

Blockades and strikes in Serbia

Editor's note:

As we went to press with this issue of the *SEER Journal*, the longstanding student protests over the collapse of the canopy at Novi Sad train station took a deeper turn with a protester being hit by a car and further groups of actors joining the students.

Zoran Stojljković, himself a university professor and a past president of UGS Nezavisnost (Independence trade union confederation), very kindly gave us his thoughts on the protests, their direction and their political potential. We are indebted to him and include these thoughts below as a broad introduction to what is currently going on in Serbia.

It is not an easy task to analyse events such as the civil disobedience and strikes in Serbia when they are only now entering their critical phase.

However, the analysis of 'pre-revolutionary situations', also using the example of Serbia, shows that, first, the existing order must be delegitimised and an image of a possible different world created. The collapse of the canopy at the Novi Sad railway station, with the loss of 15 human lives and a widespread awareness that the cause lies in incompetent and corrupt actions under the patronage of a regime which is not ready to assume the responsibility that it should, provides the tragic framework on which the accumulated anger and dissatisfaction are focused.

An actor in change in which trust could be placed was then found in the form of the student body.

The crucial third step is to take activism and create solidarity in action based on individual assessment of the likely outcome of the risks being taken and the level of solidarity that has been achieved. Threats of dismissals and salary cuts, or warnings that students may be left without access to loans and thus lose a year of study, cease to form an insurmountable obstacle in the face of the established unity among students and pupils, teachers and parents.

The key thing that the students did to prepare for a return to normality was to block President Vučić, refusing to negotiate with him on their demands, seeing him as a person without competence. The myth of an omniscient leader, an ultimate authority capable of resolving all problems, is thus being shattered. Refusing to be beaten down by 'anonymous passers-by unhappy with the crowds due to the blockades', and evidence that these were, in any case, organised provocations by party supporters and government officials, is an important blow to the regime's clientelist network and its inner circle. This galvanized the protests, spreading the blockade to all universities. Frustrated, dissatisfied and already repeatedly disappointed citizens then logically recognised in the students those who are 'persistent, incorruptible and those to whom the future belongs as our children' because it awakens our own dor-

mant consciences. And then they began to question institutions like the Prosecutor's Office, the Constitutional Court, the Public Media Service...

This time, the students are looking for allies within civil society – unions, professional associations, farmers and campaign organisations such as ProGlas. In old-fashioned, socialist vocabulary, they want to gather together an ‘alliance of peasants, workers and honest intelligentsia’.

With the duration and spread of the protests, the something that seemed impossible is becoming possible. And this something, like a general strike, has never happened previously in Serbia. This needs to be a serious, unified and strategically designed action: one that tests the will of workers and citizens through the growth of a readiness to call a halt in Serbia, via mass warning and solidarity strikes for fifteen minutes, extending to an hour or so a day, and then even longer.

Blockades and student assemblies and the decision-making that takes place in such forums represent an excellent form of self-organised protest action and a calling out of the institutions but, to coordinate wider protests and enter into some kind of negotiations with the authorities, it is necessary to have a few rotating representatives with a short, but imperative, mandate so that no one individual can be picked off.

The government will buy time, spin and gather ‘its own people’, but I do not believe that it is ready to provoke the sort of mass conflict which would result in tragic consequences for victims but which would, also, be a pretext for introducing a state of emergency.

Strikes and blockades, no matter how important they are, do not lead to key changes on their own, but they do clearly set the boundaries beyond which the regime must not go. They might, however, create a climate in which it is possible that a government able to make a convincing offer based on the values of democracy and social justice might yet come to power in free and fair elections.

An alliance of workers, young people and the middle classes is, operationally, complex but necessary for any democratic option and outcome. **United we stand, divided we fall** – a slogan created to promote the association and solidarity of workers – is more relevant in Serbia today than ever.

Zoran Stojiljković