

# **The workers' movement in Serbia and ex-Yugoslavia**

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# Introduction

This piece was originally written as a paper for the radical left conference 'Crisis, War and the World Economy - the Prospects of the Organized Working Class in the Countries of Former Yugoslavia' held in Berlin, Germany, in November 1995. The group TORPEDO has since disbanded, but the piece retains its relevance. The wars in ex-Yugoslavia, along with their nationalist and irrational aspects, have also very much been an attack on the working population and their living conditions. After all, in the late 1980s world bankers considered Yugoslavia "ungovernable" and felt the population was "living beyond it means"; and when the end of Cold War bloc politics brought an end to Yugoslavia's strategic position the destruction of Yugoslavia, including its working class, could begin.

Most of Yugoslavia has now been 'third-worlded' and virulent nationalisms play a divisive role. The task of rebuilding an independent workers' movement and other social movements on an internationalist basis there is as current as ever. This piece should help understand how the workers' movement in ex-Yugoslavia has evolved from its beginnings up until the present.

Due to the difficulty many computers have in reproducing the diacritic marks of Serbo-Croat, but so as not to leave them out altogether, I have "abbreviated" the four difficult letters using asterisks. Thus the letter indicated as Č is c with a hacek over it (like an inverted circumflex), Š is s with a hacek, Ž is z with a hacek, and Ć is c with an acute. (See also the brief section 'Note on the Pronunciation of Serbo-Croatian Names' towards the end of the file.)

Will Firth, translator

# The Workers' Movement in Ex-Yugoslavia until the First World War

With the growth of industrial production in Western Europe in the late 19th century the inexorable process of industrial development also began in the regions of former Yugoslavia. Industrialization had led to a migration of the rural population into the cities and the formation of a working class. The division of society into new classes (capitalist class, middle class, working class), class conflicts, and the continuing process of industrialization led the working class to a point where it desperately needed its own forms of class organization. The first socialist ideas and experience in organizing the workers were brought to the regions of former Yugoslavia by members of the progressive intelligentsia who had been educated in the countries of Western Europe, in particular in the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, Switzerland and France. They had become acquainted with socialist ideas during their studies, had accepted them, talked them through in discussion circles, participated in the work of diverse groups and organizations, and later brought these ideas and the corresponding experience back to their home regions.

One of the first to have taken on socialist ideas was Živojin Žujović who adopted Proudhon's teachings while studying law and economics in Munich and Zurich. He was the first socialist in Serbia and later the teacher of Svetozar Marković, organizer and theoretician of the Serbian workers' movement and one of the founders of the Serbian Social-Democratic Party.

Socialist ideas spread to other areas inhabited by Southern Slavs. During the uprising in Bosnia-Herzegovina led by Vasa Pelagić in 1875 there were many anarchists among the insurgents - Manojlo Hrvaćanin, Kosta Ugrinović and others. The uprising was also joined by many Italian and Russian anarchists (even Malatesta made two attempts to enter Bosnia-Herzegovina).

At the beginning of April 1871 John Most travelled to Ljubljana (Slovenia) and took up contact with members of the Workers' Society. This society, whose President was Matija Kunc, spread Most's ideas.

Anarchist demonstrations were held in Croatia in Rovinj (1904) and Split (1908). The teacher Miloš Krpan maintained contact with Swiss anarchists until 1898. He spread anarchist ideas among the group called the Independent Socialists. In 1909 and 1910 Krpan also tried to set up an international anarchist commune in the vicinity of Slavonski Brod. The Austro-Hungarian authorities fiercely resisted this plan. The Croatian and Slovenian socialists involved were cruelly persecuted and harsh sentences were handed down at trials held in Zagreb, Celovec and Grac.

In Macedonia there was a pronounced national liberation struggle and many socialists were involved in activities in this direction. Mention should be made of the Ilinden (St Elijah's Day) Uprising in 1903, during which the Republic of Kruševo was proclaimed. This was the first socialist republic in the Balkans and lasted almost three months.

The struggle for national and social liberation in the southern Slavic lands under the control of Austria-Hungary culminated on 28 June 1914 in Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, when the group 'Mlada Bosna' (Young Bosnia) assassinated the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, Archduke

Franz Ferdinand. The group was composed of freedom fighters inspired by anarchist ideas. At the trial of the group of assassins Nedeljko Čabrinović (who threw the first bomb at Franz Ferdinand but which didn't explode) declared that his participation in the assassination plot was inspired by anarchist ideas.

What was more significant for the group Mlada Bosna, however, was its close contact with the Slovenian group 'Preporod' (Rebirth). The Preporod group began to form in 1911-12 around the newspaper of the same name. Until 1914 the two groups were linked by the common idea of the liberation of the southern Slavs' lands and the creation of a united, south Slavic revolutionary youth movement.

In the Voivodina at that time the greatest influx of socialist ideas was from Hungary. Errico Malatesta held a very well attended lecture in Pančevo in 1904. At the time of conflicts with the authorities there were large socialist demonstrations in the small town of Bavanište. Workers and peasants were fired at by the authorities and fired back.

After the pioneering work of Živojin Žujović quite a number of intellectuals in Serbia took up anarchist ideas. Among them were Pera Todorović, founder of the first socialist newspaper in Serbia ('Rad', 1874) and friend of Bakunin's from Zurich where he studied educational theory, and Jovan Žujović, the famous geologist and later President of the Serbian Academy of Sciences.

The ideas of anarcho-syndicalism were first propagated in Serbia in 1906 in the paper 'Proleter' by the supporters of direct action (the so-called 'Direktaši'), by the left wing of the Serbian Social-Democratic Party, and in the paper 'Radnička borba' (Workers' Struggle). The leading figure of Serbian anarcho-syndicalism was Krsto Cicvarić who founded many newspapers and was active as a writer, propagandist and revolutionary agitator.

The divisions which existed within the international workers' movement meant that these representatives of the progressive intelligentsia also took up different ideas (as we have already seen). This also led to divisions within the new and growing south Slavic workers' movement. Of the various factions present it was social-democracy which began to gain the upper hand.

Since social-democracy was less radical in its position towards parliamentary activity and class struggle and was thus less of a danger to capital it was accepted by capitalism on an international scale and certain concessions were made towards it. Social-democratic parties gathered strength, provoked the split in the First International, and in some countries began to fight for state power. These parties accepted the capitalist forms of struggle and were used by capital as a means of combatting radical sections of the workers' movement.

Parallel to the development in the international workers' movement as a whole, in the regions of former Yugoslavia the social-democratic party (e.g. the Serbian Social-Democratic Party, SSDP, founded in 1903) also gained strength to the detriment of the truly revolutionary movement. The first trade unions also formed and came together in 1903 to constitute the General Workers' League of Serbia. However, the entire union movement in Serbia was taken over quickly and easily by the SSDP.

On 12th July 1914 the General Workers' League of Serbia suspended all forms of activity when Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia and the King and the government ordered general mobilization.

It is of interest to note that Mayday, the international workers' day, was first celebrated in Slovenia in 1890, in Croatia in 1892 and in Serbia in 1893.

## During the First World War

Socialist struggle did not end during the war, however. Intellectuals fled the country, in France a General Union of Serbian Workers was set up within the French Confederation of Labour and until 1917 had branches in all the larger French cities. Serb emigres in France also set up the so-called Workers' Chamber, and there was also an active group of Serbian workers in Switzerland.

Shortly before the end of the First World War, owing to the repeated defeats of Austria-Hungary's armies and the accelerated decay of its power structures, very well organized groups of workers and peasants would have had the opportunity to take power with scarcely a struggle. They did not do this, however, and took a completely indifferent stance to the transition from Austro-Hungarian domination to that of the newly established 'Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes'.

## The Period between the Wars

Before the First World War and the unification of Slovenia, Croatia and Serbia in one state (initially called the 'Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes', later the 'Kingdom of Yugoslavia') numerous Communist cells were formed. These later merged in April 1919 to form the Socialist Workers' Party of Yugoslavia (SRPJ/K), which later changed its name to Communist Party of Yugoslavia (June 1920), and in 1952 finally became the Communist League of Yugoslavia (CLY). Between the two world wars this organization played the most significant role in organizing and leading the working class.

The union movement began to regenerate, free of the influence of political parties. Thus the paper 'Radničke novine' (Workers' News) announced on 2nd December 1918 that, thanks to rank and file initiative, the re-establishment of the dissolved union organizations had been in process since the previous month. As is always the case when socialist organizations are set up from below, there was soon to be action. The first protest rally was held on 23rd December 1918. What was significant about that rally was the participation of women, who made up a large majority of those present.

The first strike in Belgrade broke out in January 1919. It was a tailors' and seamstress' strike. That same month there was a strike in provincial Serbia at the Vrška Čuka mine. In February 1919 after Filip Filipović's return from abroad the unions took a turn to the left. Their demands were no longer of a purely economic nature. They became real centres of revolutionary activity. This was influenced by the creation of the Hungarian Socialist Republic and the situation in the whole of Europe at that time.

Thus on 20th and 21st July 1919 the first political general strike was organized in solidarity with the Soviet Republics in Hungary and Russia.

At that time the need arose for contacting similar organizations in other parts of the country. The most significant contact between representatives of the working class in Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia and Slovenia occurred at the end of January 1919 at the National Conference of the Social-Democratic Party of Croatia and Slovenia.

A Trade-Union Unification Congress was held in Belgrade on 20th April 1919 and as a result the Central Workers' Union Council of Yugoslavia (CRVSJ) was founded, covering 250,000 organized workers. In order to gain a complete picture of the strength of the union movement at that time mention should also be made of the 25,000 unionized workers and farmers organized outside the CRVSJ. After this 'preparatory phase' workers' struggle ignited in April 1920 - at one point in time there were 50 different strikes going on in Serbia. There were the armed conflicts with the police and armed forces which the authorities sent in against the strikers. The workers defended themselves and replied in kind. The first anti-militarist actions also took place. Appeals were directed at the soldiers and policemen not to shoot at their brother workers and farmers but to join with them in common struggle.

For these reasons the state and the government of the day resorted to extreme methods. At the end of 1920 the 'Obznana' (Proclamation) was issued - a law banning union organization,

revolutionary work, strikes, and any assembly of workers. Police and soldiers broke into union offices and workers' clubs, seizing all documents and property. At the same time the capitalist class began an offensive: wages were cut, working hours were lengthened, there was a wave of sackings. Very often it was the most militant workers who were targeted - they lost their jobs, were evicted from their flats, and were often taken for interrogation with their whole family. Many influential representatives of the working class rose up against the Proclamation. But all their actions and all the protests of the working class were ignored. It was not until several months later that the government finally offered to condone workers' and union organization again, but only under special conditions. The government demanded that unions and workers' associations be organized purely on an economic basis. It also demanded that a representative of the authorities be present at all meetings and events, that all documents be made accessible to the authorities, and that all sources of income be declared. The working class could not accept such shameful conditions. Dragiša Lapčević (one of the founders of the class-conscious workers' movement) proposed at a secret meeting on 8th April 1921 that the conditions imposed by the authorities be rejected and that unions and workers' associations continue their work regardless of the Proclamation. Unfortunately his proposal was not accepted.

The disarray of the working class was a signal to the centrist wing of the union movement that their chance had come. Respecting the spirit and word of the Proclamation they re-established the General Workers' League of Serbia (GRSS) on 22nd May 1921 and the very next day cut all ties with the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (CPY). However, the centrists did not have much success in organizing the revolutionary-minded workers and farmers. The membership of the GRSS did not exceed 2,500-3,000 organized workers and farmers.

The monarchist regime brutally suppressed the CPY. It was banned and forced to operate underground for a long time. However, as the only force which workers could see as offering any opportunity for organization, it attracted a great number of members and sympathizers. Well-educated people and students joined, as did workers and farmers. In 1928 the Party split along communist, socialist and social-democratic lines. This also led to a split in the trade-union movement resulting in formation of a radical left-wing block (oriented towards Moscow and following the line of the Third International), a rightist tendency (still true to the line of the Second International although it had already been superseded), and a centrist platform which vacillated between the two mentioned positions.

From these divisions it was the CPY and the union faction oriented towards the Third International which was to emerge the strongest. As already mentioned, they took the leadership of the working class and were able to maintain it with the help of both material and ideological support from the USSR. Due to this assistance the CPY was the largest and best prepared organization of the Yugoslav working class on the eve of the Second World War.



# The Yugoslav Working Class and the Second World War

However, the true face of the CPY leadership was revealed in the course of the war and revolution (1941-45). Influential and educated members who had begun to see mistakes in the work of the Central Committee led by Tito (Josip Broz) were liquidated. Any potential criticism or possibility of challenge to the leadership was nipped in the bud.

With the defeat of the Yugoslav army in just six days at the beginning of the war the peoples of Yugoslavia began collecting weapons, munitions and other strategic material. Not long after the capitulation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia the first forms of organized resistance to the fascists emerged. These resistance groups differed widely in their political orientation. Some were purely bands of robbers; others were militias organized purely at a local level as a form of defense against the fascist troops and the bandits mentioned; others were of a rightist, monarchist persuasion (Chetniks, and the groups led by Nedić and Ljotić) whose goal was 'the liberation of the country from the occupier' and the return of the King. There were also fascist organizations (Ustashi) that committed chauvinist atrocities which even soldiers of the German Wehrmacht were sometimes not safe from. There were also a range of quisling organizations throughout the country.

However, there was also a significant number of independently organized Partisan groups without a firm political orientation. The CPY attempted to unite these units under its control at all costs. There were instances of fighting between Partisan units under the control of the CPY and those Partisan groups which were still autonomous, particularly early in the war when the CPY co-operated with General Draže Mihajlović's Chetniks towards the common goal of 'liberating the country from the occupier'. The CPY and its 'General Staff of the National Liberation Army and Yugoslav Partisan Detachments' broke off their co-operation with Mihajlović's Chetniks in 1941. (Mihajlović's Chetniks only differed from other Chetnik forces to the extent that they did not collaborate with the Wehrmacht.)

However, the Partisan units were poorly armed, loosely organized, had little military experience, and suffered major defeats in the course of 1941 and 1942. The CPY also suffered serious setbacks in the towns and cities - its members and sympathizers were hounded, arrested, tortured, shot or sent to concentration camps. However, the resistance struggle went on. Partisan detachments continued to fight, and their sympathizers in the towns and cities created diversions and carried out acts of sabotage.

In the middle of 1943 and towards the end of the year the National Liberation Movement under control of the CPY recovered from its earlier setbacks by insisting on an increase in the percentage of Party members in the Partisan detachments. It also placed political commissars in all Partisan detachments in its sphere of influence - these commissars were to carry out political propaganda and put through the idea of the leading role of the CPY.

Upon the insistence of the 'General Staff of the National Liberation Army and Yugoslav Partisan Detachments' the Partisan detachments were united in late 1943. It was evident that a leading

Party member was always present when Partisan detachments were unified into a battalion or brigade. Experienced Party cadre was put in charge of the newly-formed units, and of course a political commissar from the Party was always in attendance.

On 29th November 1943 the second meeting of the National Anti-Fascist Liberation Council of Yugoslavia was held in Jajce (Bosnia-Herzegovina). By exploiting the people's struggle to liberate themselves from the fascist troops and by skillfully avoiding radical revolutionary impulses, the CPY here laid the foundations of what was later to become the first constitution of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia (ultimately passed in 1946).

Under the veil of patriotism, anti-nationalism and a quasi-revolutionary verbiage the 'General Staff of the National Liberation Army and Yugoslav Partisan Detachments' gradually amassed substantial forces. Soon what had been known as the 'National Liberation Army and the Yugoslav Partisan Detachments' was transformed into the 'National Liberation Army of Yugoslavia'. Even captured Chetniks and Ustashi were accepted into the Partisan detachments if they declared they would 'fight for the people'. An army that had grown in this way could not possibly be a revolutionary army, an agent of revolutionary change, especially since up until the very end of the war the 'General Staff of the National Liberation Army of Yugoslavia' applied nothing but purely partisan tactics. In all attempts at directly confronting the combined Wehrmacht and quisling forces it suffered heavy losses and was forced to withdraw.

The 'General Staff of the National Liberation Army of Yugoslavia' (in actual fact the CPY) only won the war due to the weakening of the fascist armies on all other fronts and the great assistance given by the Soviet Red Army, which practically bore the entire burden of driving the fascist troops out of Yugoslavia.

## The Post-War Period

By the end of the war the CPY and the 'National Liberation Army of Yugoslavia' had been completely purged of 'undesirable' elements and were prepared for dictatorship. They said this was the dictatorship of the proletariat, but in reality it was a dictatorship of the Party. And not of the Party as a whole, but rather of its narrow circle of leading cadre.

The country was first called 'Democratic Federal Yugoslavia', later the name was changed to 'Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia'. In 1963 it was renamed the 'Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia'.

All workers' organizations and all other social initiatives and functions were put under Party control. The country entered a period of state capitalism skillfully termed 'real-existing socialism'.

These changes were officially embodied in the new constitution passed in 1946. The Constitution declared all natural resources and all the significant means of production to be 'People's property under state control'. At the end of that same year a program of nationalizing private businesses was carried out in 42 branches of the economy. In August 1945 a partial agricultural reform was carried through, affecting mainly the north and north-west of the country. The remainder of the economy was covered by the nationalization of 1948. Nationalization was one of the main methods of establishing a 'socialist sector of the economy'. The system of planned economy was also introduced at this stage. State agencies ran the economy directly and in accordance with set goals.

The new ruling class, later dubbed the 'red bourgeoisie', only had to make a few more moves to secure its power in the longer term. Immediately after the war farcical 'democratic' elections were held at which the CPY led by Tito won a large majority of the votes (almost 100%), dealing the bourgeois-democratic parties a resounding defeat. Having gained power the CPY banned all other parties and persecuted leading members of those parties, branding them 'enemies of the revolution'. After the elections the Yugoslav ruling class, in agreement with the ruling class of the USSR (personified by the CPSU), started a very transparent dispute. This 'conflict' between the CPY and the CPSU culminated in 1948 when the CPY carried out major purges of its military, party and civic leadership to remove so-called 'Cominform agents', members who were in favour of the Cominform resolution on the situation in the CPY. These people ended up in Yugoslav prisons, the most infamous of which was the prison camp on the island Goli otok in the Adriatic. Due to the CPY's rejection of the Cominform resolution the USSR and the entire Warsaw Pact imposed an embargo on trade and any other exchange with the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia. This economic embargo lasted five years, and after it was lifted the Yugoslav ruling class finally took all power into its hands.

It should be mentioned that the goal of this staged conflict was not simply to reinforce the power of the inner circle of the ruling class, but also to open a necessary invisible bridge between the 'communist' East and the capitalist West. In this period the development of industry was oriented towards agriculture. Farmers and demobilized Partisans were forced to join collective

farms. The energy sector also grew and strengthened. The growth of heavy industry was pushed ahead, though exclusively in the richer parts of the country, which only served to deepen the antagonisms inherited from pre-war Yugoslavia.

Strained relations with neighbouring countries which were members of the 'socialist' bloc, but also the Cominform resolution and the catastrophic harvests of 1950 and 1952 led to farmers' rebellion, which served as an excellent excuse for the state to introduce the forced sale or outright confiscation of agricultural products. Such practices were to become virtually common practice.

# The Period of 'Socialist Development'

By luring the working class with a relatively high standard of living, brutally suppressing all forms of rebellion and - what is more significant - controlling every form of workers' organization, the CPY (later renamed 'Communist League of Yugoslavia', CLY) succeeded in disorienting the working class, disabling any attempts at independent workers' organization and getting rid of militant workers and radical theoreticians.

There was a growing tendency of the Yugoslav working class to set up self-managed bodies of its own on the basis of the experience of other revolutionary struggles throughout the world. As an answer to this, as early as 1950 the authorities introduced limited forms of self-management in industry. The introduction of partial self-management gave workers the illusion that they had the right to manage and plan production and to market their enterprises' produce. Just how much industrial self-management there really was can best be seen from a table published in the journal 'Naše teme', no. 3 in 1983:

## **decisions of the state**

(% of cases)

## **decisions of the collective**

(% of cases)

Allocation of capital reserve funds (investments)

80

20

Wage policy

60

40

Price policy

80

20

Employment

50

50

Import/export policy

95

5

Financing of joint spending

90

10

Remainder

70

30

In this situation where the old capitalist state has been replaced by new state capitalism and where in reality there has not been any revolutionary change at all, the Yugoslav working class was bound to soon express its dissatisfaction.

So it was that the first recorded post-war strike was held from 13-15 January 1958 by the miners at the Trbovlje and Hrastnik mining complexes in Slovenia. 4,000 workers took part in the strike which ended in victory, or rather with the fulfillment of the strikers' log of claims. But the deeper causes of the strike were not eliminated, nor would they be by any future strike in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

In order to isolate and suffocate working class struggle and - more importantly for the class in power - to prevent it spreading all forms of workers' struggle were subjected to the proven treatment of a media blackout accompanied by the spreading of false information.

Thus the CLY leadership did not talk about strikes until 1969. By that time there had already been 2,000 recorded strikes.

There were no illegal unions in Yugoslavia; at least we have found no information indicating the existence of any such unions. The only legal union was the 'Trade-Union League of Yugoslavia'. Participation by the union leadership in the organization of strikes was virtually nil, so it is fair to say that all strikes in Yugoslavia were essentially wildcat strikes directly initiated by the working class. To be sure, there is some indication that working class militants who had become functionaries of the one legal union occasionally participated in the initial stage of organizing a strike. But such people were swiftly rooted out of the union and ruthlessly repressed, only to be replaced by 'proven cadre' faithful to the ruling class and the regime.

In order to fulfill the strikers' demands, maintain social stability in the country, and cover the great losses of the unprofitable economy, the Yugoslav leadership decided to take out new credits from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB). Thus Yugoslavia fell into the familiar trap of debt slavery.

Gradually the Yugoslav working class began to lose its class consciousness, floundering in the consumer culture cleverly served from the West. It was in such a weakened condition that the Yugoslav working class entered the eighties, a decade in which massive changes were to ensue.

# The Collapse of Yugoslavia

In the eighties Yugoslav workers and farmers took to the streets increasingly often demanding a better life, better working conditions, better management of industry and better running of the country as a whole. Because of the difficult economic situation at the time, exacerbated by galloping inflation, there was a stark increase in internal migration from rural areas to the cities (at one time 60% of the Yugoslav population lived directly from agriculture, although only 38% lived in rural areas). There was also a wave of emigration to Western European countries, in particular to West Germany and Austria.

In 1980 Yugoslavia joined the IMF and in 1981 it received one of the biggest credits approved in that period. Due to the jump in the world market price of fossil fuels Yugoslavia's foreign debt at this time amounted to 14 thousand million US dollars. As early as 1983 Yugoslavia began conducting negotiations towards rescheduling its debt repayments. As a condition the IMF demanded the curtailment of payments to unprofitable enterprises, which for years had maintained social stability in almost all regions of the country. It also demanded the liberalization of prices, a rise in the interest rate, and a further 25% devaluation of the dinar. International capital had begun its assault on Yugoslavia.

However, the reply was a series of strikes and rebellions which resulted in the number of liquidations of unprofitable enterprises declining from 156 in 1979 to 97 in 1985. In order to finance unprofitable enterprises and maintain social stability the Federal Bank of Yugoslavia began to issue increasingly large amounts of money which had no economic cover.

One of the last initiatives of the legal union in Yugoslavia was to support the government's efforts in 1986 to close down unprofitable enterprises. After this the workers no longer allowed the union to speak in their name.

In 1986 Slobodan Milošević appeared on the Yugoslav political stage just after returning from further education in the USA. At this time Milošević was a member and functionary of the CLY. The conflict in the CLY which ultimately resulted in its disintegration began in 1987 at the meeting of the Central Committee of the Communist League of Serbia. In his irresistible striving for power Milošević reached into the arsenal of nationalism, and at precisely the moment when the people of Yugoslavia were seeking change he began to demand the annulment of the autonomy of the autonomous provinces within Serbia - Voivodina and Kosovo - in order to benefit Serbia. In the beginning Milošević was supported by the voters and this was sufficient to enable him to take power from the hands of the old and superseded faction of state capital. Milošević gathered around him a circle of faithful supporters and thus strengthened his hold on the Serbian leadership and his position in the Yugoslav federation. This caused dissatisfaction among the local capitalist class in the other Yugoslav republics, who all the more frequently began talking about their individual republics ceding from Yugoslavia. Milošević continually fuelled these tendencies through his centralist cum Serbian nationalist politics. For example, in 1989 he recommended managers and businessmen in Serbia to avoid Slovenian products, and in 1990 this recommendation became a full-fledged embargo on the import of goods from Slovenia and Croatia.



Friction and conflict of this kind between the local capitalist class only exacerbated a situation which was already very strained. Workers and farmers, deprived of their traditional class organizations for solidarity and struggle, were forced to work in two or more jobs at the same time just in order to survive, and were further disoriented by the pressures of galloping inflation. They were then beset by nationalist demagogues of various persuasions, by various 'democrats' demanding change, and by a range of new, national leaders. Initially these leaders attracted masses of disaffected members of the working class who they promptly used to launch themselves on their desired political trajectory. In this way new parties were established in Yugoslavia: DEMOS in Slovenia, HDZ in Croatia, SPO and many others in Serbia, SDA in Bosnia-Herzegovina, etc. These were all parties of a nationalist hue which did their utmost to ridicule the entire tradition of class struggle.

As a result of these conflicts within the Yugoslav red bourgeoisie and the interests of international capital war broke out in Yugoslavia in 1991.

## 1991 - the Working Class and the War

The war was preceded by a massive national-chauvinistic media campaign. Politicians, writers, public figures and even sportsmen and sportswomen began competing to sing the praises of 'their' native country and 'their' people. All means available were used to sow panic and hatred in people. It was necessary to attain this 'critical mass' of nationalism in order to legitimize the war.

In the initial armed conflicts it was mainly professional soldiers and mercenaries who carried the brunt of the fighting. The Yugoslav People's Army, made up as it was of the sons of workers and farmers from throughout Yugoslavia on compulsory military service, initially was not involved to any significant extent.

It is significant that quite a number of criminals had been pardoned and were involved in the initial fighting. There were also mercenaries from a range of countries, numerous political emigres (such as sons of old Chetniks or Ustashi), and a large number of fascists and neo-fascists. It was largely these groups that committed the atrocities which attracted so much media attention to the war - their aim was to step up the hatred and create artificial differences between members of the working class in different regions of Yugoslavia.

This is further underlined by the fact that nationally-mixed militias were initially organized in the towns and cities of Yugoslavia directly affected by the war. The aim of these militias was to ward off the aggressor, and it was not uncommon for Croats, Serbs and Muslims to stand at the barricades together to defend their homes which had stood together for centuries.

Local nationalist leaders were thus obliged to take radical steps to control disobedient members of 'their own' national group. To this end they again used mercenaries, fanatical volunteers and criminals.

People in all parts of Yugoslavia resisted the war and the nationalist madness. Some figures suggest that over 100,000 people fled from Serbia alone because of the war. In Serbia there were recorded instances of mass desertion where whole army units left their positions and went home. There were cases of collective conscientious objection, e.g. in the village of Trešnjevac in Voivodina where all the male residents refused to enlist in 1991, or in the years that followed, which brought them into serious conflict with the civilian and military authorities. There were also big demonstrations and student protests, but unfortunately this resistance was weak and not well organized.

All unions and political parties supported the war or were in agreement with there being a 'military option'. Public stances and declarations against the war were only made by peace organizations of the petty-bourgeois variety.

## Rump Yugoslavia in 1993

After the collapse of the 'Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia' the 'Federal Republic of Yugoslavia' (FRY) was established, consisting of Serbia with its provinces Voivodina and Kosovo, and Montenegro. The war had torn major gaps in the FRY's budget which had to be filled. The leadership resorted to using inflation as a tool. It printed massive quantities of totally worthless inflationary money in order to pay wages, to buy up foreign currency on the black market, and to guard social stability. The unlimited printing of new money led the inflation rate to rise to the proportions of hyper-inflation. Gradually the black market became the only market in the country which actually functioned. Towards the end of 1993 the exchange rate of the dinar even rose at one stage by a mind-boggling 100% per hour against the German mark, which was the main currency on the black market. In this very unstable political and economic situation it was important that workers' struggle strengthen. In 1993 there was an untold number of strikes which hit all branches of the economy, both in the industrial sector and beyond it. One strike followed another. The climax came at the very end of 1993 when there was a call to a general strike which was followed by all the workers of the Serbian power-supply industry, the miners in a range of mines, and the railway workers.

This put the authorities under pressure and they were forced to abandon their plundering of the people by means of inflation. In January 1994 the new 'convertible' dinar was introduced. Inflation dropped away almost over night, which is one more proof of the fact that the inflation was actually strictly controlled. But the plundering of the people didn't slacken. The whole period of intensive exploitation of the working class in Yugoslavia from the beginning of the debt crisis until today is characterized by the fact that the shameless plunder has never stopped, but only changed form.

The working class became aware of this and realized the necessity of an organized form of struggle. Independent unions began to arise, trying to operate independently of the state and the various political parties. Unfortunately, seduced by the anti-Communist euphoria which has dominated the ex-'socialist' countries since the fall of the Berlin Wall, they also try to be 'independent' of the necessity of class struggle. Currently all the independent unions operate as purely economic associations of workers, producing their own 'democratic' demagogues and leaders who with time, if they prove to be good at destroying the workers' movement, will be co-opted into the social groups close to the ruling class.

Of the existing political parties which claim to be workers' parties or have a promising name of this kind, it is only the Marxist-Leninist 'Partija rada' (Party of Labour) which rejects the struggle for political power and makes working class struggle its goal. All the other parties in Serbia have sunk in the swamp of parliamentarianism.

The current situation in the FRY is not unique and cannot be viewed in isolation from developments in the rest of the world. If we look closely we can find stark parallels with the situation in Mexico, in some Asian countries, and in the states that have arisen since the collapse of the USSR. The forces of the 'capitalist international' obviously aim to stifle workers' struggle and

towards this end they employ their effective and time-honoured strategy of killing the spirit of the working class and alienating the class from itself. A climate of instability is being created everywhere, which is accompanied by crises, shocks and confusion; everywhere new leaders are being created with a thousand masks to appear in a thousand different roles; their only function, however, is to disunite the working class, to yoke it with new chains and fetters to allow further unhindered exploitation and plunder.

# The Prospects of the Organized Working Class

As we have seen, there is no organized worker's movement on the territory of the former SFRY with the exception of several small, isolated groups. The revolutionary task of all progressive forces should therefore be to create working class organizations and link them up in order to build a united front. This is no easy task, but it is a particularly pressing need today where the state and its various agencies (such as the state-controlled unions, factory management, and politicians) are going on the offensive. Having already made a killing, they are now also trying to curtail and abolish the rights which working people have won through the struggles of generation upon generation of ordinary workers. Not only has the system of state repression and control been re-consolidated since the war, but we are also faced with the task of recreating class consciousness from the very beginning. This demands a reexamination of the revolutionary movements of the past, finding their mistakes, working on educating the working masses and setting up new organizations for the struggles of the class. Under no circumstances may workers' struggle be restricted to simply formulating economic demands. It must be based on a thorough knowledge of the existing society and the relations in it and on an understanding of the revolutionary role of the working class.

In the regions of the former SFRY it is crucial that the working class establish its own organizations and, on an internationalist basis, create a broad front against local nationalisms and sections of the capitalist class which devotedly serve the current globalization of capitalism through privatization, killing the spirit of local sections of the working class, impoverishing them, lowering wages, spreading existential insecurity at every level of social life... Our goal must be to link up with the general struggle of the workers world-wide. The struggle must not be waged only at a local level with local goals. It is important to stress that the working class in rump Yugoslav and all other parts of the former SFRY needs the assistance of comrades from abroad. This aid can be of various forms. It need not be purely material - often it is even more useful and appropriate to directly or indirectly link up members of the working class which are as yet unacquainted, which is often the case in the parts of ex-Yugoslavia currently engulfed by war.

Help from comrades abroad can also take the form of them passing on to us their experience of revolutionary organization, reproducing material for us in Serbo-Croat, helping us get hold of literature in Serbo-Croat sometimes to be found abroad... There are very many ways of helping a weak movement and the choice depends solely on the fantasy of the comrades prepared to help.

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**SOURCE MATERIAL**

- 1) Trivo Indjić, 'Anarchism in Yugoslavia', in 'BLACK FLAG', 9/90.
  - 2) Dr. Petar Milosavljević, 'Položaj radničke klase Srbije 1918-1929', 1972, Belgrade.
  - 3) Milica Milenković, 'Sindikalni pokret u Srbiji 1918-1920', 1971, Belgrade.
  - 4) 'Tokovi revolucije - Zbornik istorijskih radova, VIII', 1972, Belgrade.
  - 5) 'Vidici', no. 229, 1984, Belgrade.
  - 6) Osteuropaarchiv, 'Jugoslawien: Klassenkampf, Krise, Krieg', 1992, Berlin.
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#### **Note on the Pronunciation of Serbo-Croatian Names**

Serbo-Croat is a strictly phonetic language - every letter is to be pronounced, and all vowels have their 'continental' values, e.g. the letter 'a' is pronounced as in the German 'Mann', never as in the English 'hand'. The stress most commonly falls on the first syllable. The following letters are pronounced differently to English:

c = ts, as in bits

č = ch, as in cheese

ć = tj, close to č, but softer, like the t in future

dj = like d + ž, but softer, like the j in jug

j = y, as in yellow

š = sh, as in ship

ž = zh, as s in pleasure

Thus the Bosnian town of Jajce is pronounced 'Yay-tseh'.

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Aleksandar Simic  
The workers' movement in Serbia and ex-Yugoslavia  
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