

Czech Republic: Trade Unions Call Off Transport Workers Strike

By [Markus Salzmann](#)

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On March 3 the Czech federation of trade unions once again called off a strike by public transport workers that was due to begin the next day. The move was a blatant gesture of support by the trade unions for the policies of the so-called Czech “government of experts” led by the political independent technocrat Jan Fischer and the country’s right-wing president Vaclav Klaus.

The strike, which had been decided weeks ago, had already been called off once. At that time the unions argued they wanted to give the government time for further consultations. In reality, the trade unions were reacting to the spread of strikes and demonstrations across Europe as workers took to the streets to protest austerity measures being introduced by a number of the continent’s governments.

The latest move to call off the strike by transport workers in the Czech Republic came precisely at the point last week when a general strike took place in Greece, and strikes and protests were being held in many other European cities.

There was, and still is, broad support for strike action by the Czech transport workers. Their protests are directed against measures introduced at the beginning of this year that have led to sharp cuts in employees’ pay and allowances. These allowances are urgently necessary for the workers. The average wage in the Czech Republic amounts to just €625 per month while the cost of living is comparable to other countries in Western Europe.

The cuts are part of extensive economic measures introduced by the head of government Fischer and his predecessor Mirek Topolanek of the conservative Civic Democratic Party (ODS).

These attacks on social gains and living standards have led to a growth of social and political tensions during the past few years. In 2008, tens of thousands of state employees, teachers, truck drivers, pensioners, doctors and nurses protested against the far-reaching social cuts, or so-called “reforms,” implemented by the government coalition in Prague.

Now, in order to justify this latest cancellation of the transport workers’ strike, the government, opposition parties and trade unions have organized a deceptive farce.

In the lower house of parliament the Social Democrats of the CSSD and the Communist Party (KSCM) agreed a new law that would reverse the cuts. At the same time they are well aware that this law can also be overturned and the cuts restored. President Klaus has already indicated that he will use his veto to stop the law if it wins a majority in the senate. In that case, the bill would return to the lower house, and the entire procedure would begin

anew.

The trade union leaders willingly hung on to this possibility and declared they did not want to strike as long as the bill was being discussed in the senate and lower house. Just a few hours before the strike was due to begin, the head of the railway trade union, Jaroslav Pejša, announced, "In light of the positive legislative process so far, the coalition of trade union federations has decided not to call for the strike planned on March 4."

The right-wing forces in the Czech parliament responded with effusive praise for the union bureaucrats. On the same day the strike was called off, the Christian Democratic vice-chairman, Michaela Šojdová, declared, "For the trade unions the main thing is to respect the law and not to strike at any price. I believe the trade unions must also protect their public image."

The capitulation by the trade unions will only encourage the ruling ODS and right-wing TOP 09 to press ahead with their program of cuts. The chairman of the ODS, Mirek Topolánek, demonstratively denounced the planned strike as "extortion" and declared he would not change his position. The truth, however, is that he fears that the strikes and protests could spread. "We are afraid this could be a precedent for further strikes," Topolánek declared. "The government will not allow itself to be put under pressure in such a way."

For his part President Klaus categorically refused to withdraw any of the cuts, since this would increase the state deficit. Business representatives, politicians and media commentators have already made clear that the current austerity course will be intensified following parliamentary elections in May.

It is only due to the upcoming elections in two months that the new law calling for the cancellation of cuts was passed by the lower house in the first place. It was above all the CSSD that implemented the sharpest cuts in the last 20 years, relying closely on the trade unions in every case.

The Association of Independent Trade Unions (ASO) responsible for transport and railway employees is a right-wing federation of trade unions, which has worked closely with various governments since its formation. The ASO emerged in 1995 from the merger of the trade unions for agriculture and foodstuffs, the federation of employees in non-governmental enterprises and the Czech trade union for energy workers in northwest Bohemia.

Following the inclusion of a number of additional unions the ASO became the second largest federation of trade unions, only exceeded in size by CMKOS. ASO was deliberately created as an alternative to CMKOS, which many union officials and politicians regarded as too leftist. Together with CMKOS, ASO has since 2000 taken part in official negotiations in the council for tripartite social dialogue. This is the body where the government, business representatives and the trade unions work out their plans and decide how best to implement them against the population.

The close relations between the trade union bureaucracy, entrepreneurs and political circles have firm roots. After the collapse of the Stalinist bureaucracy, the CMKOS advocated rapid free-market reforms, well aware that this would cost the jobs of tens of thousands of workers. The union also supported all the measures demanded as a pre-condition for entry into the European Union—wage and welfare cuts and extensive privatization.

Following a dramatic fall in the union's membership and support the ASO was created in order to scoop up disenchanted union members. At the same time ASO is a more virulent advocate of the free-market economy and more anti-communist than the CMKOS, which developed in the years following the reintroduction of capitalism in the shadow of the so-called Democracy Movement.

Now, as the economic crisis bites, the government and trade unions are moving even closer together in order to pass on the costs of the crisis to the working population. This is taking place against a backdrop of steeply rising unemployment. In January 2009 the official unemployment rate in the Czech Republic was about 6.8 percent; one year later this figure stands at 9.8 percent.

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Articles by: [Markus Salzmann](#)

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