

A visit to Tuzla in Bosnia-Herzegovina

This visit took place after recent mass demonstrations in Tuzla, Sarajevo and other Bosnian towns where workers, the unemployed and students were protesting against privatisation, impoverishment, and the corruption of politicians. There were small demonstrations on two days that were brutally attacked by police and then 10,000 people in Tuzla, a tenth of the population, turned out in protest. Several government buildings were set alight, the Tuzla canton government resigned and the same day a large meeting of people formed a 'plenum', an open forum, to try to give a coherent voice to the protests. Plenums have been set up in other towns and have all been meeting regularly, setting up working groups to cover all aspects of social policy and trying to co-ordinate their activities.

Our delegation comprised two people who were active in the Workers Aid for Bosnia campaign that took convoys of supplies to the Tuzla trade unions during the Yugoslav war and one person from the London region of the trade union Unite. We held meetings with various trade unionists and with people active in the Plenum. As far as possible this report summarises what people told us with my own observations confined to a final section.

But firstly some background information to help make sense of this report. Before the 1992-95 Yugoslav wars the population of Bosnia was roughly one third Serb, one third Croat and one third Bosniak, ie descendents of people who had converted to Islam under the 400 year Ottoman rule. Nationalist political parties based on the different ethnic groups came to dominate the scene prior to the war, except in Tuzla. The Dayton peace agreement, forced through by the US, mirrored the aims of the Serb and Croat nationalists and rewarded their war efforts by formalising the country's division into three parts. The Croat and Bosniak entities have to some extent merged into the 'Federation' while the Serb territory remains separate. A so called national government covering all the country has been almost totally paralysed by the squabbling between the nationalist politicians. The country is further divided up into cantons each with their own local governments also mostly ruled by nationalist parties.

During the war Tuzla and the surrounding region, with its century long tradition of working class solidarity, held out against ethnic division and nationalism and mostly supported the multi-ethnic Social Democratic Party. That resistance is key to the present protests. Nationalism was used to divide the working class of Yugoslavia in order to carry out privatisation. Tuzla's resistance to ethnic cleansing, its support for the right of all people to live and work together is the bedrock on which this upsurge of activity and debate takes shape.

Yugoslav pre-war property ownership was different from the rest of eastern Europe. All factories and companies were worker owned and self managed. At least that was the legal status. In reality the Communist Party exercised a total top down control system that emptied the legal framework of any real working class input. The 'trade unions' were really more like a personnel department and operated as part of management. And this has really continued in many unions till today and their top down structure has been made worse by the fact that most industries ceased to function during the war and subsequent privatisation has bankrupted many of them so some of the 'unions' are largely devoid of working members.

Meeting with the Tuzla District TU committee.

We were met by the president of the committee (equivalent of a regional secretary here) and representatives of some of the unions the committee embraces: chemical, non-ferrous metals, metal workers, building and construction, education and transport. Member of the committee gave us the background to the protests.

Tuzla district president: Fahrudin Sahovic

Tuzla with its huge coal and salt deposits was the centre of the Yugoslav chemical industry. It also had furniture and wood processing industries as well as large metal working industries. Many enterprises had over 1500 employees.

During the war workers' ownership was ended by the state taking control of all property. This was done under the influence of the IMF in order to make privatisation easier.

Privatisation began straight after the war and workers were given vouchers that gave them the right to buy shares. Many workers had to immediately sell these vouchers at knock down prices because of destitution (most people had not earned anything for the four years of the war). In some of the big factories workers took out loans from the banks to buy shares in their own company but in most cases nearly half the company shares were sold on the open market with war profiteers and foreign buyers ending up with 49% of shares. Legally these newly privatised companies were supposed to honour the rights and terms and conditions of all existing employees for three years but sackings and asset stripping began right away. Sacked workers or workers who had no pay were unable to keep up the loan repayments they had taken to buy shares and were forced to sell them to the private owners. All the privatisations were done illegally even within the framework of the pro-privatisation laws and this has been a catastrophe. For example there were 25,000 metal workers in Tuzla pre-war, and now there are 2,500. A few individuals, all connected to political parties, have grown rich while workers are impoverished.

Despite endless worker complaints to the legal authorities no action was ever taken against the new owners who failed to pay workers, paid no National Insurance payments or taxes and who mostly used their new assets as collateral to raise loans from the banks, loading the companies with debts, then departed with the borrowed money leaving the company bankrupt. Over 100 enterprises had suffered this fate. Because of non-payment of NI contributions 3500 workers are unable to receive any pension. Of 80,000 people working only a third get regular wages and many have not been paid for nearly two years.

Meanwhile the government at national and cantonal level is a huge institution, divided three ways by the Dayton agreement and divided again at canton level, all with ministers and staff. In the Federation (Croat and Bosniak entities) there are 10 cantons and 300 ministers. Tuzla canton (the size of Lincolnshire) has a staff of 526 serving ten ministers. Politics is the only profitable business in the country. On top of their regular pay, which is five times what a pensioner gets, the ministers claim huge expenses, extra monies for sitting on various boards and are entitled to 'white bread', the rule which allows them to receive a year's pay after they leave office. Their political allies are also enriching themselves via the 'golden helicopter', which sees them all given jobs running different state companies and activities like health and education. Everybody in any position of

authority is directly tied to and appointed by one of the political parties. The average government monthly income is 10,000kmarks/month. One Tuzla minister managed to get 42,000kmarks (£18,000) for one month while the average worker's pay, if he is lucky enough to get paid, is 500-600kmarks (£250) a month.

The government borrows from the IMF and the World Bank but all of this goes into the pockets of politicians and their cronies, none goes to industrial development. The health service is in crisis and the unions fear a national bankruptcy.

In 2012 the unions organised a demonstration and told the government that if they didn't make changes there would be trouble. In 2013 the Tuzla canton government organised tri-partite talks with unions and employers on the state of the economy, and there was a limited, warning strike in the education sector, but nothing changed. No-one in government is willing to listen to the unions. Strikes and demonstrations were all ignored. The unions do not support violence but the recent demonstrations have made government take notice.

Metal workers representative, Mr Vidic.

Pre-war conditions were reasonably good. The planned economy was good. After the war industry was not ready for privatisation but it was forced through by the international community. In the EU there are 200million out of work and here also thousands of skilled workers are idle.

Building and construction workers representatives

The privatisation was robbery. The Agency for Privatisation employed pro-government people with no skills. Contracts were always in favour of the prospective buyers and everything was done illegally. We never saw the contracts, which were drawn up in favour of the buyers. The Union has never been able to see the privatisation contracts. The buyers, the lawyers, the government were all friends. Any worker who opposed their plans was sacked and blacklisted. We thought the 'west' would help improve production and conditions but they did the opposite. The 'grey' economy grows all the time.

Chemical and non-ferrous metals

We need help from, the international TU federation. The world bank and the IMF have created a catastrophe. The international community is very cunning in the way they have pushed through privatisation and slavery

Metal workers

We have gone from 11,000 members to 4,000. Pre-war we had good conditions and the workers' councils and planned economy were good. Globalisation is just leading to a reduction of wages.

Education

We need a globalisation of the workers' movement to oppose globalisation. We didn't organise the recent demonstrations nor did the student union or war veterans, we don't know who organised them but they did grow out of protest by frustrated workers in the big 5 companies destroyed by privatisation. Although

not in support of violence, we want to thank those responsible for setting up the Plenum. We agree with 90% of what the plenum demands. In fact we think the big demonstration was started by people with a political agenda, tied to one of the parties. We participated individually but could not do so as an organisation because the law prohibits us. For example the TU from the furniture factory in Zivinice was fined for blocking the main roads. Our worry is that the demonstration took place just when the anti-union laws inspired by the IMF were being discussed. Now the TUs are blamed for everything. Allegedly we have failed our members so they spontaneously took to the streets. Now we have a schism in the unions which weakens us. But the TUs were not responsible for the violence. We need education and exchange of views with TUs internationally.

Tuzla committee president

Regardless of who started the protests we are against violence but the demonstrations made government take notice. It seems they only respond to violence. The plenum is new but we do agree with 90% of their demands. The politicians seem to be from another planet, sitting in their assembly, raising their hands, coming up with no proposals but taking large salaries. The plenum is a good thing but we are not taking any official part as we are not the organisers. We are also scared the politicians will use the plenum for their own end and we are not political.

Transport

Pre war we had 1050 employees and 450 public transport vehicles. The war saw 70% of vehicles destroyed. After the war the Tuzla Mayor, from the Social Democratic Party, insisted that the service must be privatised. We opposed this but had little influence and privatisation was carried through by US AID as a pilot project. In fact this privatisation was not so bad. The Director took 40% of the shares and bought new busses. We now have 300. Salaries and NI contributions are paid regularly.

Tuzla committee president

We must develop our international co-operation. Members contributions do not cover our activities and 95% of our officials are volunteers. This union building is 50 years old and needs refurbishment, maybe you could help us with this. The building reflects our situation.

After this meeting we went to meet with trade unionists who had separated themselves from the Tuzla District Committee (the schism referred to above). As they had no building to meet in, our translator, a retired member of the banking TU, organised for us to use a room in Hotel Tuzla, the largest hotel in town. Here we met with representatives from the chemical factory 'Ditta', the chlorine factory, the Tuzla Hotel workers, the 'Ditta' occupation committee, sacked employees from the chlorine factory, the UMING factory (rubberparts/gaskets), the President and Deputy President of the Zivinice TU committee and sacked hotel workers.

'Ditta' washing powder and chemical factory.

Pre-war we had 760 workers and produced 760,000 tonnes of washing powder for all Yugoslavia.

All production stopped in the war. We resumed with 360 employees in 1996. The state took 51% which was sold off and employees got loans to buy 49%. In the year 2000 problems started. Seven directors tried to get full ownership. Workers had not been paid and were forced to sell their shares as they could not repay their loans. The directors were able to get control of a company worth 20 million kmarks for 650,000kmarks (£1 =2.3kmarks). They were able to remove 3million kmarks worth of stored materials so actually they got the company for nothing. We went to the prosecutor's office to demand the arrest of the robbers, and delivered documents, but nothing happened. The President of the Federation of TUs was complicit in the privatisation and signed privatisation agreements. In 2008 contractual obligations expired, and pay ceased. In 2009 the strike started. For 52 months pension and insurance payments have not been made. We have had no wages for 27 months.

Hotel Tuzla

(Amira was the only woman we had met so far) She felt she was not welcome at the meeting and had not been invited but she was fighting like a woman against illegal privatisations. Hotel Tuzla had been privatised in 2002 with 67% of shares going to the workers and the rest sold on the open market. This privatisation was done with union approval. The privatisation Agency imposed the sell off to 'help' them as the workers could not run the hotel in compliance with the law, but the workers didn't elect the new company or the union that agreed with it. Everything was imposed on us, the same as at 'Ditta'. Out of 138 employees 117 took out loans to buy shares but were soon unable to repay them because of sackings and non-payment of wages. In 2007 the hotel was re-sold to a new company who was supposed to take over payment of unpaid wages but didn't. They did nothing except refurbish the hotel so in 2007 we created a new TU as the old one was tied into privatisation and had done nothing for us in 20 years. (at this point other people began shouting at the woman and demanding to know why she hadn't gone on the big demonstration. She broke into tears but then continued). This hotel has 13 floors but on all official paperwork it has 12. This was to make it cheaper for privatisation. We reported this to the prosecutors but they did nothing. Privatisation should be revised. We want to preserve the hotel but it is a disaster. People with 35 years' service are being sacked without compensation. They replace them with young compliant people. The restaurants are sub-contracted with new non-union staff. Many of us have not been paid for 14 months.

Sacked workers from the chlorine plant

In the war socially owned property was converted to state property and then the bandits planned their robbery. They gave us shares or vouchers, then made us hungry so we would have to sell them. They took control of the unions and turned them into their postmen. So the unions ceased to exist in the private companies. So we as individuals formed our links across companies and tried to achieve our rights. The leadership of our branch unions in the Tuzla District Committee have money and waste it on travel etc. We want to start setting up a 'Solidarity' union amongst the whole community then we will pressure government to meet our demands - to restart production, pay wages, pay NI. We also want free health care for all and unemployment benefits. We need assistance to set up this solidarity union.

Chlorine factory

The workers at Polychem defended and saved the factory during the war but have been unable to defend it from our own bandits. Pre-war we had 11,000 employees and good conditions. Our company built a 10 million Euro hotel. After the war-time shut down production restarted but in 1998 the director took a 2.5 million kmark loan on behalf of the workers at a high rate of interest and in 2 years it had become a 5 million debt. We forced him to resign. In 2001 we were privatised in a public sale. The new owner was responsible to no-one. When we went to the privatisation Agency to ask why he allowed such a bad kind of privatisation they said 'because that's what the new owner wanted'. The new hotel and other valuable assets were sold off despite court cases brought by workers. Then electricity was cut off to the factory and we started hunger strikes. On 4th march 2002 the director took revenge by bringing bankruptcy procedures and sacking all workers. But our strike forced the resumption of production in 2004 with a grant of 1.5 kmarks from the government. Then in 2007, on april fool's day, the company was sold for 10 million kmarks to yet another criminal from Poland. He promised to restart production in all areas but parts of the company were hived off and asset stripped. Nothing was invested in production and all the non-organic side of things were destroyed. This new company employed 250 people which was cut to 200 in 2008 and in 2010 everyone was sacked, even security and the firemen so the place was left in a dangerous state with many explosive and poisonous materials stored on site. We found the 13.8 hectares of land had been used as collateral to take out bank loans. We won a court case for 3 million kmarks but got nothing as the courts are in league with the robbers. So now there is no production.

Gummin, Zivinice.

In 1990 the chamber of commerce pushed through the amalgamation of two companies which was then privatised. In 2011 it went bankrupt having paid no wages or NI. 211 employees accepted the bankruptcy just so they could get health care but they got no back wages and are now unemployed and only ruined buildings are left. During the bankruptcy process, first call went to tax and the 'patent holder'. The government, the Agency for privatisation and the tax authorities are all connected to the criminals.

Someone in the meeting - the President of the trade union from Zivinice I think, who we met at the furniture factory the next day.

About the plenum - it is deeply politicised and is in an association with a political party, the Social Democrats. Its aim is to dissipate the people's protests. A person from the plenum described war veterans and TUs as lice. (a person from the plenum later told me this was a lie). We are not interested in the plenum. Look the building they are meeting in, it only holds 500 people so how can that democratically represent Tuzla?

Several people had not spoken when we came to the end of our time so we all agreed we would reconvene the following morning in the furniture factory in Zivinice.

A short meeting with people active in the Tuzla canton plenum

Protests developed around workers' dissatisfaction with privatisation and asset stripping, These have ~~have~~ been going on since 2006. There is a huge government budget but this has gone to the creation of a few oligarchs and poverty for most. Many politicians are drawing 30 salaries from different public appointments.

We had five big companies that were the basis of Tuzla's industry but they have been destroyed. Now there is 50% unemployment and for the under 35s it is 75%.

The idea of the plenum was to give a voice to this dissatisfaction. In the plenum anyone can speak freely, whereas previously the oligarchs occupied all public space and the political parties dominated all debate. The plenum is outside of all previous political institutions and outside of ethnicity which has been used by political parties to keep people in fear.

On the 5th and 6th of Feb there were protests that the police attacked with CS gas and batons, beating youngsters and women indiscriminately. The government refused to meet the protestors. On the seventh there was a massive demonstration as well as protests in other cities. At that demonstration we read out a list of public demands covering health care, payment of wages and taxes etc. We asked people to come to a meeting and the plenum was born. For the first week it met everyday but that was too exhausting. Workers were very involved in the protests but the trade unions seem to follow political lines and don't seem to want to work in a public, democratic way.

Of course the plenum contains people from political parties because it is an open forum but it is not tied to any party and many people are critical of all the parties. We know about the people who want to form a solidarity type union but some of these people just want to be a new Lech Walensa. Many of the union representatives are old and all they really want is for somebody to pay their NI contributions so they can get a pension and retire. Also several union leaders have been heavily involved in selling the privatisations.

A meeting of the plenum

The meeting started at 6pm in a cultural centre theatre. There were about 250 people present which was less than previous meetings. First of all there was a call for 2 people to act as moderators for the meeting. One man was nominated who we later found out was an ex-soldier with political ambitions and a great ego. It also seems he has some support from a Croatian group who are connected to the right wing group in Europe headed by Nicholas Farage. Another man nominated himself saying he was an ex-Ditta worker. In practice the first moderator took sole charge of conducting business.

Various working groups had been meeting and there was a report from the group that had met with the canton government. They had agreed to abolish white bread, the year's salary paid to people when they left office. The demand of the plenum that the chief of police be sacked for authorising the violent attack on demonstrators was not agreed to. Also the demand that all people arrested on the demonstrations should have their charges dropped was also not agreed to (In

fact while we were there several of the trade unionists we met said they had just been pulled in for questioning by the police and many people were being fined or imprisoned by the courts).

The plenum legal team is trying to defend people picked up by the police, but many people were pleading guilty or being tried without the plenum being able to get to see them for lack of any information from the police/courts/government of who was being held etc.

From the floor someone questioned when would the legal team have an office so they could be contacted easily. The speaker replied that they had no money for offices but they were always contactable by email. A voice from the floor called out that many people did not have email.

A suggestion was made that more young people should be admitted to the police to reduce corruption.

A meeting had taken place with the head of the courts to request access to all documents relating to the privatisation of the big 5 companies.

The legal team had met with 27 young people beaten by the police.

A young man from Serbia receive great applause for his speech praising the actions in Tuzla and hoped that similar actions would spread to other parts of former Yugoslavia as problems were the same everywhere.

A speaker said, "Tuzla is a workers' town, and yet the unions here. We need the trade unions at the Plenum."

A war veteran called for special treatment to be given to veterans as they were suffering.

(the meeting then became increasingly hard to follow via our translator as the first moderator became increasingly autocratic, wanting to reply personally to every contribution from the floor with more and more people shouting against him. People began to leave in frustration, the first to go were a whole row of teenagers. Others followed shouting out as they left)

A discussion appeared to be taking place about who should replace the resigned Tuzla canton government leader who would have the power to appoint a new government. The canton assembly had called for nominations from the population at large but were refusing to say who had been nominated. The canton assembly, of the existing political parties, would then make their pick. Some people from the floor suggested various names while other people said the plenum should concentrate its work on a programme of demands. The meeting then became too difficult for us to follow and we retired to the bar.

Continuation of the previous day's meeting with trade unionists.

We met with most of the people who had sat with us in the Tuzla hotel the day before. This time we were in the furniture factory Konjuh in Zivinice.

The president of the Konjuh branch thanked Workers Aid for their solidarity during the war. Then he gave a history of their factory. It was started in 1885 as a

saw mill taking timber from the surrounding forests and the town of Zivinice had grown up all around it. Workers had defended the factory and their livelihoods through 1st and 2nd world wars and through the recent war, but 'our nationalist politicians have destroyed it'. The factory produces high quality furniture and other wood products which were exported world wide and the factory is still capable of doing this but there is no working capital and all the factory bank accounts have been frozen. The tycoons only want to get their hands on the huge area of land that the company owns as it is in the town centre. The government has downgraded its classification of the land from 1st to 4th class in order to make it cheaper for a buyer. Three times the workers have marched the 110km to Sarajevo to protest. We marched in the 40C heat of summer and in the -20C depth of winter. But the marchers were met with silence apart from being accused of being politically motivated. When they visited the top politicians, the politicians (SDP) said that they must be working for the SDA (Muslim nationalist party) so the President produced his SDP card, of which he said he is very critical. Ironically, this was the same man who expressed fears that the Plenum is run by the SDP. We also camped outside the municipal headquarters in Tuzla for a month but no result. We met with the head of the TUs in Sarajevo and with the High Representative (the UN's overall governor of Bosnia), warning that there might be an explosive reaction, but nothing came from it. We told an American at the High Rep's office, Doyle, that we would not fight amongst ourselves, only against privatisation.

Our politicians need to be changed. We know that 85 people in the country have 9 billion kmarks of savings in the banks but the names are kept secret, why? Because they are politicians. Protestors have asked for their names, but with no answer. Ask your politicians not to support our politicians.

Now we have all been discussing what kind of a union we need in this situation. On 28th Feb we invited all the different branches in the Tuzla region to a discussion about this. We proposed that we end the branch division between crafts since we all now face one common problem and individual strikes, sector by sector were ineffective. The heads of the unions opposed this idea. The Tuzla committee president you met yesterday is opposed to this. But we are going to start collecting signatures from all workers demanding a new united union for the Tuzla region. We will also spread this idea to other regions.

At this time some delegates arrived late, having been questioned by police.

The plenum is a problem as we don't know who the leaders are. The moderator at the meeting last night wants to be the new Tito.

Asked about the miners, the backbone of the Tuzla workers movement, we were told that the miners were being bought off by government. Their wages are paid regularly and the mines are being subsidised by government by being allowed to run up huge non-payment of NI contributions. The leader of the miners union is imposed by the mine management.

One speaker said that the Federal Agency for Privatisation had sold 6.5 billion marks' worth of state property for 400,000 marks in cash and vouchers.

The director of Konjuh then joined us and spoke about the capability of the factory to employ 300-400 people if only they had working capital. He had approached all levels of government but it was like talking to the deaf. The IMF

pays politicians' salaries but won't help a viable business. He also made it clear that his appointment wasn't made as a result of any political party, the usual practice.

We were then taken on a tour of the vast site where a handful of men and women are still producing high quality beech furniture and flooring.

A family

I visited old friends. The father is a retired engineering worker, the mother still works in the office of a small private company. Their son is a teacher in Sarajevo and their daughter is an unemployed law graduate who does voluntary work for one of the unions. They had all been on the big demonstration but left when the violence broke out. Then they went to a meeting of the plenum but couldn't get in because there were too many people. They were following what the plenum was doing and saying but felt that the problems of ordinary people were not being spoken about there. The politicians are crooks but most of the union leaders are also not representing us, especially the head of the union in Sarajevo who is just a government servant.

Our translator

We went to dinner with our translator who is in his seventies, a very cultured man.

My wife and I always thought our retirement would be different to this. We wanted to travel but now it's difficult for us just to pay for the three hour car trip to see our son just across the border in Croatia. Like many people we had savings in the bank but these have all vanished in the war. Stolen. No-one in government will say where our money has gone. These bastards have stolen everything. Look what they (the nationalists) have done to this country. (he wipes his tears). I'm sorry but it is terrible.

A theatre worker and her husband

We spent a good deal of time with a teacher of acting at the National Theatre school in Tuzla, an old friend. A visit to the school showed the difficulty facing young people in finding work of any kind, let alone acting work. However, the mixture of students - Bosniak, Croatian, Serb - retained the character of pre-war Tuzla; the students seemed particularly fond of their Serb colleague. The theatre worker (part Bosniak, part Turkish) and her husband (the last Bogomil in Bosnia!) are both fervently anti-nationalist. The husband, having had hopes of using his considerable language and business skills after the war twenty years ago, is now working advising the Plenum. He has earned little recently, but is drawn to the passion of the young people in the Plenum. His wife saw the municipal building on fire from her high rise on the day of the big demonstrations. It frightened her, but she also said 'that I feel I have been sleep walking the last few years, and have suddenly woken up'.

A visit to the 'Ditta' factory

We are taken to the washing powder factory by a middle aged woman, Emina Busuladzic, who is active in the plenum. She is one of the workers who are

keeping a round the clock occupation of the factory to prevent the owners stripping out production equipment.

I worked in the laboratory on quality control but was kept out of the factory for 5 years because I revealed the deteriorating quality of the products. Pre-war we had 1000 workers and by the time we went on strike in 2011 there were only 112 people. That strike lasted 8 months. This was over non payment of wages and NI contributions. Then in Oct 2012 we were locked out so we set up a protest camp outside the gates. We were helped by other unions but our own did nothing. At the federal level the union leaders were involved in our privatisation. Tuzla used to be the centre of the Yugoslav chemical industry but every part of it has been destroyed by privatisation. Another washing powder company in Serbia promised to buy this company but we think this was just done to shut us up and nothing happened. So in June 2013 we went on strike again and also began this occupation as we know that potential buyers are only interested in getting the land and will remove the machinery.

We have pressed charges against the owners showing that the privatisation was illegal but nothing happens. Our union continually lied to us, pressuring the workers to sell their shares saying that they will be out of work if they don't. The union also agreed to short six month employment contracts which the workers didn't want. The leader of the union was in favour of privatisation. She was 'elected', but you couldn't find anyone who voted for her. Both the Social Democrats and the SDA (the main Bosniak nationalist party) had fingers in the pie, all the directors of companies are politically appointed mates and not one of them did anything positive for the economy or our conditions. When we had our protest camp they all turned up to look for votes but then vanished. Meanwhile lots of people, young, old, whole families turned up to really support us.

We had various small companies renting factory space here but they have all left because the water and electricity were cut off.

In terms of our own union it is worse than two years ago. We need to form a new, canton wide union for all workers because everyone is in the same position. The national president of the trade unions does nothing. We held demonstrations every Wednesday in Tuzla. He ignored them but people did begin to join us and then finally we had the big demonstration.

A co-worker doing his shift on the sit in added: we made legal protests but nothing happened. The corruption and nepotism controls everything. So it was no surprise when other people began to join us. Now all sectors of society have joined together for the first time. Sadly the miners didn't join us. There was political pressure on them not to join the demonstrations and they were threatened they would lose their jobs if they came.

Emina gave us a document the following day, which contained smears against her by the trade union leadership. She had been threatened publically as an enemy of the workers for opposing privatisation.

A meeting with the Federal President of the miners union

We met with the union president and the mine rail transport director in the director's office in the Banovici mine.

Banovici is the biggest and best coal mine in Bosnia with 2,800 miners producing 1.5million tonnes of coal a year from open cast and underground seams. 1 million tonnes goes to the electricity generating station and the rest goes to some industries and to Serbia.

We have had major investment since the war with 130 million kmarks of new equipment. All wages and NI are paid and we also run the surrounding rail infrastructure, the salt mines and the mining institute in Sarajevo. In the country as a whole there are 5,500 miners and the pay for a face worker is between 1000 - 1200kmarks a month (£434-520)

We are in a better position than most as we have not been privatised. Various politicians talk about our privatisation but we will not allow this.

We were then shown the narrow gauge steam railway that brings coal from pits in the mountains. This was built during the days of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and will soon be replaced by a conveyor belt but the mine will transform the railway into a tourist attraction and hopes to extend it to their hotel at Zlacha.

Note The town of Banovici which is based entirely on the mine and miners has recently elected a Mayor from the SDA (bosniak nationalist party). The power of political patronage and manipulation? A young activist from the plenum who has worked in the Canton presidential office questions the claim that NI contributions have been paid by the mine and also questions the claim that the mines have not been privatised saying that apart from the Banovici mine other aspects of the company have been hived off.

As we drove back to Zagreb airport we had to cross the Bosnian / Croatian border. The approach road was blocked for lorries by hundreds of tractors, Bosnian farmers making a protest at something. Our car was allowed to bypass the blockade and we made our way into the EU.

My summary

I had not been in Bosnia for nearly four years. I don't speak the language and given the shortness of the visit I cannot really know what is going on but a few things are clear.

The generation gap is significant. Many of the trade unionists are older people, predominantly men. A new generation is now entering the scene with women as prominent as men. They were children during the war and because many of them could speak English lots got jobs with the post war circus of NATO,UN,NGOs etc and learnt at first hand the real agenda of the 'international community' which was not to help Bosnians determine their own future but to impose a pre-decided policy on them.

Some of these people have studied abroad and have been active in student protests elsewhere, for example in the student fees protests in the UK. They use facebook and the internet to communicate with each other, with the Bosnian diaspora and with radical thinkers around the world. They are also part of that movement which has developed all over the world over the last twenty years, often independent of the unions, and healthily suspicious of hierarchical structures and 'leaderships'. Some could clearly leave and get very well paid academic positions abroad. The fact that they don't, and that they are putting in

huge hours to sustain the Plenums, shows how different they are from the nepotists associated with the political parties. All this gives them a great advantage. But it seems that some of them are inclined to see things in terms of right ideas against bad ones, clean politicians against corrupt ones. But right ideas will not abolish the coalition of robbers, both national and international, politicians, national and international, all of them acting on behalf of capital. Indeed after a moment's retreat in the face of the demonstrations, the ruling elite have regained their composure and are preparing to clamp down on further protest and resist making any significant concessions.

The mass demonstrations which frightened the politicians gave birth to the plenums but the plenums do not yet seem to be able to galvanise that mass movement. This is almost inevitable. Apart from a brief period of mass demonstrations before the war this is the first opportunity in most people's lives to take independent action free of political parties, trade union bureaucracies etc. Everyone is suspicious of one another and used to political patronage determining everything. There is also clearly a conservative layer, ie in the trade union leadership, with many ties to parts of the regime that resist any independent action. Their warm praise for the old 'workers control' and 'planned economy' is misplaced. The non-payment of wages and collapse of industry began long ago. The economy of pre-war Yugoslavia was in crisis and it was this crisis that fuelled the nationalists drive to war.

Some of the people from the plenum that we met were very aware of the plenum's shortcomings but felt that this was an important first step and that even if the plenums failed to develop it was an important first step, that the social protest would continue and that new ways would be found to enable people to organise themselves. They were adamant that a new kind of social movement which did away with the old 'leaders' and 'led' was necessary. "We are in a better position. "