

WIRFI Message at Miroslav Vodslon's funeral, Berlin, December 2018

Mirek was a comrade in the truest sense of the word; a fighter side by side with us for a socialist future for the human race.

He was a convinced and profoundly thoughtful Marxist. His theoretical stature towered above that of others because he was highly intelligent, very thorough and took Marxism very seriously indeed. He was never satisfied with superficial or half-baked formulations of it.

Mirek also possessed a wry, dry and self-deprecating sense of humour which showed deep appreciation of the contradictions that arise in life and which moreover enabled him to reveal defects in another person's reasoning without massaging his own ego. This is something that we will especially miss.

Mirek came into contact with us UK Trotskyists as a militant of the Group of Opposition and Continuity of the Fourth International (GOCQI), in the late 1980s. Having just dealt with an abusive leadership in the Workers' Revolutionary Party, we were looking for contacts with activists around the world who had gone through experiences parallel to ours and who had similar ideas to ours about the way ahead.

Comrades like Balazs Nagy, Miroslav, Radoslav Pavlovic and Janos Borovi had paid the price of resisting Stalinist rule in their home countries. They had been forced to leave behind families and comrades and go into exile or face death or imprisonment. Based on their own experiences and difficulties in the Trotskyist movement, they joined with the insurgent Workers Revolutionary Party members and contacts in Namibia, South Africa and Latin America to set up the Workers'

International to Rebuild the Fourth International in 1990.

The GOCQI, including Mirek, quickly showed their theoretical mettle, contributing powerfully to the theoretical publications which prepared for the new foundation.

But the development of the new international collided with the collapse of the workers' states in the USSR and Eastern Europe and the Thatcher-Regan onslaught on all the things workers had gained in the class struggle. This was also a development which sought – where it could – to drive back the movements against imperialist oppression around the world and to corrupt them where it could not.

The workers' movement in western Europe and North America was undermined by de-industrialisation and re-location of industries, automation and the introduction of new technologies and the political collapse of Communist and Socialist parties.

Significant numbers of our already small group left, in some cases abandoning the very idea of an organised Marxist International, in others abandoning political activity completely.

Mirek stood out against the quitters, but for a while was unable to contribute personally to the struggle of the Workers' International.

Nevertheless, physically isolated as he was from other comrades, Mirek instinctively sought out footholds in the revolutionary Marxist movement and in the struggles of industrial workers. He worked within these circles to encourage the study of fundamental questions of Marxism, in particular political economy, and he deliberately participated in the shop-floor organisation of Daimler-Benz trade unionists.

The international situation for Marxists became extremely

gloomy. The first big break in the clouds was the determined struggle of the platinum miners at Marikana in South Africa, followed by a widespread mass-movement of workers in a large number of industries and trades for a big increase in wages. Twenty years after the end of apartheid and the rise to power of the African National Congress in South Africa, the deliberate murder of 35 strikers at Marikana by the South African Police acting under the instructions of the mine-owners with the collusion of ANC ministers marked the outbreak of a political crisis which faced revolutionary Marxists with a serious challenge.

It also brought Mirek back into activity in the Workers International. Together, we fought for the understanding that the way forward after Marikana is work towards the establishment of a socialist party of the country's working class, and that this could not be achieved by isolated sectarian groups, however courageous and devoted. The decisions and resolutions of the December 2013 Special Congress of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa) sketched the plans for the re-foundation of the country's working-class movement, and Workers International pledged its support for this process.

Meanwhile the leading comrades of the Workers' Revolutionary Party of Namibia, founded in 1989, had been working for years through the Workers Advice Centre in Windhoek providing legal advice and representation to individuals and groups suffering abuses at the hands of employers and government. They had placed themselves in an excellent position to take forward new (or newly-resumed) mass struggles, such as:

- the campaign of former TCL miners for their stolen pensions
- various ethnic groups defending their land
- the matter of wholesale miss-appropriation of the assets of the former TLC in the course of official bankruptcy of the company.

- the question of whether German compensation for imperialist oppression, land-theft and atrocities during the occupation of “South-West Africa” would go to the victims’ communities or be stolen by government ministers,
- the campaign for a real reckoning over the crimes of South West Africa Peoples’ Organisation (SWAPO) during the liberation struggle,
- against the theft of people’s homes through legal chicanery
- Stood in the 2014 election and won two Assembly seats
- new industrial struggles such as that of the fishery workers.
- This meant that by late 2015, the WRP of Namibia was able to convene a conference with over 100 delegates to re-launch the party

Mirek devoted himself to assisting the development of the WRP of Namibia, spending considerable time in the country and brimming with advice to assist its development, both practical and theoretical.

Mirek did all he could to bring a lifetime’s experience of political struggle to bear fruitfully in the training of a new generation of political leaders in the continent of Africa. In the process, he designed a series of lectures to try to explain Marxism and the Fourth International to members of a party which contained representatives of pretty well all the ethnic groupings in the country, from bushmen to descendants of German settlers, and certainly all the oppressed groups, rural or urban.

The precious outcome is a pamphlet: [Why we must rebuild the Fourth International](#), which will undoubtedly play a major role in the political training of new generations. It is written in a very straightforward style, using everyday language in a way that makes complex questions easier to understand and does not set up the author as some sort of ivory-tower intellectual.

In a movement which has no lack of flamboyant, even abrasive, characters, Mirek was exceptional for his gentleness (not without firmness!) towards all and for the modesty and simplicity with which he wrote and spoke.

Back in Europe, Mirek keenly followed political event in online discussions. Topics included how Marxists should react to the discussion around mass migration and a sharp intervention on the outcome of the UK referendum on leaving the EU.

Mirek engaged in a lengthy online discussion earlier this year on the question of Catalonian independence.

He was keen to write-up his own experiences of the development of events in Czechoslovakia before and during the “Prague Spring” of 1968, and we were hoping to provide him with an opportunity to talk about this at an event in the UK on the fiftieth anniversary.

Sadly, things turned out otherwise. We were utterly shocked by news of Mirek’s death.

We pass on our condolences to Adrien and the rest of the family – Mirek was enormously proud of his son and his grandson – and also to Senta, who has been his companion and bedrock for so many years and whose companionship clearly meant so much to him.

We join with many rank-and-file IG Metall trade unionists, activists in the political movement in the Trotskyist left in Germany, the UK and elsewhere, and above all many Namibians in treasuring what he was worth and mourn his loss.

Bosnia: A cauldron ready to blow?

RADOSLAV PAVLOVIC recorded a day of high drama as workers in Tuzla marched to the border

***Sunday 28 December, 2014: 09:00:** As I write, high-tension developments are unfolding in the class struggle in Bosnia-Herzegovina. No-one can tell in advance how it will play out.*

Ten minutes ago, 200 workers from 4 firms in Tuzla – Dita, Konjuh, Aida and Livnica (detergents, timber processing and furniture-making, shoe-making and a foundry) – gathering at the Croatian border in Orasje, decided to actually leave the country and go looking for work and a crust of bread anywhere in Europe. They don't even know if they will be let over the border, but what they do know is that this is their last hope; they are fighting a life-and-death struggle at the highest political level. They have nothing to lose: they weren't even able to afford cheap sweets to give their children for Christmas.

Tensions

Tensions have been building up for years, and it has picked up pace since the revolt in February whose sparks ignited explosions in big towns all over the country. But none of their demands were met. What's worse was the feeling hundreds of thousands of workers in this country had that they were being treated like worse than beggars, like idiots. Over recent months, especially in recent weeks, they have knocked on every door, lobbied all the politicians, demonstrated in the street, occupied cross-roads, even slept on the steps outside the canton government building so that freshly-shaven cabinet ministers could meet them to examine the unbearable situation. They got nowhere!

The thousands of workers who used to be employed at these factories are today down to a few hundred. The factories are publicly-owned but condemned to death by the public authorities on behalf of private business people who are mostly Mafiosi. The Bosnian state, which came out of the Dayton agreement with three heads of state, two entities and nine cantons simply does not have a clue what to do with its working class. This ramshackle entity, run under the eye of a European satrap, would make many a former colony blush. Year after year, factory after factory, the economy has been left to rot, industrial plant has gone to rack and ruin and corruption has flourished at every level. The international market has left Bosnia-Herzegovina by the wayside like a bunch of beggars unable or unwilling to work for Bangladeshi wages – \$35 a month – when you need 200 euros a month to survive in Bosnia. The only ones who get anything in Bosnia are the leading officials, all hand-in-glove, whether nationalist or social-democrat, and a state-of-the-art riot squad with all the latest gear.

From time to time over recent years the canton government has made one-off special payments to the compulsorily unemployed. Then they promised 400KM (convertible marks) or 200 euros, equivalent to a month's salary, for the end of the year, but they changed their minds. Apparently they had no legal basis for the offer, there was no credit line available, etc.

Response

Then, faced with a determined response from workers, they started to haggle, offering 120KM one day, then 180 KM the next, then 220KM (drawn from the Red Cross) and coupons for the rest of the 400KM.

That did it! Two hundred workers decided to get up and leave their country, "leave Bosnia to the gangsters" and go anywhere else in Europe. They walked the 75km from Tuzla to Orasje in three days, in good order and determined, for all

the cramps and blisters. Determination grew as country people, young people, townsfolk came out as they passed and offered them everything they could.

Solidarity

A wind of general solidarity breathed on the highroad. Even the cops who came with them to control the traffic felt like part of the march. Medical personnel, all kinds of benevolent associations, former combatants, they all gave without hesitation, while at the government building in Tuzla, all was total paralysis and confusion. The whole town was ready to explode if the slightest thing went wrong for the marchers. With mobile phones, communications are immediate and total. The other night, the canton government (who are still in place, although they have actually resigned?!) intervened to beg the marchers to stop. But their hands were empty, since they needed authorisation from the canton parliament before they could offer anything. People got more and more angry, saying: "They really do take us for idiots!"

Only minutes ago they were thanking a head teacher (who had loaned them his school for the night) and set out for the Sava river. Before they went, one of them threatened to throw themselves into the icy waters of the Sava, which flooded a third of the country last spring, if they were not allowed to leave the country. Bosnian and Croatian police chiefs have said in advance they will only let people with passports through, but only 23 of the 200 have one. What will they do? They have declared a hunger strike under the starry Bosnian flag that marks the border of the fleur-de-lys State. Support from a Croatian trade union at Osijek, a town 60km away, raises hopes that comrades in Croatia, where everybody has been talking about a Workers Front for the last two weeks, will make a symbolic gesture of support, a symbolism beyond price at so tense a moment. The coming hours will cast a long shadow in future over the class struggle of Tuzla workers. Either the government will give way all along the line, or it

will set the whole town alight! There is no room left for half-measures on either side. 200 euros will see people through one month. A victory or a defeat for workers will last years.

To end with, this is what Hasan UZICANIN, a trade union leader at "Aida", said ten minutes ago:

"We don't know what is going to happen from one minute to the next. We don't know what to expect. The spokesperson for the Osijek trade unions (in Croatia) have declared total support. I don't know if they can help us to get over the border.

"Trailed around"

"They've trailed us around shamelessly, we want to leave this country because you can't live here. I'm 53 years old and my 18 years' service at the company means nothing to any of them. I've got nothing to live off, although I'm employed at a state-owned business."

10.30: Bosnian police are preventing them from crossing the border and threatening them. One woman worker is ill and has been taken away in an ambulance. It is snowing hard. Hasan says: "Either they let us all through, or no-one will get through!"

Postscript at 14.30 Sunday 28 December 2014: Today the wall round Europe was too high for the workers of Tuzla. The border police were under very strict instructions not to let anybody through the border without a passport! Very few did have one.

Big brothers

The European Union is first of all two big brothers, then the smaller ones, then the children by a second marriage, and then the more or less distant cousins, finally the ones born out of wedlock ... The massacre at Srebrenica in full sight and

with the full knowledge of the whole of Europe twenty years ago stirred profound emotions at the time but that doesn't seem to count for much on the money markets and stock exchanges today ...

Even the weather was against the workers: It got very cold and it snowed heavily. With the average age closer to 50 than 30, exhaustion after three days on the road left the women hardly able to stand. A hundred of the toughest ones stood their ground in front of the border post and the implacable police for several hours, the abyss of Europe yawning in front of them, the abyss of Bosnia behind ...

The mayor of Tuzla was elected by workers' votes and was happy to provide the after-sales service. Three buses were sent to Orasje at ten in the morning. At 13:30 they set off back to Tuzla. A whole hospital was requisitioned to receive the marchers who were completely exhausted, for the Bosnian state looks after those in its care, even if that doesn't extend to giving them enough to eat. There would be warm drinks and the famous Ćevapi kebabs. They even hired six cabs to get everybody home! Yesterday they couldn't raise a bus fare, today everybody gets a taxi home. It's a miracle!

Bitterness

But the miracle only fools those who want to be fooled. Edina ALICIC, president of the union at Aida, swallows her bitterness and says: "You had to go through it to understand it. It's something we will remember for the rest of our lives. And it's not over yet. We won't stop."

Even as I write this, citizens are heading for the meeting-place at the canton government office to form a welcome party. Everybody remembers this building was set on fire last February. Hasan, who wanted to go on but not to let everybody get dispersed, says they are going straight there "to see if they haven't freshened it up a bit in the five days we were

away. If not, maybe we could sort it out and put it back as good as new so everybody can admire it". Work may not start tonight, but it will one day soon.

On events in Bosnia-Herzegovina: a letter to a Trade Unionist

Dear Comrade,

Let's think through what positive and appropriate proposals to put forward in discussion with Bosnian worker or socialist activists. We will be of some use if we just find ways to help a given social movement to draw from the experience of the international workers' movement (which we know something about) which is long-buried in Bosnia-Herzegovina. We don't need to invent anything, especially not substituting ourselves for the Bosnians; all we need do is generalise and bring together the demands they themselves are fighting for.

- 1. The character of the movement:*** (1) it is clearly social, workers and young people suffering chronic unemployment; (2) This movement is up against a political regime with the following characteristics:
 - political paralysis as a result of the Dayton Accords which installed a two-headed federation alongside another state (republica serbska), this means*

no common measures of any significance can be achieved; – endemic corruption whose source is the nationalist political parties; – a liberal viewpoint, from which the fourth, social-democrat, component of the coalition is also not exempt; (3) The whole has produced the worst possible remedy for a war-ravaged country: all-round privatisation. The slogans on the demonstrations and the political programmes of the collectives involved (“Udar” and “Revolt” in Tuzla) reflect this diagnosis.

2. **Our position** consists of: (1) supporting this profoundly correct movement; (2) clarifying it from the class point of view (to oppose provocations, running battles with the police, looting and arson), things which workers instinctively agree with; (3) sifting out which of the demands raised are most appropriate to unite, structure and develop the movement.
3. The main demand comes from the movement itself:
 - **Stop all new privatisations NOW, review all existing privatisations, no privatisation without workers' control!** How? By a national commission of persons of integrity, including qualified economists (like e.g. Stoyanov, currently an economist at the university of Rijeka), independent of the government and the bosses, under the control of elected **workers' councils (committees)** in all workplaces and institutions, including students and especially in the big mining and industrial units, and structured at a Federation level; total **transparency** of this Commission's work via public media (TV and major dailies): People should know the whole truth about a quarter of a century of fiddles! This Commission should have the authority to set up its own investigation and enforcement branches, as there can be no confidence in the state fraud squad, corrupted by the crooks in the ruling political parties who appoint and supervise them. Immediate payment of unpaid wages! Social security for all! Free access to

schooling and hospital treatment for all! Cost-of-living indexing of wages and pensions, etc.

4. A **Federal emergency job-creation plan!** Between those who have lost their jobs and those who have never had one, unemployment stands at 44%. This is a question of life and death for hundreds of thousands of men and women. Unless the government can very quickly come up with a plan to absorb mass unemployment, they should go! They should resign or be thrown out by the people. Working people always prefer peaceful and democratic solutions, but if that means keeping in power the class of capitalist rascals impotent in the face of unemployment, working people and young people will not stand idly by as society decays. If they can find the will, tenacity and discipline to elect their own **central organ of committees or councils of struggle**, they can put forward a government of suitably qualified people of integrity. Without their own permanent, democratic and durable rank-and-file organisations, all the demonstrations, petitions and cries of anger will go up in smoke. If the country has to look abroad to borrow money, at least it should be used to create jobs. Life is more important than the laws of the market!
5. Commission to review privatisations and Emergency plan to deal with unemployment are merely the first measures to put in place. There still remains the institutional Gordian knot of the Dayton Peace, which engendered a state paralysed from birth. Two or three states in one, half a dozen canton-states in each of them, states which straddle each other so that main roads have to leap-frog over each other on flyovers and suffering unparalleled legislative anarchy and negligence – the situation is untenable. Social progress is what brings peace, not the nationalism which rampaged during the war. The only way forward for working people and young people in the Federation is stretch out a hand to

their fellow-citizens, workers and young people of the so-called "republica serbska": For an **independent, united and democratic Bosnia-Herzegovina!** No Bantustans! There is room in such a joint federation for all the peoples of the region, for all nationalities, all religions and all alphabets, but not for war criminals or state mafias. A joint confederation of three peoples ready to turn the page and secure their children's future is possible. Two or three states in one, pulled this way and that by great power influence, is not. Bosnia-Herzegovina is condemned to political paralysis, economic stagnation and social decay. Working people and young people in "republica Serbska" have a choice: live together in a common state, with the federation guaranteeing national rights, or eke out a miserable existence as hostages of a state which was criminal when Mladic and Karadzic ran it and has turned into a mafia state under Dodik. Working people and young people in Tuzla, Sarajevo, Bihac and Mostar have shown that they do not want to sacrifice their futures on the altar of nationalist party rule; it is up to their fellows in Bania Luka to respond by joining their struggle for an independent, united and democratic Bosnia-Herzegovina and refusing to be held hostage to rule by a mafia that can neither acknowledge the crimes of Srebrenica nor catch the guilty.

I think that is essentially the size of it. Privatisations and unemployment — immediate key issues. Medium-term perspective: a re-united country, break with the paralysing Dayton arrangements. Means to do it: Committees of struggle (of action) of working people, unemployed and young people — essentially all the stuff nobody else mentions. Long-term perspective: links with the working and young people in Serbia and Croatia, who have had to put up with the same liberal treatment (privatisation, unemployment) and the same

nationalist straitjacket. In brief: suggest ways to strengthen and broaden the movement.

All the best

Radoslav Pavlovic, 10 Feb 2014