

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.