter Simić, at a special conference of Army party organizations. Referring to the crisis in Kosovo and the emerging separatism in Slovenia, Simić charged the Party with "failure" to control the situation. "The level of organization, extent, form and intensity of hostile actions," he declared, "have reached the point where they are beginning to threaten the constitutional order of the country."