

Balkan Voices: Anti-Austerity Protests in Montenegro Heat Up

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Translation and contextual information by Konstantin Kilibarda

Montenegro has been ruled by the same political party, the Democratic Party of Socialist (DPS), for the past 23 years. Along with the government of Belarus, Montenegro has the dubious distinction of being the only country in Europe that hasn't seen a change in government since 1989. In the past several months an unprecedented wave of protests has hit the country, with workers, students, NGOs and citizens mobilizing against the government. The growing movement has called for the government to resign by 15 May 2012 or the organizers plan to escalate their campaign of non-violent civil disobedience. The movement's demands include a call for an end to criminal privatizations, free post-secondary education and a serious confrontation with organized crime and corruption in Montenegro.

Below are two translated interviews with Janko Vucinic, head of the Niksic Steelworkers Union and a key trade union official in the Union of Free Trade Unions of Montenegro (UFTUM) that originally appeared in the independent dailies *Vijesti* (The News) and *Dan* (The Day). The first interview deals with the lead-up to the last mass protest held last week (5 May 2012). The second interview deals with the position of Montenegrin workers in light of May Day. Images accompanying the text and the accompanying captions help provide further context to the protest movement.



Vijesti Interview

Why is it time for the government to fall?

A government that doesn't work in the interests of the people, a government that isn't allowed to confront organized crime and corruption, a government that seeks to find fiscal room among the poor and which increases levies on pensioners, students and unemployed workers, a government that is basically a tool in the hands of the powerful for implementing a dictatorship over the people and for maintaining the regime cannot be our government. The fact is that they have left behind them nothing but empty towns, a destroyed economy and an army of tens of thousands of unemployed workers that have been left without

jobs; these are the consequences of the "tsunami" that hit us after 23 years of DPS-SDP rule and that cannot be undone easily, even if the government was composed of the world's biggest experts the task of undoing the damage would be difficult. However, the government of Prime Minister Igor Lukšić hasn't even tried to change the course of its predecessors. It hasn't taken even one action to show that it is interested in meeting the justified demands of citizens. Instead it has been careful not to move a step away from its neoliberal economic policies and has tried to avoid a confrontation with tycoons, mafia figures, bankers, etc. - that is its mentors who are effectively directing the government and who hold the final word in this state. I therefore don't see anything wrong in asking for the resignation of a government behind which stand those who've put their fingers in every significant business in this state and that are pulling the strings of the puppet government of Prime Minister Lukšić?. The time has come for this play to end and for the show to stop.



What do you expect from the protest march on May 5?

We expect that they will be lead by the energy of the youth who will be gathered in front of the University [of Montenegro]. We will march along the Boulevard of the Revolution and then we will turn onto the Way of Saint Peter of Cetinje, which wasn't accidently chosen for this march (nor was the already mentioned Boulevard of the Revolution). We expect that a large number of citizens will join us for a peaceful, respectful and civic march regardless of national, religious, political or any other belief or identity, since the majority want real changes. All of them want, if nothing else, to show that even in Montenegro the principle of changing governments is possible. They want to show the regime that governing shouldn't be an entitlement for those in power, allowing them to freely enrich themselves at the peoples' expense without any consequences, but instead to teach them that governing is a duty to serve the people.



Where there any difficulties in organizing the protests, including more pressure than before given that you're now calling for the fall of Prime Minister Igor Lukšić's government?

Immediately after the first protest we organized on 21 January 2012, when an enormous number of people turned out to express their discontent with the existing state in the country by gathering before the Government building [in the capital Podgorica], the regime was in chaos. From that time, the pressures and blackmail began as the government began applying all the known and lesser known strategies of the secret services. Regardless of such pressures, an even greater number of citizens showed up to the next protest, which means that we can only expect these numbers to grow. I'm saying this because the citizens have recognized that we're dealing here with the truly honest intentions of the organizers, that we're all fighting together for a much better, fairer and more democratic society - for a new and better Montenegro, a Montenegro based on social justice and one without arrogant power holders, criminal elites, and self-important officials who imagine themselves (and call themselves) the creators of the state and fathers of the nation. Let's not forget that the former Romanian dictator Ceausescu wanted to renovate the whole of Romanian history that preceded him, so it's time for us to help our would be architects sober up a bit as well.



As a lead up to May 5, protests were organized in a number of Montenegrin municipalities. Are you satisfied with the turn out and results of these actions?

Given the speed and spontaneity with which they were organized in towns across the state and considering all the pressures, threats and other forms of instilling fear in the poverty-stricken and traumatized population, the turnout was very good and represents a good overture for the upcoming protest march in Podgorica on May 5.

The government has yet to respond to the citizens' demands even after the protests. The latest statements by the head of the ruling party, statements by the Prime Minister and spokespeople clearly indicate that the government has no intention of considering resignations. How do you expect to realize your goals? Will the protests become more frequent or will you adopt another model?



By ignoring our demands and failing to respond to such massive protests only indicates the degree of fear within the ruling regime, since this is one of the methods of defense that was suggested to them by the *consiglieri* of the most powerful families in confronting the impoverished masses that have stood up. We are already indicating that if the government doesn't resign after our protests, the gatherings of citizens will become more frequent. They better get used to street actions in the same way the Prime Minister has suggested to the people that they need to get used to greater price hikes and levies. It seems clear that we're going to see more of both the former and the later unless something changes.

Prime Minister Lukšić? and the spokespeople of the ruling DPS are consistently repeating that these protests are 'political' and that if the organizers have political pretensions that they should enter the electoral arena and offer a program... How would you respond to the ongoing attempts of the Government to pull you into the electoral system?



Prime Minister Lukšić?, like a good student who has memorized the right answers, continuously repeats this same story, telling us to offer a program and enter the electoral arena. Our program was stated during the second protests, which includes removing extra surcharges on our utility bills, the annulment of bad privatization deals, to establish individual accountability for corrupt deals and illegally acquired wealth and that this money be returned into the state budget. Our demands also include free education at the post-secondary level and a return of the University's autonomy, which has come under the strong political and financial control of those belonging to the ruling coalition. It would be a lot easier for the government - if it implemented our program - to for instance take the illegally acquired €7-million that a small group

received as kickbacks from the privatization of Montenegrin Telekom and in this way fill gaps in the budget. Instead, the government has chosen to cowardly find a euro here and a euro there by increasing levies on students, pensioners, etc. Lukšić is too afraid to go the more honest route. This is one case of high-level corruption that the public is familiar with, but how many more millions have gone into private pockets for which the public has no idea and will probably never find out. That is why our program includes a full investigation into the past and to return all illegally acquired funds into the state budget. In order to do this, key people in key institutions need to be finally changed - but Lukšić is not allowed to change them. That is why it's better for him and for us that he go. As far as the electoral arena is concerned, I believe that the time will soon come when that game will no longer be played according to rules dictated by the DSP-SDP's version of democracy; a version that includes beatings, threats, and pressures. We need free and fair elections that will reflect the real electoral will of Montenegro's citizens.



If your wish for the Government's resignation was realized, do the protest organizers have a further plan of action?

Our strategy and further plans of action are dictated by the citizens themselves who gather with us and for whom we're doing all this. Whatever their desire and mood, that is how we will define our joint positions and determine our further strategic moves and we won't let up. This government, whose resignation we're asking for, is the product of a longstanding dictatorship presided over by a single regime. This is why we need to remove the source of the problem, which means that simply asking the government to step down and then calling for new elections under these circumstances wouldn't result in any progress.

This week trade unions did not mark May Day. The UFTUM did not do so because of the planned May 5th protests that were being organized, while the [pro-government] CTUM did not do so because of planned meetings with the Prime Minister on May 8. What is your assessment of the status of workers in Montenegro?

It's been many years now since there were workers, I mean those that fill the budget, so because of this we can't even speak of worker rights. Today getting a job is akin to winning the lottery in Montenegro, though even then it's hard to keep one's job. Employers are using this situation mercilessly in order to ensure that all former rights that workers had are eliminated. Now it's mostly just a matter of survival, which the regime has imposed on us. The legalized theft of public property in the name of "privatization" has destroyed our economy and decimated the number of workers in this country. The rights of those workers that have remained have been eroded through the stipulations of employment legislation. This legislation, it has been revealed because they bragged about it, was often written by foreign tycoons who

sat with the former Prime Minister in order to create for themselves, here in Montenegro, a classical field upon which to exploit workers and to transform them into precarious laborers. All of this was justified by saying that such measures would help attract foreign investors.



We in the UFTUM have attempted through all forms of institutional and trade union activity to protect worker interests, but the effects on the government's course of action were minimal. Given that the "social dialogue" has effectively been little more than the imposition of the thoughts and positions of the other social partners [i.e. the government and employers], we soon understand that our participation in such discussions was purely decorative. Given that we're not as young and pretty like our colleagues in the [pro-government] CTUM, we've decided to move to the streets in order to defend worker rights and to try to change the current position of workers through protests. Let's not forget that it has been the working class that have been identified as the largest losers of the transitional process. Because of the protests planned for May 5th, we cancelled our May Day rally, which we've organized every year since we appeared on Montenegro's trade union scene.

Dan Interview



What is the situation of workers on May 1 and do they have any reason to celebrate this day for workers?

In Montenegro, May 1 has for a long-time now ceased to be a workers' holiday in the real sense of the word. I believe that many young people don't even know the history of this holiday and it seems that the

older ones have forgotten what happened in Chicago in 1886. At that time in Chicago, workers were struggling for an eight hour workday, something that many of us in Montenegro who were lucky enough to keep our jobs no longer have. Unfortunately, the truth is that here the wheel of history has gone backwards, and that we now have in Montenegro the same type of capitalism that was actual back then in Chicago. It's very similar to the klepto-capitalism that we have here at the moment.

It's definitely true that Montenegro's workers have no reasons to celebrate because getting a job has become similar to winning the lottery, while the position of those who work has been brought down to mere survival since whatever is earned is only sufficient for the most basic needs (i.e. for basic biological survival). What is currently happening to Montenegro's workers is more than sufficient grounds for studying the basic principles of how capitalism functions in its initial and most brutal forms. This is a situation in which workers have no protections, no social security and when capital is accumulated on the maximal exploitation of precarious labor.



What future awaits workers and can they fight for a better position?

Looking at all that is happening, one can conclude that workers practically have no future to look towards in so far as substantive changes aren't made soon. We are facing a tough struggle to preserve whatever little remains of secure jobs and to maintain the current level of income, which is already insufficient for the normal maintenance of families. It's no longer a question of whether or not we can fight for a better position, we've been left with no choice and we have to struggle at any cost since the current situation is unsustainable and things can't really get worse than this. We've been thrown into this desperate situation by criminal privatizations that have destroyed our industry and left workers without jobs. Our former Prime Minister took care to ensure that this situation would only be perpetuated in the future, apparently in order to attract foreign investors, by signing into law liberal tax laws and flexible employment legislation with foreign tycoons. Of course, these laws were tailored to their needs, which effectively turned us from people with secure jobs to precarious laborers, all the while we're expecting to fill the gaps left in the budget by these liberal tax laws. You can imagine Peter Munk or Oleg Deripaska sitting on their mega-yachts in Montenegro, chatting away with Milo [?ukanovi?, the former Prime



Minister and current head of the ruling DPS] and laughing at those 'cowards' in Montenegro who work a whole month for €300-400 while trying to return mounting debts.

How many workers have been left without jobs during the transition and how do they live today?

If we consider the Labor Law of 2008, which introduced as a rule fixed-term employment contracts and whose other provisions effectively freed the hands of employers to exploit and threaten workers in any way imaginable, then in reality we've all lost anything resembling a secure job. We will all then join the army of tens of thousands of workers that have lost their jobs during the transition. Since the new labor law was passed in 2008, there have been almost no contracts for permanent jobs signed. The stipulations of this law were slightly altered last year thanks to the initiative of our trade union, but an enormous space has nevertheless been left for employers to manipulate workers.

How are workers living today? Every good host in the village maintains a cow by ensuring that it doesn't go hungry and that it is housed in warm and dry conditions. Today in Montenegro, there are many people who cannot afford for themselves such conditions. So how can we speak of anything else, like buying a book maybe, of buying some normal clothes other than on the flea market, or of thinking of traveling somewhere and to see a bit of the world. For the majority of us such things are mission impossible. All that's left is to try to feed ourselves and to make sure that we're good enough to see another tomorrow, and if we have the chance to hold a job to work for our bosses. It's something like the life of machines or in a hen house.



Who is responsible for the closure of factories and the loss of worker rights?

The misguided and manipulative policies of those who've ruled the country all these years is to blame. But all of us are also partially responsible who've allowed them to do this to us. We only really woke up once everything was gone. It took us a long time to realize that we've been tricked, since there were always some other "more important" questions on the horizon, including questions around the state, the flag, disputes over the church, identity issues, debates around the anthem. Now that all of us are listening to the same hymn, the majority of us with "torn pants and empty pockets" alongside those who've landed on the lists of the world's richest leaders, we've begun to realize that those of us at the bottom are wearing donkey's ears. Now we need to remove those who've made donkeys of us and bring down those who've placed themselves on these lists of millionaires. We can't achieve such a goal through "social dialogue."



What will the UFTUM do to defend the interests of the working class?

The UFTUM has tried to defend worker interests through all institutionalized forms. However, the result of all these efforts was minimal. In 2008, we warned about the potential consequences of the incoming, neoliberal labor law. We denounced the criminal privatizations that were essentially little more than the legalized plunder of the people. We also noted the consequences that would follow, though we were misunderstood at the time and the government labeled us as enemies of the state.

Given that the "social dialogue" was little more than the imposition of the thoughts and opinions of the other social partners, and that we were constantly relegated to a decorative role, even though we're not so pretty to help with the decor, we've decided to move our struggle to the streets and to try to change the current status of workers in this country from that of the transition's biggest losers.



Can we expect a continuation of this social flame and why?

The social fire has spread because life in Montenegro has become unsustainable and unsupportable for the great majority, excluding the privileged. We're witness to the fact that everyday becomes harder. Instead of helping the people, the government is raising new levies, instead of meeting their demands, it calls on citizens to enter the electoral arena, instead of standing on the side of the people it is firmly holding the hands of large capital, tycoons, mafia figures and bankers who are jointly robbing us and taking away with them social property.

I don't see anything wrong with the fact that on May 5th we will be calling for the resignation of the government. This government has shown that it is not interested in reducing our utility bills, that it is not interested in ending corrupt privatization deals, that it does not want to establish individual responsibility for such privatizations and the kickbacks that accompanied them, or to meet the students justified demands for free post-secondary education. Even though the government's resignation is the first step, the second will be taking down the regime that brought us out into the streets in

the first place.

The social fire in Montenegro was lit a long time ago. It was started by those who've sold this country to foreign and domestic tycoons, without choosing means in accumulating their millions. I'm sure those millions they've managed to steal will burn up in the fire that they themselves have set.