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Yours, mine, ours? We're all in this together now!

By Emin Eminagić, February 2014

Today on February 5, 2014, the city of Tuzla in Bosnia and Herzegovina witnessed a protest, which erupted in violence. The protests started as a peaceful gathering of people, mostly workers from privatized and bankrupted companies, followed by students and activists, and others. They came as a reaction to the privatization of Tuzla's large industry (i.e. Konjuh, Polihem, Dita, Resod-Guming), which was the main source of income for the city and its population. This left workers on the streets, struggling for their very existence. This marks the first protest of this kind in Tuzla, about 3000 people took to the streets, and occupied the two main roads of the city and blocked traffic for several hours. The protests escalated into violence as riot police came to drag away the protestors from the premises of the Canton Government and the Cantonal Court. The workers demand their worktime be linked, and that their own health and pension care be paid. They also demand the creation of conditions for a decent life and the employment of young people whose unemployment numbers grow by the minute.

Information on the protests and part of the organization was done through a Facebook group was called "50,000 Za bolje sutra" (Eng. transl. "50,000 For a Better Tomorrow") and "Udar", but the main organizers remain the workers trade unions of above said companies. These protests seem to be more successful than a series of small-scale protests of workers from all these companies in the past ten years, as they were more visible and exposed, and even represent a first attempt of a unified protest of workers for the first time in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina. I will try just to give a timeline of the privatization process of Dita, which is the most evident example and briefly describe what was going on between then and now.

In 2002, 59% of Dita's capital was allegedly bought by the workers and the State Agency for Privatization confirmed that the ownership of the company is completely private, this was dragged on until 2005, when Dita was bought up by a chemical company under the name of "Lora" which is under the ownership of Beohemija a chemical conglomerate based in Belgrade Serbia. The company was being systematically destroyed.

According to the financial reports from 2010 Dita was already going downhill which was preceded by several years of great production and safe work places. What actually happened between 2007 when the privatization took place and 2010/11 (the year that strike and protests occurred) remains a mystery. According to some workers, between 2009 and 2010, they were ordered to put salt into the chemical mixture the company used to make detergent, which damaged the machines they used, thus slowly destroying actual production capacities of the company . After the bankruptcy proceedings, in December, a group of forty workers gathered in front of Dita and started a protest in an attempt to save their company. What was interesting about their protest is that they did not formulate this as a strike to halt production, but a protest that would let them go back to work. Until now, the workers are owed over 50 salaries, most of them cannot retire, as they are lacking several years of work service due to the privatization process that had been dragged on since 2002. The company's trade union has filed several lawsuits against Lora and its owner and the general manager of Dita, either unsuccessfully, or still on trial. This is one example, which bares the most symptoms of the entire state of affairs that not only the workers in Bosnia and Herzegovina are experiencing.

As stated above this protest is the first of its kind in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where workers for the first time after a severe stalemate after the war came together to fight for their rights. It started as a peaceful protest, where several hundred workers gathered in front of the Cantonal Court building in Tuzla, the protests soon escalated in violence as stones were thrown at the building, soon after which the government responded the only way it knew how, with a good dose of state violence , by sending riot police on the protestors, as the situation grew more and more violent, more police was being mobilized and tried to control the crowd with tear gas and attack dogs. Several protesters managed to enter the building of the Canton Government, ten of which were detained. Until now, 30 people were arrested, 18 were injured. One of the main organizers of the Facebook group was severely beaten by the police and arrested, he was taken for questioning without receiving medical attention. A cameraman from Tuzla's local TV station RTV Slon was hit in the face with by a police officer.

This protest has the potential to outgrow past attempts of people in expressing their anger and discontent, as this is the first time physical violence was exercised upon the people . In the past couple of months we witnessed different protests and events of social decentralization- the JMBG protests for the ID numbers and workers strikes which were

completely disconnected. During these, no connection was made to show that precarity in Bosnia and Herzegovina knows no boundaries, it only appears that the interest of one group are exclusive and share no logic with the other. This problem indicates on something more traumatic in society which stems from not only war which ended in 1995 but the ongoing one created by the political elites in these past 20 years and the separation they create, thus demystifying other economy related problems. This protest, however, could be the long-awaited opportunity to reintroduce the notion of class struggle into Bosnia and Herzegovina's society, moving away from the nationalist imaginaries of political elites.

In the case of this protest it is evident that can the collective needs can speak loud and the same does not need to recognize difference in either ethnic or confessional terms. It seems that the workers are not alone in their struggle anymore, and that this protest should be heeded as a wake-up call to all of us who suffer from the injustice committed by the elites day after day. This struggle, therefore cannot be called mine, nor yours, nor theirs, it is a struggle of all of us, we are all in this together.

Emin Eminagić is a researcher and activist from Bosnia-Hercegovina.

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