

Protesting to Production

On 7 February 2014, on the streets of Tuzla, Bosnia and Herzegovina, activists from the antifascist organization *Front slobode* (Freedom Front), which bears the name of the Yugoslav partisan newspaper established after the liberation of Tuzla in 1943, circulated a manifesto among the 15,000-strong people's protest that had taken to the streets that day. The manifesto proclaimed:

On the fifth and sixth day of February, the people of Tuzla rose up against the criminal gang in power, which has been killing and looting us for over 20 years. Its end has come. The people, who have been fleeing into helplessness, blindness, and hopelessness, now see and face – a catastrophe!

Workers without pay and health insurance; students with no prospect of employment; demobilized soldiers on the brink of starvation and on the verge of madness; our mothers and fathers, sisters, and brothers forced to work in military bases in Iraq and Afghanistan; our pensioners rummaging in garbage bins looking for food.

And the gang in power? They have it all. The gang widens the divisions between us, to make it easier for them to steal our money. They blackmail us to give bribes and to behave corruptly for basic survival. The gang secures expensive loans and then

forces our children and grandchildren into debt and servitude. The gang lies when they say that we loot, when it is them who are looting. The gang beats us, teargases us, and uses attack dogs on us. The gang has robbed us of everything and has left us destitute! And this gang calls us scum.

Are we the scum for wanting to live honestly from our work? Are we the scum for wanting to leave our children what we have honestly earned?

We demand that:

- 1. The government which ordered the beating of the people to be removed.*
- 2. The police force responsible for brutally beating the people to be removed.*
- 3. Those who ordered and used brutal force against the people must stand trial.*
- 4. A force be established for civil protection of the people, which will maintain order and ensure that the gang does not destroy our unity.*
- 5. Salaries of political representatives be set at comparable levels with the salaries of workers in public and private sectors.*

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Arsenijević

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6. *Additional payments to government representatives and civil service workers be annulled.*
7. *Salaries for ministers following the termination of their mandates be abolished.*
8. *Fair social welfare to be provided to ensure a dignified life for all.*
9. *A people's committee be set up with the task to manage common goods and ensure: work and pay for all, health insurance for all, and food for all.*

These demands speak of the devastating impoverishment of people and of the brutality in the “peacebuilding” and “post-war reconstruction” of Bosnia and Herzegovina. They were written using words from the streets of Tuzla: the words of the workers on hunger strike, the words of the students, the words of our homes. Our words spoke of hunger, unaffordable medical treatment, despair, suicides, and factories turned into cheap labour camps. Yet these words were being spoken 20 years after the war had ended. Our predicament was rooted in the peace agreement that cemented the power of political ethno-nationalist elites –

“People are not responsible for a freedom that has been withheld from them, but they are for an un-freedom against which they failed to stand.”

Boris Buden

who organized concentration camps, genocide, and mass graves during war-time. The peace that ended the 1992-1995 war in Bosnia and Herzegovina had become a multiculturalist apartheid, in which ethnicity was reified as the only recognized identity for political participation. The ethno-nationalist elites continued their war-time looting of public assets, but now they were continuing their fearmongering by using democratized tools. When the workers returned from the trenches, they found that the factories which had been owned by them in the socialist Yugoslav self-management structure, were now being sold to private owners with bloodied money. The “transition into democracy” became synonymous with negotiations between international actors and the ethno-nationalist

elites around the privatization of the country's natural resources. "Political participation" became enforced ethnic victimhood. From Washington to Brussels, we were told this was the only way, which was possible.

Workers of five factories in Tuzla—DITA, Polihem, Poliolhem, Gumara, and Konjuh—decided to rise against this bloodstained larceny. To protect the DITA factory from being stripped of assets and closed down, the workers occupied the factory. Exhausted from being undermined by the private owner for three years who withheld payment for their labour, they decided to defend their livelihoods and their factory. Their message was clear: we are protesting in order to maintain production.

A new political axiom was born. The workers' demand was recognized as a universal demand. It brought the street together. This was now the protest.

Roses, rocks, and teargas – Postcard 1

The peaceful protest became a united push-back against the brutal violence used by the police. We survived the carnage of the war – who dares to claim the right to beat us now? Both rocks and roses were used to invite the police to lay down their batons and to join the people in the struggle for justice. The protest brought together broad section of the society and enabled the emergence of the previously censored speech of commonality. The claim that we live parallel lives, which never intersect, proved to be a lie. The protest showed that while you might be destitute, you are not on your own; it brought us all together, as bodies in movement; it reminded us that the ultimate barricade was the human body, and this collective body was now stopping the terror of peace. In this postcard, the police officers guard the SODASO building, which was the administrative seat of a big industrial conglomerate before the wars, but was later taken over by the ethno-nationalist bureaucrats and converted into government offices. By this point, the government officials had already resigned and fled the building, and the police were guarding an empty seat of power.

Solidarity – Postcard 2

Approaching the police cordon, I witnessed a mother, who was amongst the protesters, shouting at her son, a police officer: "You better watch out when you get home tonight!" As we moved towards the courts, I heard police officers shouting amongst themselves, some were laying down their truncheons. The solidarity that sustained our push-back against police violence meant that nobody was left alone. A friend and writer Šejla Šehabović





wrote about an anonymous woman who joined the protests: “She is not hungry, she has a secure pension, she is not unemployed, she is not on the margins of society. But she also did not stay at home to watch the despair of her fellow citizens from a respectable distance. When the police pulled out their truncheons and started to impose order on the backs of the citizens, she did not hide herself away. Attempting to protect one of the demonstrators who was being arrested for no reason, she offered to go with him into the police van. Most of the people who watched this scene thought that she was a professional mediator – it looked like she had done this kind of thing a thousand times before. But my dear woman of Tuzla leads a peaceful life. She has never been convicted of anything and has never previously had any contact with the police. There are people who do not need any training to offer to help other people. The man who was taken into the police van was not beaten that day. Because one young woman stood with him.”¹

The SODASO building in flames

The sight of the burning SODASO building surprised us and provoked feelings of shock and fear. It has, so far, proven to be impossible to establish how the building caught fire. At the time of writing, in early 2022, the building stands, charred and abandoned. It is an ambiguous site, a site of unease, a reminder of the incompleteness of power. As the empty seat of power was in flames, a decision had to be made – whether to remain at the site of protest, or to move elsewhere. Emina Busuladžić, who led the DITA factory occupation, said: “The SODASO building is ours, built with workers’ money. It is our building that is in flames, and so be it.” We were not counting the losses; we were counting the gains. So, we stayed at the site, we discussed the manifesto that we had previously circulated, and agreed that it should be read out. “On behalf of the people,” was all I added to the text as it was written, as I read it to the journalists who were waiting voraciously. Another



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important decision was made: to convene a citizen assembly, a plenum, that evening, open to all citizens, through which collective decisions and demands could be made and action taken, beyond any guarantees of leadership. The plenum became a form of self-organisation and a method of work through which, for months, citizens came together to deliberate and to articulate their demands. The threat of the protests legitimized the plenum. The following day, we returned to the site of the SODASO building to clean up. Charred and uninhabitable, it was still our building.

The backs of the postcards say that they were funded by the *raja* – the commonfolk – from Tuzla. A group of workers, activists, academics, and artists decided to create these postcards to communicate to others how proud we were for having united in our struggle against the socio-economic violence, and to invite as many people as possible to join us in standing against our unfreedoms. The legacy of the protest and plenums is more than just a memory today: it is a concrete physical and emotional infrastructure of a social bond that continues anti-capitalist struggle as a struggle against ethno-nationalist oligarchs. These postcards continue to circulate to remind us of this, and to invite us into taking a concrete stance in this struggle.

Endnotes

- 1 Šejla Šehabović, "Two stories of solidarity or..." available on: bhprotestfiles.wordpress.com/2014/02/13/sejla-sehabovic-two-stories-about-solidarity-or/

Pozdrav iz Tuzle

Projekat finansira raja iz Tuzle
Project is financed by the raja from Tuzla

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