

Enraged workers and youth protest austerity in Bosnia

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Over the last few days, workers and youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) have erupted in rage against the abysmal economic conditions and ethnic divisions imposed by the imperialist powers and enforced by the local political elite.

The country is still divided into two semi-independent entities—the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH), inhabited mainly by Bosnian Muslims and Bosnian Croats, and the Serb-dominated Republika Srpska (RS)—created by the US-brokered 1995 Dayton agreement that ended the four-year war provoked by the imperialist powers amid the restoration of capitalism in Eastern Europe.

The protests started last Wednesday in the former industrial town of Tuzla in the north of the country. Regular weekly demonstrations by several hundred workers, laid off from formerly state-owned companies that went through privatization and restructuring only to be declared bankrupt, were joined by youth, the unemployed and wider layers of the population. Many apparently responded to an informal call for “50,000 people in the streets for a better tomorrow” posted on social networks.

The protesters were appealing to the head of the Tuzla cantonal government to take part in talks about their grievances. “We wanted to talk to the government about restarting production, about the payment of our wage arrears, but nobody ever showed up,” said Hrustan Muminovic, one of the protesting workers quoted by Reuters.

Instead, the Tuzla government released the riot police on the workers, which sparked violent clashes and led to dozens of protesters being arrested and hurt. Some 17 policemen were injured and 11 police vehicles damaged.

Stunned by the reaction, the Tuzla government then called on “dissatisfied workers to seek to achieve their rights through syndical institutions, with whom [this]

government has had continually good cooperation.” It is notable that the trade unions are considered such reliable allies by these malignant institutions that they desperately peddle them to angry workers.

Undeterred by the police brutality, an even larger gathering of workers and youth gathered on Thursday in front of the Tuzla cantonal government building. “The people have nothing to eat, people are hungry, young people do not have jobs, there is no health care insurance, no basic rights. It can’t get any worse,” Maja, one of the protesters, told reporters.

That afternoon, the police deliberately spread misinformation about widespread looting—completely debunked the following day, including by those who were supposed to have been looted—and used this as an excuse for a crackdown. Several neighbouring police districts and special forces were mobilized. Thursday saw many more injured, with some 50 police reportedly hospitalized.

By Friday, much larger protests and demonstrations were triggered in more than 30 cities and towns across the country, including the capital Sarajevo and the towns of Mostar, Zenica, Bihac, Banja Luka and others. More than 10,000 people protested in Tuzla—population 80,000—burning the cantonal government and municipal buildings and stoning the court and prosecutor quarters. The graffiti inscribed on the demolished local government building included “Resignations, everyone,” “Death to nationalism” and “One people.” Reports suggest some 400 were injured nationwide on Friday.

“I think this is a genuine Bosnian spring. We have nothing to lose. There will be more and more of us in the streets. There are around 550,000 unemployed people in Bosnia,” said Almir Arnaut, an unemployed economist from Tuzla. The BiH unemployment rate is around 45 percent and 60 percent for young people.

In the capital, Sarajevo, the presidency and cantonal government buildings were set fire on Friday, while

police met several thousand demonstrators with tear gas and rubber bullets. The day before, Sarajevo Cantonal Premier Suad Zeljkovic had reassured the media, “In Sarajevo, no one has reasons for unrest and actions like this. There is not a single unpaid salary, nor has any sector of society have reasons for dissatisfaction.”

Friday, a young protester who joined the thousands that had ransacked Zeljkovic’s offices, told the media, “Enough is enough! Politicians have been drinking our blood long enough and now it is time for people to bring them down. If we shed some of their blood in the process, so be it!”

Demonstrations and protests have taken place across the ethnic divide. In Mostar, a town which witnessed some of the bitterest ethnic divisions during the war, both Croats and Bosnians came out in protest. Local government buildings, including city hall, local parliament and others were set ablaze, as were the headquarters of the two nationalist parties—the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) and Bosnian Democratic Action Party (SDA). In Zenica, the cars belonging to politicians were thrown into the river, as yet more government buildings were torched, to the chants of “Thieves” and “Revolution!” In the RS capital of Banja Luka, a peaceful demonstration of hundreds was held.

The political elite were caught completely off guard by the ferocity of the protests and the speed with which they have spread. By Friday, they were issuing statements seeking to blame local governments and divide the “genuine” protesters from the supposed “anarchist” or “hooligan” elements.

Croat member of the BiH Presidency, Zeljko Komsic, declared, “Unfortunately, that hooligan manner, destruction of property and burning have killed the very essence of the justified protests by the people.” Another Presidency member Bakir Izetbegovic, son of the late Muslim communalist leader Alija Izetbegovic, whilst admitting the people have good reasons to be frustrated and angry, condemned the violence and pleaded with protesters to recognise that government institutions were their institutions.

BiH Security Minister Fahrudin Radoncic tried to ingratiate himself with the protesters, declaring the unrest, a “people’s strike against the state mafia” and scapegoating the head of the cantonal Tuzla government, calling him a “political bandit.”

This is rich coming from Radoncic, who is described in a 2010 US State Department cable released by the WikiLeaks as a “powerful, reportedly corrupt, and

sometimes vindictive media mogul” with “ownership and direct control of the most widely-read daily newspaper in Bosnia,” who “is almost certainly seeking political status in order to secure protection from the investigation of his illegal business deals by wielding government influence over the judiciary.”

BiH Federation Prime Minister, Nermin Niksic, tried to slander the protesters, querying whether they were infiltrated by elements that “through burning might have tried to conceal evidence of the robberies they’ve made during the privatization.” This stands reality on its head, as it is the whole political elite, pushed by the EU and the US, that is responsible for criminal privatizations that have enriched a few tycoons while impoverishing the overwhelming majority.

Sarajevo Interior Minister Nermin Pecanac said Friday that he is “absolutely sure that hooligans were paid to ransack Sarajevo,” threatening that “the police will not let the hooligans beat them.”

Several cantonal governments, including Tuzla and Zenica, as well as Sarajevo cantonal Prime Minister Zeljkovic and the Interior Minister of Mostar, Mario Sulenta, have announced their resignation in the face of the popular upheaval.

While the protests have shown the strength of the justified working class anger and have shaken the political establishment, their biggest weakness remains the lack of political leadership fighting for the political independence of the working class, as a precondition for workers taking political power into their own hands.

In the face of the two-pronged attack by the authorities—who combine repression on the one hand, while trying to appease and offer limited reforms and personnel changes on the other—the question of political orientation is being posed with the utmost urgency. If the initiative is lost to the ruling class, they will undoubtedly use the most reactionary ways to divide the population, including by again appealing to the basest nationalist feelings that have devastated BiH and the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s.



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