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Bosnia-Herzegovina

Tuzla, the unknown capital of the Europe of workers and peoples

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Why does Bosnia-Herzegovina inspire so little interest and curiosity in the media and the political class when, on the contrary, Ukraine is front-page news? Is it because of its non-membership of the European Union? Is it because its name evokes the war that, twenty years ago, claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of men and women – more than 200,000 dead and 600,000 exiles – in the face of virtual indifference in the West as to what was happening one and a half hours by plane from Paris ? Or because it often wakes up to the call of the muezzin?

Yet in recent weeks, this country has also risen in revolt. The people has rebelled against social injustice and poverty and expressed loud and clear its desire for change.

Intrigued and excited by the information provided by our comrades there, I set off for a short hop to Tuzla and a brief stay there. It was fascinating to see how misleading time can be: the hands on the ordinary clock seem to freeze while the political and social clocks are going haywire. But it is well known that in times of rebellion or revolution seconds are worth minutes, minutes are worth hours and hours are worth days. This brief tour of internationalist solidarity seemed to be an eternity, rich in meetings, discussions and lessons.

At the airport in Ljubljana, Slovenia, it was Mladen, a comrade from the group *Iskra* (Spark), who led the small delegation consisting of two Belgian comrades and myself. We headed for Tuzla, the epicentre of the protests that are stirring Bosnia today. Mladen is preparing a protest against the liberal university reform which threatens the student youth of Slovenia. He is also active in organizing solidarity with the social rebellion, because the new frontiers between the different nations of the former Yugoslavia are not impermeable to the momentum of this rebellion. Along the way, Mladen evokes the great damage to the economy of the Balkans that has been caused by twenty years of frenzied liberalism. Constrained by a system that had remained bureaucratic, despite the dissidence of Tito against the Soviet regime, then ruined by years of war, the economy of the former Yugoslavia was literally vampirized by the market economy. The results were the development of increasing inequality, poverty, unemployment (between 40 and 45 per cent in Bosnia) and the privatization of public services and industry for the benefit of clan and mafia groups linked to a handful of thoroughly unscrupulous Western capitalists.

Concerning the war, Mladen is more taciturn and insists on talking about it in the past tense. He says with a smile that his passport is Slovenian, his mother is Croatian and his father Serbian. After a moment, the endless Slovenian conifer forest gives way to the tarmac of the long highway that takes us to Croatia, skirting Zagreb (we are still in the European Union, which Slovenia joined in May 2004 and Croatia in July 2013) and then leads us to Bosnia, a country that is not a member state of the EU. As the kilometers fly by we pass industrial zones with internationally known companies and villages with packs of straw that recall the traditional methods of another century. Gradually, a thick cloud of pollution tells us that we are approaching Tuzla. Chimneys and the huge yoghurt pots of the coal-fired hydroelectric power station appear. They spew out a continuous cloud of smoke that exudes an inescapable smell of sulphur throughout the city. The stage is set. If the administrative capital is Sarajevo, Tuzla is the industrial capital. Which is why the Serb shelling, twenty years ago, took care to spare the industrial sites, counting on taking them over. The bombardments were deliberately targeted, often for the worst, as is recalled by a monument in the city centre commemorating the massacre by cannon fire, on 25 May 2 1995, of seventy-one civilian victims, mostly young people sitting at pavement cafés.

Up till then, Tuzla had only made me think of a vague destination on the map, associated with the humanitarian convoy project, "Workers' Aid to Bosnia" in the early 1990s. At the start of this initiative, trade unionists and anti-capitalist organizations had gone round several cities in Western Europe, in Britain, France and Belgium, to

collect food, books and drugs before trying to reach Tuzla, the working-class city that dared to proclaim loud and clear its multi-ethnic character – in spite of war and hatred.

In the heart of the city, we were immediately enveloped in a dense and fragrant fog, giving the streets and neighbourhoods the appearance of London in the nineteenth century, so well portrayed by the Scottish novelist Conan Doyle. The houses are low and often lopsided, because the ground is unstable. The young people stroll around in groups, encountering each other in a permanent ballet, where laughter and discussions fuse, without excess. In the taverns, people drink, dance and flirt, just like anywhere else in the world. Dressed the same way, behaving the same way, Tuzla's young people look just like ours. The young people of Tuzla are also ours. Simply, they were born from the womb of war and have kept a serious and mature manner. Talking with different people, we quickly understand that this terrible ordeal, only evoked by a terse "after the war ...", has strongly marked this generation, which appears, when the discussion gets underway, very precocious for its age. Its Battle-hardened character is probably one of the ferments of the revolt.

The stigmata of social catastrophe and political revolt are obvious: closed shops, forsaken streets, rundown blocks of flats where people still live, buildings and walls that reflect the general atmosphere, reinforced by graffiti; a mixture of insults (which any self-respecting urban facade has) and all the "good feelings" the people have for the former government and for politicians. The highlight of this rapid tour was the building of the government of the canton of Tuzla, sacked and burned by demonstrators on February 7, the culmination of three days of protest involving more than fifteen thousand people. A few hours later, in Sarajevo, it was the seat of the presidency which was burned in its turn. Here, the police pass by, now indifferent to the charred premises, a "distant" memory of a government forced to abdicate confronted by the power of the street. A huge graffiti proclaims "revolution" and indicates "nationalists, thieves." And indeed, at the heart of popular anger you find poverty and corruption. These two words sum up the balance sheet of the liberal policies implemented in complete harmony by the social democracy and the Nationalist Party of Bosnia (founded by Alija Izetbegovic, taken over by his son Bakir) alternating politically and overlapping to such an extent that Mladen said: "Here, the opposition was constantly in the government and vice versa ."

"Was it the war that caused all this?". "Yes, the economic war!"

So, there has been no government in Bosnia for a month and it does not seem to bother anyone. A power vacuum such as this would make any politician from here or anywhere else dizzy, but any passerby on the street can explain it patiently, fearlessly and with conviction.

Gordan, who is 35 and one of the oldest activists of the *Lievji* group, explains for example the original experience of direct democracy that emerged in Tuzla after the demonstrations and the fall of the government. In the absence of government, a plenum, a popular assembly open to the entire population of the city, meets regularly in a communal room – in the beginning, every day, now twice a week – to deal with common problems and policy issues. This plenum involves between seven hundred and a thousand people, not always the same. Interventions are brief and timed; budding leaders are kept at bay. At each meeting, only mediators are designated, to ensure the smooth running of the meeting. The topics are varied and freely discussed: employment, industry, public services, education, culture, corruption, violence ... Twelve committees have been set up to work on topics hitherto treated by departments. Another is responsible for relations with workers. Three working groups deal with the media, legal aspects and logistics. The plenum has demanded that Parliament quickly appoint a technical government, refusing the idea that the Prime Minister should come from its own assembly and preferring to remain independent of traditional politics so as not to be exploited. The plenum sees itself first of all as a counter-power, strong and legitimate. Its goal is that the solutions it works out are implemented to the letter by the future government, or else it will be brought down for non-respect of the mandate. It is a kind of veto imposed by direct democracy.

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In the commission concerning the workers, in which we were present, the issue of restarting the detergent factory Dita was discussed. This enterprise had been privatized a few years earlier and ceased its activity, allowing its owners to make a great deal of money, and to do so fraudulently. There was a long debate in the group that had to submit its findings to the plenum: should the workers be helped to buy shares in the company; should the cancellation of Dita's debts to its suppliers be decreed; how could ownership of the plant be given over to its workers?

Mirna, a worker in the factory and a member of the group, took us to visit the factory. In the industrial outskirts of Tuzla it's a disaster zone, a real economic graveyard. Looking at the countless waste grounds, abandoned warehouses, buildings literally gutted, I ask naively: "Was it the war that caused all this?". "Yes, the economic war!" was Mirna's quick reply. Here, factories were born, lived and died, sometimes in only twenty years. Whereas our Western industrial histories, also run down, often last for more than a century, in Tuzla economic life is ephemeral. It boils down to rapid mafia-style capital accumulation, reduced to its most juicy and optimal expression, where capitalism comes to pillage and leaves as it came: a kind of economic Blitzkrieg. We are all overcome by a profound sense of the waste and mess of it all.

Stray dogs accompanied us on the wharfs and on the site, where vegetation is reasserting itself. Since 2011, the workers, who number a hundred and twenty today, as against a thousand in the past, have no longer been paid and take turns in small coordinated groups to protect the plant twenty-four hours a day against theft or tampering. The workers explained proudly that with not much investment and support for vocational training, the company could restart quickly if a policy choice was made in that sense.

Back in the centre of town, we met four friends coming from Sarajevo. Tijana reported that beyond the towns of Tuzla and Sarajevo, the whole of Bosnia is in flames. In Mostar, for example, the fight took on a symbolic twist. On either side of the river two communities, Croatian and Bosniak (Muslim), usually face each other. This time, the revolt has unified the two groups, sparing neither the Bosniak or Croat government offices. Confronted with the accusations of the Bosniak authorities, accusing Croatian demonstrators of setting fire to their buildings, the Bosniak inhabitants loudly took responsibility for the action and proclaimed their solidarity with their "Croatian brothers." Of course, national questions have not disappeared; they are still present, veiled and latent. But for now the social question blocks and transcends them, which is a source of great pride for this new generation, which says that it observes with some anxiety the Ukrainian counter-example. There, the people that first rose up against social injustice and corruption is now held hostage by the machinations of the imperialism of the Russians and of NATO.

However, if Ukraine focuses the attention of all the champions of the EU because what is at stake on the strategic level is far more appetizing than in Bosnia (in geostrategic, economic, energy terms ...), Tuzla only offers the possibility to show solidarity and to identify with an exemplary struggle for emancipation. This social and political experience is thinking aloud and has probably rediscovered a hint of self-management buried in the groundwater of the collective Yugoslav memory. It is chaotic and it faces many obstacles, but it exists, it is there before our eyes, if we just open them and see. Ensure unitary political support for the insurgents in Bosnia, conduct an internationalist trade-union campaign to support the recovery of the self-managed enterprise Dita; these are suggestions, non-exhaustive, around which we can rally the organizations of the social and political Left in France who are ready to do something. A Balkan Spring, a Slavic conjugation of the Occupy movement? What we call it doesn't matter much. One thing is certain: the European elections are approaching, and while the political class is highly discredited, it is in the public and internationalist interest to proclaim that Tuzla is the capital of Europe that we lack. A Europe of workers and peoples, to be built on the ruins of the EU, its treaties and its present economic and political representation.

March 15, 2014