

The Romanian working class: sitting ducks in the open fire of capitalism

Why the Romanian working class is the most exploited in Europe

Anarcho-Syndicalist Initiative from Romania

May 16, 2013

There are about 5 million employees in Romania, currently. Some other 3 million people (a quarter of the local workforce) work in other countries of the European Union, mostly Spain and Italy. Officially unemployed people are said to represent 6.7%, but this is not accurate. This number covers only people who have been registered, and it is not calculated according to the entire number of people who could work but are left out. Therefore, the real number of unemployed people is not really known (nor is it reported by the government), but a logical deduction puts it somewhere at an additional one million people.

A quarter of the officially unemployed people are fresh graduates from universities. 53 percent of registered unemployed people have terminated the period within which they were entitled to benefits (75 percent of their wage) and currently have no income. Workers are in a dreadful situation, to put it kindly. More than two thirds of the 5 million workers are employed in the private sector. They are not unionized: huge solidarity among workers and hard struggle will need to be fought against the ruling class (the business class, protected by the State), in order to break their opposition and allow unions in the private sector.

The only unions that exist in Romania are “yellow” unions – a sinister farce – who cover only some of the State employees (police, some education and some healthcare workers) or the state companies’ employees, and some former state companies, which have been privatized. These unions have constantly betrayed their people. The only efficient struggles these unions have led were for obtaining high-ranking positions in the state apparatus for their officials. Just a few examples to illustrate this: a late ‘90s prime minister was a syndicalist (in 1999 he fired 100,000 miners overnight on the orders of the IMF and left entire regions in ruin and unspeakable poverty), former ministers, different party members and lawmakers were previously union leaders, some of the Romanian top 500 Forbes rich people are former syndicalist leaders.

Lacking any unions, the level of vulnerability of the Romanian working class is the highest in Europe, and this has tragic consequences on the entire society, which burst out into the open during the last ferocious capitalist attack on labor over the past 3 years. In 2009, the Romanian state was the first in the European Union to force upon people the “austerity” blueprint, backed by the IMF, European Commission and the World Bank. Overnight, the government intentionally

doubled the number of unemployed people by forcing hundred of thousands of small firms into bankruptcy. These were small, mostly family-run firms, with few employees. The Government literally killed them and admitted doing so, by imposing a tax on them which they knew these firms could not pay. “The firms who cannot pay the 500 euro tax must die”, the then Finance Minister, Gheorghe Pogea, said.

This doubled unemployment in the private sector. It was the first step in a clear all-out State-led capitalist war against labor. The second step taken by the State – which publicly admitted it was the advocate of the corporate sector – against labor was changing the Labor law, which deprived working people of even the fragile and apparent legal protection against all-out and total exploitation by their employers. They made it possible for employers to fire people at will, they demolished permanent work contracts and reinstated the apprentice status, which literally makes young people victims of legal abuses by employers. Job announcements openly call on people to find employment as “volunteers”, so they can gain “experience” – this means slave, unpaid labor, and it is dramatically widespread. And it is still not enough, as the corporate gurus call again for more changes to the Labor law to make workers even more vulnerable. Companies are free to militarize labor at will, to police and legally spy on employees.

Exploitation and poor working conditions result in a huge number of work accidents – 4,000 in 2012, 215 of them fatal. Again, the real number is very likely to be much higher, since many of these incidents are not even registered as “work accidents” (because it would force the employer to pay damages to the workers or to their families). Again, this happens because the working class is not unionized, and because of the widespread corruption and brotherhood between the State and the business class. (Some media have managed to take a glimpse at how this brotherhood works: in 2010, some high-ranking state officials from the Labor Monitoring Inspectorate were exposed as they took bribes from companies in the name of the ruling party to cover for abuses against employees.) The fact is that the State-enforced austerity plan was a brutal attack on labor, as it artificially created a high unemployment rate which is used to scare workers into working more and making it easier to fire them to ensure bigger profits, which allows companies to later hire other people at even lower wages. The artificial unemployment rate, created by the State to the benefit of the business class, is a powerful disciplinary tool which prevents the workers from getting unionized and secures the means by which employers keep wages at the lowest level possible.

The purpose of the “austerity” in creating a high rate of unemployment was also to cripple any possible resilience on behalf of the people when more cuts were forced upon wages in the state and private sectors, on the incomes of teachers, doctors, students, pensioners, simultaneously with a brutal increase in VAT of 5 points up to 24% for all goods and services. All these were justified “in the name of the crisis”, through so many lies and such an enraged ideological propaganda by the ruling class-controlled media, though at some point in March 2009, the Romanian president, who comanded the attack against the workers and labor, admitted the country needed to take a huge loan (€20 billion, meaning a fifth of its GDP, almost 4 times more than it actually needed, as some banking people recognized) in order “to give banks and corporations a chance”. All these measures against labor and wages ultimately skyrocketed the cost of living, which in translation means that today half of the country lives in poverty. Statistics indicate that a fifth of employed workers cannot even survive from their wages, and live in absolute poverty, though the reality could be much worse.

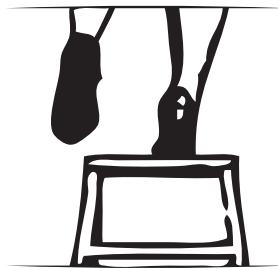
Moreover, the state forcefully closed down at least 1,300 schools (out of a planned 3,000) and a quarter of hospitals, to create space for forcing the complete privatization of education and healthcare. Public transportation is almost all privatized, the State is currently trying to sell the Railway Company, and the Post Office too. Utilities are almost all privatized, and this has not created any of the promised “free market competition for the lowering of the prices” of these services, on the contrary: the prices for utilities are constantly increasing, since the state actually created territorially-separated private monopolies. During the planned poverty enforced by the State, which they call “austerity”, prices continued to rise, especially of food and utilities, making the cost of living unbearable and forcing people to take more jobs and work strenuously. Suicide rates increased dramatically. Romania has been found to have the largest number of children who live in poverty in a 30-country UNICEF survey from 2011.

The State propaganda for forcing the planned poverty on the working people was centered around day-in-day-out stigmatization of the working people: politicians were relentlessly accusing them of being “lazy”, while they themselves constantly allowed more budgetary spending to finance their sponsors in the private sector and to make sure the riot police and secret services apparatus are very well paid. The entire situation can be illustrated by a catchphrase of the people protesting in the streets, for weeks in the row, during the harsh winter of 2012 against state abuses, widespread corruption and forced poverty: “Pardon us, please: We cannot produce as much as you steal”. The reality is that the Romanian working class is the most exploited in Europe: people work the highest number of hours (legally they are said to work for 8 hours daily, but all surveys show they actually work 10–12 hours, sometimes even during weekends), and are paid the worst salaries in Europe, while the cost of living is comparable (if not in some areas higher) than that in Western Europe.

The working class is not unionized, unions in the private sector are non-existent, and the unions in the state sector are exclusively “yellow”. The yellow unions are highly responsible for the state of disaffection which is rampant in the Romanian working class. Though crucial, this is not the most damaging factor of the terrible situation of the working class. Worse than the lack of the unions is the lack of identification of workers with their real condition: that of people being forced to work for wages, of which some two thirds the workers use to pay for survival. However, most workers identify themselves with their condition of consumers, in an attempt to run away from the general stigmatization of the working people, which is the result of decades-long propaganda by the State, politicians, media and intelligentsia. The sooner people understand their condition of workers, of wage-slave laborers, and understand its causes, the sooner they will break the smoke screens of the capitalist illusions imposed on them, and the better they will be able to search for each other, to find each other, organize and stand up together, in solidarity, to fight for their emancipation. This is difficult because capitalist propaganda is dominant throughout the media, but it is not impossible. There are ways to help them get informed about real working-class history and struggles, on the current developments among the working classes in other countries, and on the best ways to unionize and organize. There is no other way for the working people than to stand up, organize and fight for themselves.

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