

International Workers Aid To Bosnia

Syndicalists truck flour directly to Bosnia unions

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I'd like to present to you a very concrete example of international solidarity and proof that it really works. I'm here as spokeswoman for International Workers Aid but I'm also a member of SAC which played an important role in developing this idea to reality.

International Workers Aid started last summer with a plea for help from mine workers in Tuzla, a mining town in central Bosnia, to comrades in Britain. The miners of Tuzla have a long history of solidarity. During the British miners strike in 1984–85, members of the Kreka Miners trade union sent one day's pay each during the whole strike in spite of their poverty. So when the plea for help came in the midst of burning war, the English thought it was the right time to pay back.

This was a very abstract idea which was caught up by unionists and Trotskyist groups. When the call came to Sweden it was through a Socialist Party and it was like it always is: when you need to get some hard work done, send in the anarchists.

This was the initial idea:

- Collect money and aid (food and medicine) for the workers of Tuzla.
- Develop an international solidarity network between trade unionists, peace and women's groups and other radical, anti-nationalist movements throughout Europe in order to give political support to those forces in former Yugoslavia striving for peace, multi-ethnicism and democracy.

Tuzla: A Mining Town

Tuzla is one of the major industrial cities of Bosnia with a population of 170,000 counting the refugees. The principal industry is mining — coal and salt.

During the war, Tuzla has profiled itself as a symbol of human values in all this madness — it is a city where people still live together despite ethnic and religious origins, and have many times expressed their determination to continue to do so.

So far the dark powers of war, meaning national chauvinism, hunger for political power, territory and economic supremacy — have not yet managed to corrupt this profound conviction in Tuzla. I didn't dare to believe it before I actually got there, but it's true.

Tuzla is also a city where unions are and have always been extremely strong. Three days ago I spoke to a gentleman who came to Sweden from Tuzla 31 years ago. He told me a lot about the role unions played in people's lives. These were social security, education and survival. In Tuzla, the Kreka Miners union has been the very heart of the city. The system for monitoring, taking care of and organizing was already there — it was a perfect partner to our project.

Tuzla has also been flooded with refugees from all over Bosnia, Serbia and Croatia — people fleeing from ethnic cleansing, military conscription and nationalist mayhem.

As the military situation is now, Tuzla is surrounded on 3 sides by Serbian forces. Since the federation between Croats and Bosnians was agreed upon, there has been a more or less peaceful corridor through Bosnia from the Adriatic coast. But shelling from the Serbs is not unusual, and the newly opened airport has been a popular target. Tuzla suffers mainly from the effects of siege and isolation, and there is a constant fear that Tuzla will be cut off from the rest of Bosnia; if you look on a map this fear seems well founded.

Humanitarian Aid and Power

When we started this campaign we were amateurs. We didn't know anything about this vast field of political, economic, social and technical complications called 'humanitarian aid'. We just loaded up everything people gave us, and didn't give the political implications much thought.

Convoy I dissolved after months of hopeless struggle, but 3 trucks, among them the Swedish one, decided to give it one more try. In November of 1993 they succeeded. This was our first personal contact with the miners of Tuzla, and this is where the real work started: a rebuilding program in cooperation with the miners union.

Humanitarian aid is a political factor of power in all disaster and war situations. Food is used to blackmail against unwanted developments, or parts of the population. Starvation is a very powerful weapon and the ones in control of the food often control the entire situation. We had to avoid this trap.

Dumping tons of corned beef in the streets of Tuzla is not a way to help rebuild and reinforce the civil society inhabitants have been fighting for. The civil society — as an antipole to the military perverted societies that are blossoming over Bosnia in the tracks of the war.

These are societies where all normal, inter-human structures and frameworks have been totally destroyed. Often well-meant humanitarian aid in fact helps to prolong and entrench this deeply disturbed situation. The big organizations, including the UN very soon get institutionalized. The bureaucracy surrounding each kilo of milk powder is enormous. A lot of money is plowed into the humanitarian aid business, but not much comes out of it.

We decided to stick to one singular, very concrete project: the Bread Program. The concept is simple. We deliver flour, oil, sugar and yeast in regular, smaller convoys directly to the miners union. From the union's warehouse these ingredients are to be distributed to local bakeries where the bakers produce bread — a staple of the Bosnian diet. The bread is distributed to people in need.

In doing this we hope to help strengthen civil society where people still work, some machines still function in civil production, and where some people can bake bread that other people can eat.

It may look symbolic. But the Bread Program would be of no value if it only worked on a symbolic level. One ton of wheat flour means 2,000 loaves of bread. Ten tons means 20,000 loaves of bread. This is not, as we say in Sweden, cat shit. So far we have delivered 70 tons of flour.

Worker Control and Solidarity

It was from the very beginning important to us to be in total control of every link in the chain, from the collecting of money and aid in our home countries to the actual delivery in Tuzla. We cannot, as was recommended so many times, just deliver our aid to another UN warehouse. Too much aid ends up on the black market.

It was around the Bread Program and the political impact Tuzla stands for, that we tried to get support. Here in Sweden the campaigning went, and still goes remarkably well. SAC played the leading role in this work, but we cooperated with other groups: Bosnian clubs, trade unions, and organizations of the political left. The organization is also alive and well in Denmark, Belgium, Germany, Netherlands, Britain and to some extent in Spain and Italy.

We have tried to strengthen our contacts in this fragile network in Europe and also with independent unions in Croatia and Serbia. The practical arrangements with the actual convoy driving (for which Stockholm office has been responsible), have been so overwhelming that too little work has been done to make these contacts really creative.

It is nevertheless a crucial part of International Workers Aid and one of the things that separate us from ordinary humanitarian aid organizations. With an active, functioning solidarity network we have enough political power to act against war, neo-fascism and nationalism in the near future.

I finally reached Tuzla in April and it was an overwhelming experience. After months and months of work, we did manage to get our first Bread Convoy on the road. By then we had an office and warehouses in Split in Croatia, 3 ex-army 4-wheel drive trucks, and over 100 tons of bread ingredients waiting to be delivered. WE also had the necessary contacts and endorsements from the governments concerned and the UN.

The welcome was very, very warm. The people in Tuzla have been starving for a long time. Last winter was absolutely horrible with very little aid getting through. Still the miners union has managed to support its workers and their families with food packages and meals, as is its tradition.

I spent 3 days in Tuzla and have never met such hospitality, warmth, pride and courage anywhere. The situation in Tuzla is a bit better now, but our friends are still in need of absolutely everything. To keep this project going we need to reinforce our efforts until the war is over and we can start working on the revolution.

I think it is just about time to put some action behind the slogans and try to re-establish the political potential of the unions!

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