

Kicked in the Balkans

Anarchist Communist Federation

1997

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SERBIA

As we write the Milosevic regime in Serbia might now have already fallen. The demonstrations, some as large as 250,000 in Belgrade, which threaten the ex-Stalinists of the regime were set off after the municipal and federal elections of November 3rd. The opposition parties did well and the ruling Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) refused to accept the results, annulling them through the courts by claiming fraud. The opposition alliance Zajedno has mobilised tens and hundreds of thousands on a daily basis in Belgrade alone. This Alliance has support from students and the wider population.

However, Zajedno is as much implicated in Serb nationalism as Milosevic and the SPS. Vuk Draskovic and his Serbian Renewal Movement has made rapid ultra-nationalist speeches in the past and organised a paramilitary organisation, the Serbian Guard, which fought in Croatia, before he made a U-turn and became anti-war. Zoran Djindjic, leader of the Democratic Party, is a supporter of the Bosnian Serbs' murderous leaders, in particular the apostle of ethnic cleansing, Radovan Karadzic. Both he and Draskovic have refused to denounce the Bosnian Serb leaders. The third opposition leader, Vesna Pesic of the Civic Alliance, has not engaged in nationalist rhetoric but his relative isolation points to the nationalism which the others are still exploiting. The alliance is highly brittle. All that unites it are opposition to Milosevic, Serb nationalism and anti-'communism'. If Milosevic were to fall, it is likely that it would break up.

The alliance is composed mainly of intellectuals and professionals. They have appealed to the working class to come to their aid in the mobilisations. Such support has not been readily forthcoming. The working class did indeed vote for Zajedno in large numbers but this can be seen merely as a desire to remove Milosevic. The working class has suffered badly under the regime, with wages being paid on an irregular basis. There have been long strikes over non-payment of wages in the last year, one of the most important being that of 6,000 workers at the Zastava arms factory in September. Workers used the Zajedno mobilisations to launch their own demands for pay and conditions, when several factories struck in Belgrade and large groups of workers were to be seen on the demonstrations.

Zajedno represents pro-market forces. For his part Milosevic remains a Stalinist bureaucrat who exploited Serb nationalism to stay in power. The protests were, to begin with, not anti-war but sparked off by his abandonment of the Bosnian Serbs and his labelling of Karadzic as a war criminal. The UN sanctions have created massive inflation, reaching one million per cent during one month(!) whilst unemployment is at 23%. Milosevic used the war to fan nationalism, in the process extinguishing anti-war protests in which the working class were active in the early part of the war. He succeeded in bringing about the disorganisation of the working class, who as well as taking part in anti-war protests were taking industrial action over pay and conditions.

Milosevic needed to drop his former Bosnian allies in order to get the sanctions lifted. The Dayton agreements meant that the Americans would continue to back him if he did this and ensured stability in the region. In the process, Milosevic has now lost the support of the Orthodox Church, much of the armed forces and his junior partners in the Montenegro government. He hoped to wear out the opposition in the streets, but the protests continue unabated. He can still rely on the 90,000 strong police force who he has armed and paid well. This is still his major defence.

The opposition forces are very much in favour of the market, which as in other East European countries would mean greater unemployment and further shut-downs of state factories.

The working class, along with any revolutionary forces in Serbia, must attempt to develop an independent opposition, separate from Zajedno. The collapse of the Milosevic regime must not mean a surrender to pro-market forces. Milosevic has made a deal with the Croatian leadership under Tudjman. He abandoned his Krajena Serb allies in Croatia. Tudjman himself is facing mounting opposition in Croatia. The fall of Milosevic would strengthen the possibility of the collapse of his regime. These events could have immense repercussions. The working class revolutionary movement that seemed invisible during the last few years of appalling bloodshed in the Balkans, may have a chance of re-emerging. In the process, the false alternatives of Zajedno and its counterpart in Croatia must be seen for what they are.

CROATIA

Franjo Tudjman, the nationalist strong man of Croatia, has been threatened by mass demonstrations himself. He lost municipal elections in the capital, Zagreb, a year ago and has since blocked the formation of an opposition-controlled local council. In December last year the Tudjman government attempted to close down an opposition radio station, Radio 101, which resulted in 100,000 taking to the streets of Zagreb.

In the last elections, in order to stay in power, Tudjman had to include the Bosnian Croats, who are dominated by extreme nationalism, in the electorate. At the end of the Serb-Croat war in 1995, Tudjman and Milosevic came to a deal that meant them recognising each other. They both carved out great chunks of Bosnia for themselves in the recent war there, with Tudjman's henchmen turning on their Muslim allies and engaging in massacres against the local population. There was an unwritten agreement that both Serbia and Croatia would annex parts of Bosnia to enlarge their own States. Neither Tudjman nor Milosevic have allowed privatisations on a large scale which the West wanted, both because of fear of popular unrest. As in Serbia, the latest mobilisations are designed to remove an obstacle to a fully fledged market capitalism.

BULGARIA

The Communist Party in Bulgaria, under its new name the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), regained power through the elections in 1994. Since then, wages and living standards have plummeted further. Inflation has shot up by 300% and Bulgaria is even beating Albania as the economic disaster of Europe. The situation is so severe that soup kitchens have been opened up to feed the thousands near starvation. Pensioners' heating has been turned off because their pensions allow them only to make a choice between food and heating. Hospitals have run out of medical supplies. Patients needing blood transfusions have to buy blood on the black market or bring relatives to give blood.

The result of these conditions has been the mass demonstrations throughout Bulgaria. Unfortunately, this mass discontent has once again been hijacked. In 1990 the pro-market forces, eventually grouped in the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF), were able to win the elections of 1991. Now, once again, the UDF is using its previous expertise to jump on the back of the simmering social unrest. Last November, Peter Stoyanov, a leader of the UDF, was voted in as President-elect. The BSP government resigned in December but hung on to power by nominating their Interior Minister to head a new government. The BSP refused to hold elections. As a result

the UDF mobilised large sections of the population to make the BSP back down and agree to elections. The mobilisations were obviously inspired by similar mobilisations in Serbia, as were other movements in Albania and Belarus.

The large mass mobilisations in the early 1990s in eastern Europe were used to bring about the end of the state-controlled economies and to introduce the market. As such they served the interests of 'liberal' market capitalism. In the aftermath, the old Communist Parties transformed themselves into enthusiastic advocates of the market, many of them turning themselves into capitalists or hanging on in the state bureaucracies. Whatever type of capitalism they chose, state or private, they brought about massive attacks on the working populations of both the urban and rural areas. Vicious austerity programmes, galloping inflation, sackings and part-time work have been inflicted on the working class.

Now that the workers have been nicely softened up for full-scale market 'reforms', the old Communist Parties are now no longer needed. They have fulfilled their role as midwives of the market. The latest mobilisations in Bulgaria and Serbia mean the removal of old style Stalinists from office and their replacement by fully fledged disciples of the market. The working class has allowed itself to be mobilised to a lesser or greater extent to help this course come about and has thus failed to assert any of its own priorities.

In Albania, where an openly pro-market party had already taken power, the anger felt by the mass of the population is taking on an insurrectionary tone. In Southern Albania the resistance has indeed become a fully-fledged insurrection, with what appears to be many features of genuine working class revolution. Only here may the working class develop its own autonomous and independent demands, and considering the conditions, with no revolutionary currents and no recent history of struggle, this will be difficult.

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