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Serbia

Uprising of workers and youth overthrows Milosevic regime

- IV Online magazine - 2000 - IV326 - December 2000 -

Publication date: Sunday 10 December 2000

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The overthrow of Slobodan Milosevic on October 5 marks a new stage in Balkan history. The state of mind in Serbia has changed from top to bottom. Nothing will be as it was before. The general strike was total. The movement affected every household and the smallest village in the country. The essential problems remain, but a monstrous obstacle to the future has been swept away.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/serboppo.jpg>]

It was the miners of Kolubara who gave the signal and the tone to the movement. Like the others, in their majority they used to vote for Milosevic. In ten years they had hardly led an economic strike. Because of this moderation, but also because of their central role in the energy system, their action became an affair of state. From the beginning they made it clear that their demands were not sectoral but political - the recognition of the victory of the opposition candidate, Vojislav Kostunica.

A peaceful revolution? Yes, because the relationship of forces was changed. It was not because Milosevic was voluntarily inclined to recognize the verdict of the ballot box that bloody conflict was avoided. He had mobilized all the available police. However, popular unanimity and determination exceeded all that he, like Kostunica, had been able to imagine. Belgrade alone against the regime would not have secured victory. It was the provinces that played the decisive role: the working class towns like Cacak, Kraljevo, Kragujevac, Uzice, Valjevo, Novi Sad and Nis. The majority of the 100,000 provincials who came to Belgrade on October 5 were youth and workers.

The decisive nature of this support from the working class is moreover obvious if one compares it to the winter of 1996-1997, when some hundreds of thousands of Belgraders had demonstrated over three months against fraud in the municipal elections. The working class was not mobilized at this time, which allowed Milosevic to give way on the municipals but maintain central power. This time, popular unanimity and determination politically disarmed both police and army.

Milosevic himself was destabilized. The electoral defeat was flagrant, too much time was needed to effect a credible fraud, the state apparatus now only worked reluctantly. For Milosevic nothing worked any longer, panic invaded the highest spheres of the regime. He who had reigned by fear ended by earning universal contempt.

Hence the revival of pride, dignity and confidence in the masses. It was a spectacular overthrow, a big gain for the future, but it is not for all that a definitive gain for the struggles to come. The best lessons of history are confirmed: the more the masses are politically determined and energetic, the more easily the enemy throws down its arms and the less blood is spilt.

Anger against Milosevic was quickly generalized after the NATO bombings. Responsibility for the lost and shameful wars fell on him unanimously, but there was no political channel to express this anger. Milosevic called elections - his initial calculation was not so stupid, since he had changed the Constitution last July. By introducing the election of the federal president by universal suffrage but suppressing the rule that 50% of registered voters had to vote, he hoped to give himself years of unshared power with the 20% of the electorate represented by the SPS-JUL, [1] against an opposition dispersed into 3-4 lists, of which none expected to win more than 10%. This, moreover, in conditions of mass disaffection about politics, promoting abstention of more than 50% of the electors. The opposition denounced this constitutional change as a veritable coup d'etat, which it was, but it rapidly understood the danger of boycott. By getting rid of Draskovic, who wanted to dominate the electoral bloc as head of the biggest party, and who ended up sabotaging it with his own candidate, the democratic coalition of 16 parties was able to unite. It chose the DOS [2] of

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Kostunica, a democrat and nationalist, but without beard, weapons or alcohol. He was violently anti-NATO during the bombings, without siding overtly with Milosevic, although he has never disavowed the ethnic cleansing in Kosovo. The bourgeoisie and petty-bourgeoisie of Serbia had nothing better. The man who could overthrow Milosevic from a centre-left position, Ivan Stambolic, former head of the Serbian Communists who Milosevic had removed in 1987 and a left social-democrat, had been kidnapped in the street a month before the elections. The Serbian working class, unorganized, voted for Kostunica to get rid of Milosevic and assure the minimum of democracy. This choice was not wrong, although there should be no illusions. In the economic, social and national domain the conceptions of Kostunica are clearly rightist.

The heterogeneous democratic opposition established a very limited contract with Kostunica, as did the masses. Illusions in him are minimal and he will be subject to as much surveillance from below as from above.

The Serb right was wiped out at these elections, above all the monarchist Vuk Draskovic. The fascist Seselj who got more than 20% of the votes at the previous elections, only won 5-6% in these. The most unexpected fall was that of Vuk Draskovic. He was punished for having sabotaged the united opposition front with a candidate who only gained 2.8%.

The elections signified a profound democratic desire and a firm determination to defend the victory in the street. Public opinion was profoundly affected by the dynamic network of students called Otpor (Resistance). Waging guerilla war through posters, without leadership or central office, mobile, inventive, cheerful, they banished the fear of the population, above all in the provinces. Their slogans stirred the consciousness of the masses.

Undoubtedly a new period has opened, despite the appearance of nationalist continuity between Milosevic and Kostunica. A new generation has arrived, which has only known Milosevic. The big gain for everyone is that this fall is due to the spontaneous action of the masses, with their own means, their own determination and organization. The masses do not feel indebted to anyone, not even Kostunica. That means the new president's room for maneuver is very narrow faced with immense popular demands. Not so much in terms of incomes immediately, but in the areas of political transparency, democratic management, peace initiatives and normalization of relations with the outside world.

The fate of Milosevic was sealed at the ballot box and in the street, but not that of the bureaucracy. Milosevic wants to stay in political life, supported by the Russians. If Kostunica tries to amnesty him and reintroduce him into politics, under Russian pressure and/or institutional constraint, the masses would revolt. The democratic alliance would be broken.

Workers targeted the bureaucracy and not only its supreme leader. A tension seems to reign in all Serb factories. The directors are in general the local leaders of the SPS, up to their neck in shady and illegal affairs behind the backs of the workers, enjoying not only the absolute power that the law gives them, but also total impunity in the general arbitrary ambiance of the Milosevic regime.

Like the army top brass and the SPS deputies, all these directors have expressed their allegiance to the new president in order to save their posts. They are capable of changing their party card in 24 hours. If Seselj the fascist had won, they would have done the same. The Serb bureaucracy under Milosevic had no other ideology than personal profit.

What will Kostunica do about this bureaucracy? To overthrow it from top to bottom is to carry through the political revolution. Kostunica is anything but a revolutionary. But also he is a democrat. We will soon see where the alliance between himself and the numerous workers who have carried him to the presidency ends.

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The fate of Milosevic is another problem. Kostunica cannot hand over Milosevic to the international penal tribunal for ex-Yugoslavia which has arraigned him for war crimes - all Serbs are agreed on that, including this author, although for different reasons. He cannot amnesty him either. Serbia cannot avoid the question of his role in the wars of ethnic cleansing. The future of the numerous Serb refugees from Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo will pose this question.

Thus everything indicates new struggles in Serbia. Kostunica has promised democracy. In the current situation it is one step forward. To guarantee democracy, is to guarantee freedom of the press, trade union freedom, political liberties, freedom of criticism, the independence of the judicial system. For us the basic question is the fate of the Serbian working class. It will face traps no less dangerous than those it has encountered for 10 years, above all in the area of privatization and the national question. It has shown an élan for spontaneity and a remarkable capacity of organization, but it needs help to emerge from its national isolation which has disarmed it in relation to nationalism.

The Serb workers have made a leap forward, above all in the provinces. They have shown their courage but for the future political intelligence is needed. If not they will fight for the interests of other parties and other classes, to be finally disappointed. They cannot get out of this alone. The workers' international movement must act. Our task is not to settle the political programme of the Serb, Albanian, Croat or Bosnian workers in detail, to do their work for them, but to help them reconquer elementary notions of class, so that they can forge their own political and trade union tools of social liberation and inter-ethnic peace, build solid bridges of mutual confidence after what has been destroyed by the wars.

It is the most urgent task, for behind the Yugoslav tragedy, enormous for a relatively small country, can come new and greater catastrophes in Eastern Europe. Despite the victory of the democratic opposition and although it has lost the elections, fascism in Serbia is not inexistent. Its partisans combine ballot boxes and weapons, and while they have lost at the former they maintain the latter. For Serbs to genuinely break with the Stalino-fascist policy of Milosevic and Seselj, they must learn the whole truth about these wars over the last ten years, and this not a job where a few honest intellectuals on all sides can take the place of the workers' movement. If, on the contrary, we are content to pose dubious questions about the fact that Serb workers voted massively for a politician of the liberal right like Kostunica, it might be as well not to bother.

[1] The Serbian Socialist Party (SPS) of Slobodan Milosevic and the Union of the Yugoslav Left (JUL) led by his wife Mirijana Markovic.

[2] DOS (Democratic Opposition of Serbia) is the name of the victorious electoral bloc which put forward the candidature of Vojislav Kostunica. His programme of reforms allies popular illusions in the Western democracies and some elements of a programme seeking the integration of Serbia inside the 'civilized world'. He favours the return of Yugoslavia and Serbia to the world through reintegration in all the international institutions (Pact for Stability in Southeast Europe, IMF, World Bank, EU) in the hope of benefiting from financial aid and foreign capital and investment. He proposes radical economic reforms, notably cutting public expenditure, tax reform involving the introduction of a VAT, the creation of a stable currency (issuing of a new convertible currency or adoption of the German mark!), the liberalization of prices (accompanied it is true by a system of aid and subsidies for the most deprived) and privatization.