

# **The Bosnian Miners' International Workers' Conference - "Defend Social Property" 14-15 March**

**Bob Myers**

This conference raises some important questions for Marxists. First a short report. (A full report of discussions available from Durham NUM, fax 0191 386 6824, is worth reading.) Attendance - about 90 people in total: national and local trade union leaders from: Russia - engineering workers (two miners were blocked by the Russian authorities. Hungary - teachers and miners, Balazs Nagy (leading activist in the 1956 uprising). Turkey - communications workers. Greece - Athens Labour Union. Serbia - energy workers, Independent Trade Union Federation, Journalist from Metal Workers Union, Radoslav Pavlovic (first proposer of the Workers' aid convoys to Bosnia). Bosnia - miners, electrical supply workers, teachers, food and distributive unions, President of Bosnian TUC, mine directors, economists, a government representative, journalists from TV, radio and papers. Austria - union activists involved with LabourNet. France - teachers, energy workers. Spain - railway workers and Workers' Aid. Sweden - SAC trade union. Scotland - Scottish TUC, Edinburgh and Aberdeen TUCs. England - Liverpool Dockers, General and Municipal Workers Union, Durham and Northumberland NUM, UNISON, TGWU, BECTU and Workers Aid. South Africa - miners. Two Kosova miners were unable to travel due to new wave of repression in Kosova. Bosnian miners proposed a message of solidarity to Kosova workers, condemning repression of the Albanian population.

Conference took place in the Bosnian miners' hotel. Delegates were able to spend time together outside conference sessions to make closer personal contacts - particularly useful for the delegates from ex-Yugoslavia.

Conference opened with a short statement by the Bosnian miners' president explaining the miners' fears concerning privatisation of mines which they expected the government to push through at some point. Privatisation was already proceeding in many industries without consulting workers.

Then came a long, slick presentation from a representative of the Government's privatisation board outlining how their "model" of privatisation would lead to job losses in the "first stage" but eventually to growth.

The President of the Bosnian TUC made a demagogic speech attacking government corruption but went on to say privatisation was inevitable and he only opposed the government's methods.

A Bosnian economist, the only member of the Bosnian

government who opposed laws in 1994 that transferred social property to state property, spoke. He made a damning indictment of the robbery taking place of workers property. He said that privatisation was inevitable but that the property should be privatised into the hands of the workers.

For the rest of the conference there was open discussion. 37 delegates spoke. The Northumberland miners' president outlined what had happened to British miners. Most of the delegates from different countries passed on similar information about how privatisation had devastated the working class. Some said that privatisation must be fought, others thought that the Bosnian miners might have to accept it but fight to minimise the damage. The Turkish delegate brought the only news of how militant workers had fought and defeated a proposed privatisation. Some of the Bosnian miners wanted more information - as they saw it, to avoid the mistakes made by others in the privatisation process - while other miners, particularly the working miners, wanted a categorical rejection of privatisation. The South African NUM representative outlined the Tripartite talks in which the NUM were involved with Government and Mine owners to solve problems, but also agreed that private ownership of mines was not good for miners. The Scottish TUC and General and Municipal Union delegates both outlined various aspects of the attack on the working class that had gone on under privatisation and urged the Bosnian miners, if they did choose to accept privatisation, to make sure that legislation was in place first to stop the worst aspects of destruction of workers' standards and employers' enrichment.

A Serbian delegate touched on the war, refusing to accept collective guilt for a war he had never supported. Milosevic was attacking the Serbian working class. A Hungarian miner described the great problems facing the working class. His union leaders supported privatisation and had tried to stop anyone coming to the conference. He stressed the importance of this and future conferences to exchange information and to begin to develop a leadership that could fight for the working class. He was sure that the contacts made at the conference would not be broken.

The miners proposed a statement (see below) which was not voted on when some delegates explained that they were not mandated by their unions and would have to take it back to their members. Conference delegates, especially the Bosnian miners, felt that the conference had been very useful. The miners felt very proud that their

union, despite the ravages of war, had been able to hold an international workers conference in Bosnia. Workers' Aid prepared Bosnian and English versions of a pamphlet containing 12 articles on the experiences of privatisation of workers in mines and other industries in Britain, Russia, Greece and Kosovo. It also contained an article by the socialist economist, Keith Gibbard, outlining the history of the global privatisation campaign. Cliff Slaughter wrote on the question "What kind of capitalism is coming to Eastern Europe". 100 copies of the Bosnian version were distributed to all the mines in Bosnia and to other unions.

**\*\*The conference was financed by British workers through appeals by Durham NUM and STUC.**

**\*\* Some delegates remained in Tuzla for a public meeting on the Monday night launching a new book Taking Sides Against Ethnic Cleansing in Bosnia - the Story of the Workers Aid Convoys. The meeting was packed out. The first person to speak from the floor was a Serbian journalist from Belgrade who asked Bosnians to forgive Serbs for what had been done in the name of all Serbs and which Serbs had been unable to stop. He hoped Bosnians would be able to help Serbs as fascism had to continue its attack on the working class, now against Kosovo and Serbian workers. The Tuzla citizens, proud defenders of multi-ethnic society (workers' unity) welcomed this anti-nationalist Serb with their hands and their hearts. Other speakers from the floor spoke of the working class solidarity carried out by Workers' Aid during the war. The miners President explained how this internationalism had helped them to see the way forward and explained to the audience about the weekend's conference with its representation from so many countries. The teachers' president reported that Workers' Aid had helped them organise the first post-war meeting of teachers representatives from across ex-Yugoslavia in 1997 and that the teachers were going to follow this up with an international teachers conference in Bosnia.**

**\*\* Both the conference and the book launch were featured on television, radio and in the press. TV coverage also went out on satellite channels to the refugee community in Europe.**

**\*\* On reaching home the Russian delegate gave a report to the Russian miners representatives who were blocked from travelling and they have sent an invitation to the Bosnian miners to visit Russia.**

## Comment on the Conference

The Iranian comrades responsible for initiating this journal made a big contribution to the Marxist movement in their analysis of the Iranian revolution. The terrible defeat of the Iranian revolution forced them to confront the inadequacies of the entire revolutionary movement. Many of those who pass for Marxists are still happy today to

wander through the "struggle" with the same bits of dogma that proved so useless to the Iranian working class. A willingness to confront this theoretical poverty is the starting point for collaboration, but it would be wrong to believe that because our past mistakes were so great and our efforts to overcome them are still so inadequate that to occupy positions of leadership in the class struggles will simply add to the list of disasters. The working class is pushed into struggles and tries to resolve its problems. The greatest disaster for Marxism is to stand aside from those class battles and learn nothing from them. Could the working class respond to the rise of fascism in Yugoslavia? Did we know nothing?

Marxism had been fought for decades in a struggle against Stalinism, establishing its counter-revolutionary role. In its final act against the working class, Stalinism in Yugoslavia allied itself with the open fascists and attacked the working class. Most of the left internationally fell silent, all tied in one way or another to the Milosevic's claim to be "defending socialist Yugoslavia". Marxist had to fight this accommodation to Serbian nationalism. Starting with a comrade inside Serbia this was done.

Did the break up of Stalinism open up a new opportunity for the working class to organise itself as an international class - in Europe, above all, to overcome the fifty year east/west division? You could not answer yes to this question and then see the working class in Yugoslavia smashed to pieces. Marxists had to work to find a way that the working class could organise itself to intervene against the counter revolution. The Workers' Aid campaign, while making many mistakes and completely inadequately theoretically prepared, did find a way to begin to do that.

The perspective that the death of Stalinism opened a qualitatively new period for the working class, and therefore for Marxism, was tested out in the Yugoslav war. Despite the military attack that the dying remnants of Stalinism and the UN unleashed against the Bosnian workers their unity has not been completely destroyed. What a different outcome than to Spain in 1936. And in the midst of the Bosnian workers' self defence Workers' Aid was able to bring the international working class onto the scene, not in large numbers but in sufficient force for elements within the Bosnian working class to begin to develop a perspective of turning towards the international self-organisation of the working class as the solution to their problems.

This is the statement the miners union proposed at the end of the 14-15th conference:

\* Analysing the discussion and experiences at the conference from workers around the world we have become convinced that privatisation is against the interests of workers and especially the miners of Bosnia and Herzegovina whose union organised this conference.

\* As a direct response to the globalisation of capital it is



necessary for workers to organise themselves on an international basis to oppose the privatisation process which is also internationally organised.

\* Following this conference we call for all workers' and trade union organisations who share our views to contact us and let us know their views. We will then organise a second international conference for everyone who has contacted us (time and place to be decided) at which we would propose the establishment of an international campaign for trade union solidarity with a committee to implement conference decisions.

\* We appeal to trade unions internationally to support the miners trade union of Bosnia and Herzegovina morally, politically and materially to enable us to continue to lead the fight against privatisation and to achieve our demand that our mines stay as public property, organised as a single public company. In this way miners and their union will have the biggest possible influence to defend the rights and social conditions of workers and their families.

To many "learned revolutionaries" this resolution will not seem very dramatic - they knew and understood these things years ago. These "revolutionaries", however, never have to deal with the problems that the working class has to confront.

A few weeks before the conference the Citizens Association of Lukovac, a mining town near Tuzla, organised a public meeting to discuss the Bosnian government's privatisation plans. 400 miners and their families attended. Workers attacked the government for failing to send any representatives to answer questions. The leader of the new Bosnian Socialist Party attacked the government for corruption but said he thought privatisation was inevitable. The President of the Bosnian TUC agreed with this. Miners then angrily attacked the TUC leader for having no plans to fight privatisation.

Behind the workers' anger was not just the future of the mines. Many factories have mysteriously ended up in the private hands of previous directors or people connected with government. Housing is also being privatised. Most workers live in apartments built with money from their companies, ie their money. These are now being sold and people are being evicted.

The miners at the Lukovac meeting echoed the anger and frustration of working people across Eastern Europe. The Bosnian miners' newspaper carried an editorial announcing the 14-15 March conference under the slogan "Let the voice of the workers be heard". (Not a small question for the Marxist movement which has, for the most part, been concerned only to make its voice heard). When the conference opened the chairman repeated this slogan. However, the first session of the conference showed the ideological and material pressure on the working class to prevent it finding its voice. The government spokesman's

speech was really prepared by international capital after all its experiences of privatisation over 20 years. The Bosnian TUC president's speech was really prepared for him by the big international TU Federations who have rushed into Bosnia, as they have done across Eastern Europe, to support the privatisation process (see the Workers' Aid pamphlet *How the International TU Organisations Supported the Ethnic Division of Bosnia and the Transfer of its Social Property to Control of Western Banks*). The attack on the working class in Bosnia is organised internationally by both the direct and indirect representatives of capital while the Bosnian working class is isolated and fragmented by four years of war and with access to information very limited.

The miners at Lukovac expressed their anger but how do they turn their basic understanding that they are being robbed into a coherent, organised, class voice? This was the central task for the conference. Does Marxism, even our very inadequate Marxism, have anything to contribute to this? Well, for a start the miners, concerned about the future of their mines, had called an international workers conference to discuss it. In other words, through our collaborative work, we had helped to start the discussion at the international level - the only serious basis for such a discussion.

The conference came about for many reasons but important amongst them were:

\*The surviving connection between the working class and the legacy of the partisan revolution made by their parents, a legacy expressed both in the opinion that the factories and mines belong to the workers and in the spirit of unity and solidarity in sections of the Yugoslav working class. It was this unity that the Stalinists bureaucrats had to destroy to push through privatisation. Their violence failed and the resistance to their attack, especially in the multi-ethnic mining communities, has actually sharpened the working class spirit.

\*The war time Workers' Aid convoy campaign began to restore, in the minds of some Bosnian workers, the idea of practical international solidarity.

\*Workers' Aid helped the miners visit workers in Britain to see for themselves the effects of capitalism. They visited destroyed mining areas of Britain and saw what privatisation had done. They visited Liverpool Dockworkers and saw what casualisation had done.

At the conference solidarity became a very practical sharing of experience and problems. Few people made the kind of speeches, full of noise and little else, that are usually found at conferences. This was a meeting of workers (some of them Marxists) trying to deal with big problems. A working miner, fresh from the pit, made the planned attack against the Bosnian miners very clear. The Bosnian authorities have decided that a natural gas pipeline from Russia will be extended to Tuzla and Zenica -

the two main coal producing and consuming areas.

The picture of privatisation given by the President of the Northumberland miners destroyed the image created by the government spokesman. As more and more reports were given the perspective put forward by the president of the Bosnian TUC - privatisation is inevitable so try to get the best deal - also began to be pushed aside. (Even though most Bosnians had cheered the TUC president when he attacked the government spokesman for corruption they all noted that when the government spokesman suddenly withdrew from the conference in the middle of the first afternoon, the President of the TUC got up and left as well, and they could be seen outside setting of together back for Sarajevo.)

By the morning of the second day the miners' leaders, who through their visits to Britain had already formed their own personal ideas of opposing privatisation, were ready to read out their statement from their whole union committee opposing privatisation as not in the miners' interests.

The conference and the processes of collaboration leading up to it had succeeded in giving the miners their voice, a working class perspective for a fight against the restoration of capital and the exercise of their own control over their mines..

The miners are already leading a campaign inside the trade union movement in Bosnia for a new democratic, independent leadership. Last year a miner stood for election against the President of the TUC. He was not successful at that point but the conference, televised across the country, will help other workers in other industries stand up against the robbery that they see taking place but which they had felt powerless to stop.

So the conference not only enabled the Bosnian working class to begin to find its voice, it also helped a section of the working class to raise a beacon of international organisation in its appeal to trade unionists world wide to contact them to develop a solidarity campaign. There were conference delegations from many countries but there were also messages from unions that could not come. One was from the Pakistan Trade Union Federation supporting the miners fight against capitalism. The appeal of the miners, an appeal for help and at the same time a message of internationalism, can become a pole of attraction for militant trade union organisations. It is vital that everyone fights in their own organisations for a response to the miners' proposal. Financial support for the Bosnian miners' union is also needed to enable them to lead this fight. They have been invited to Russia where hundreds of thousands of miners have not been paid for many months. This kind of coming together of workers is essential. Without it there can be no successful movement against capital.

The miners have said "no" to privatisation but with the natural gas pipe line on the drawing board this is not

enough. Capital would only buy the mines to close them. Resistance can be met by isolation and a freezing of investment. The need for a "workers plan" becomes acute. Such a plan requires concrete technical, economic and scientific knowledge.

One Bosnian has pointed out the need for producing glass in Bosnia which is in great demand. Tuzla has the raw materials. The question of "co-operatives", even on an international scale, comes up just as it has for the Liverpool dockers and other workers who capitalism deems "excess" to requirements. Such a strategy, however, can only be accomplished through the mobilisation of the working class against capital and capitalism. The miners' cannot make alternative plans without a fight for control over their resources.

But the way this "debate" arises is significant. The miners, with close allies amongst some economists, technical experts, etc., start to confront their problems, not with their eyes fixed on parliament, but on "their" resources. In the midst of social devastation there are natural resources, machines and human skills. Why shouldn't these come together for social benefit? Isn't it possible to see in this the necessary, intimate relation between the social(ist) and political revolutions? Solutions are not to be found "up there" in parliament which only presents itself as more and more an obstacle to doing what obviously needs to be done by working people themselves.

Both before and after the conference there has been a discussion about the nature of "social property". Yugoslavia's history is clearly different from the rest of the post WWII "socialist" states. The elimination of the capitalist class in Yugoslavia came about through popular mass mobilisation in opposition to Stalin's dictat unlike the imposition of Soviet rule through the Red Army in Poland, Hungary etc.

This imprint of the deep social movement in Yugoslavia in WWII, despite its political limitations and the subsequent incorporation into the Soviet bloc, was clearly seen in the different property relations that existed in Yugoslavia. Unlike the rest of Eastern Europe there was no state ownership. Instead there was "social ownership" with control formally exercised through workers self management. In reality the workers did not exercise control. This was taken over by the Communist Party, claiming to speak on their behalf. In 1994 this process of destroying the inner content of social property was taken a step forward when the Bosnian government nationalised most social property in order to "define ownership" - in reality in order to prepare for privatisation.

The Sarajevo economist told the miners they could not defend social property as it was already nationalised. Other people from the left have queried the miners' defence of social property on the basis that it was never really under workers' control.

These arguments miss the point. It could be seen at the Lukovac meeting and at the conference that miners feel the mines belong to them and in the present fight, in attempting to stop themselves being robbed, they are defining their relationship with the mines. But the challenge facing the miners' union, which until a few years ago was more a part of the administration of the mine than a representative of miners, is can it now turn to its members and to the wider working class. A campaign to defend social property can only advance if it is turned over to wider and wider sections of the class. Again, that is not something for us to simply speculate about. A campaign in the working class internationally to support their stand will encourage and strengthen the hand of the Bosnian working class to exercise growing participation and control over the campaign that has been launched at the conference.

Now, more than ever, Marxists have to confront our theoretical weakness, the lack of an adequate programme in the working class, the lack of answers to the problems such an international mobilisation of the working class requires if it is to be developed and sustained. But if we have begun to restore Marxism to its true relationship with the revolutionary class (not the revolutionary, thinking, "party" and the passive class) then clearly this work on programme cannot be done just by those who designated themselves as 'Marxists' or separate from the rebuilding, by the class itself, of its own international organisations including its trade union federations and its international.

Bob Myers. A member of Workers' Aid for Bosnia and Movement for Socialism

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Le socialisme est le seul but qu'une intelligence contemporaine puisse s'assigner.  
(Siniavsky devant ses juges)