

Montenegro: Five years after independence

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Following a referendum held just over five years ago, on May 21, 2006, in which a narrow majority voted to secede from the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro, the Republic of Montenegro declared itself independent. The population of the tiny republic of some 620,000 people favoured “independence” by 55.5 percent, bringing to six the number of countries formed from the former territory of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY).

Five years later, the social and political situation in Montenegro, and indeed in all other former Yugoslav republics, belies the false claim that the break-up of Yugoslavia into “independent” states represented the historic realisation of national self-determination and emancipation for the peoples of the region.

According to the Montenegrin statistics office, Monsat, the average wage in 2010 was just €479 [US\$683] a month, virtually the same as in 2009, when it was reported to be €463. A closer look at the breakdown by industry is more telling: while wages in the financial sector were almost twice the average at €891, and those employed in transport, storage and related industries earned €607, workers in the fishing industry, for example, averaged only €159 [US\$227] a month.

Putting these numbers into perspective, the Podgorica-based daily *Vijesti* reports on June 17 that the consumer basket for May 2011 was €773 and that the “average family” needs 56 percent of the average wage just for food. The average rent is estimated at €169, while in the capital of Podgorica, which has almost one third of the country’s population, a family can hardly find a place to live for less than €200 and this excludes the sky-rocketing costs of utilities.

If one takes a look at the data that focus on the working class, the widespread poverty and social deprivation become even more evident. In 2009, the latest available data, 6.8 percent of people were living below the “national absolute poverty line” or €169 per month for a single adult person. It was a steep rise from 4.9 percent in 2008, reflecting the effects of the international financial crisis, and it can be safely assumed that the worsening trend has continued since. At the same time, the minimum wage is €160, all benefits included. This means the government implicitly acknowledges that its minimum wage is below the poverty level—even for just one person with dependents excluded.

The June 19 edition of *Vijesti* reports on the situation in higher education, as the enrolment for the next academic year starts. Of some 6,500 prospective university students, less than 2,000 can expect to be state funded, while the rest will pay tuition fees between €500 and €2,500 per year, a huge drain on family budgets.

The government is able to maintain pressure on wages through

the cultivation of a huge “reserve army of labour”—the unemployed. Official unemployment for 2010 was just under 20 percent, with real figures undoubtedly much higher. The ever widening gap between the vast majority of impoverished citizens and a handful of “winners of the democratic transition” threatens to lead to social upheaval.

This was the warning issued by the general secretary of the Union of Free Trade Unions of Montenegro, Srdja Kekovic, on June 6, in *Vijesti*. He pointed to three hunger strikes that occurred during the last month, at the Duvankomerc tobacco factory, the Lenka shoe factory and the engineering and construction firm Novi Prvoborac, as clear signs of growing social tensions. The situation at Novi Prvoborac has recently escalated with workers partially occupying the company premises and threatening self-immolation. Coal miners and mineral water factory workers have announced their intention to go on hunger strike as well.

Without mentioning the role of the trade unions in the process, Kekovic sought to lay the blame on the government for privatisation of public property over the last 20 years. “The workers were told that privatisation will bring higher wages, production, and that it’s going to be efficient, transparent and just. Not a single one of those postulates has been realized”, he said. For all his talk of “public property being squandered”, “privatisations being complete failure”, “a small number of people enriching themselves at the expense of others”, etc., the union official’s own proposed course of action is entirely limited to pressuring the government to change its policies. Speaking of the widening social gap and resulting public anger, he says, “All of this could change quickly, if the government faced those problems in a proper way”.

Even a cursory look at the history and development of the ruling clique exposes this failed perspective of pressuring the government for reforms. For all the talk of democracy, Montenegro is still ruled by former Stalinist cadre, characterized above all by shameless opportunism and corruption. This is most evident in the person of Milo Djukanovic, head of the misnamed Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), a direct successor of the Stalinist Communist League of Montenegro and the only party in the Balkans to have enjoyed uninterrupted rule since the first “democratic, multi-party elections” in December 1990.

Having joined the Yugoslav Communist League in 1979, Djukanovic became the youngest member ever of its central committee in 1988. As with many other Stalinists, he seamlessly traded pseudo-Marxist rhetoric for virulent Great Serbian nationalism when he was installed in power during SFRY President Slobodan Milosevic’s so-called “anti-bureaucratic

revolution” in 1989.

The Western powers looked favourably on Milosevic in the 1980s as he pursued the structural adjustment demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and other international institutions, involving the privatisation of state property and the imposition of austerity policies that aggravated simmering ethnic tensions. However, the economic pressure exerted by the West laid the objective foundations for the dissolution of the unified Balkan state, which was accelerated by the changed world situation following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. The great powers sought to fill the resulting power vacuum. A race began amongst the transnational corporations to secure control over raw materials, labour and markets.

Despite warnings of a violent outcome, the break-up of Yugoslavia was encouraged by Germany, which abruptly recognised the independence of Croatia and Slovenia in 1991, and the US, which even more recklessly gave its approval to Bosnian secession in 1992.

Serbia became an obstacle to more direct imperialist control of a region considered strategically significant—both in terms of its geographical location and its oil, gas and mineral deposits—and formerly dominated by the Soviet Union. Milosevic rapidly joined Iraqi President Saddam Hussein on imperialism’s list of “Most Wanted”.

Milosevic’s role in the breakup of Yugoslavia was thoroughly reactionary, but his exploitation of Serbian nationalism differed little from the chauvinist policies of Tudjman in Croatia, Izetbegovic in Bosnia, and Kucan in Slovenia, all of whom adapted themselves—like so many other ex-Stalinist leaders in Eastern Europe—to the centrifugal social tendencies unleashed by the reestablishment of market economies. Milosevic’s former ally Djukanovic played a similar critical role, aggressively advocating Serbian chauvinism before switching, for entirely tactical reasons, to a separatist agenda while prime minister of Montenegro from 1991 to 1998 and then president to 2002. He then returned as prime minister in 2008, finally stepping down in December 2010.

While sanctions were imposed on Yugoslavia as part of the NATO war against Serbia, the Montenegrin republic, which was legally part of the same state along with Serbia, was cultivated as an ally against the Milosevic regime in Belgrade. Control of Montenegro deprived Serbia of its access to the Adriatic Sea and cut off most of its oil supplies. The tiny republic became the second main beneficiary of overseas US financial aid and was granted quasi-sovereign status, participating at United Nations meetings and those of the Stability Pact for South East Europe. Djukanovic was actively promoted by the European Union (EU) and the US, who described him as a “shining example” of a democratic reformer.

For a period, following the ousting of Milosevic and fearing for the stability of the more pliable government installed in Belgrade under Yugoslav President Vojislav Kostunica, the Western powers cautioned Djukanovic against holding a referendum on independence, even though they had encouraged the economic and political momentum for such a development. In the end, however, they decided to push for independence for both Montenegro and Kosovo. Following the vote for independence in 2006, officials

declared the EU would adhere to the result and that the “strategic goal” was “full integration into NATO and the European Union”.

For their part, the Montenegrin separatists saw their membership of the EU as a means of buoying the fragile economy, with President Filip Vujanovic saying he expected “fast economic development and an increase in living standards”. The main plank of their economic programme was the expansion of the tourism industry. As the WSWs pointed out at the time, “This will bring little relief to the majority of the Montenegrin population. Its small economy will be entirely at the mercy of the major global corporations and the international financial organisations”.

Having won “independence for Montenegro” in 2006, that is, freedom for the tiny elite of his cronies who enriched themselves through the plundering of state property to forge even closer ties with world capitalism, Djukanovic has tried to tone down earlier nationalistic rhetoric and substitute it with vague, liberal, “21st Century” values that Montenegro supposedly shares with the European Union and even NATO. His recent resignation reflects the growing difficulty of his DPS to square its dependency on Western imperialist favours with the growing social polarisation of Montenegrin society.

These are the people the trade union leader Kekovic approaches to beg for a few more crusts off their table for hunger-striking workers and their families. In the course of the past two decades the Balkan elites have demonstrated time and time again that they will stop at nothing, even fomenting nationalism and waging war, in order to preserve their class and compradorial interests.



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