

***The Bridge Never Built. The Collapse of the Union Movement Initiative and  
Workers' Marginalization in Serbia (1988-1992)***

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## Introduction

[Workers] are forced to think about pure survival, and they are constantly reminded on some sort of patriotism. They are in a dilemma whether to deal with their own interests or to follow politics imposed from above. People are used to monolithism, so democracy without the right information causes confusion<sup>1</sup>.

[During the workers' protest on Vidovdan, on June 28 1992, after the introduction of UN sanctions against FRY] I was in one of the (workers') protest committees, formed with the purpose to demand from Slobodan Milosevic to resign. However, [after looking him up personally] when the chairman of our committee, otherwise an Academic, apologized to Milosevic because we are disturbing him, I smoked two cigarettes and I decided that that should be all my contribution. (Milan Nikolic as quoted in 'Tek smo poceli' UGS Nezavisnost 2006)

If for anything, organized workers' and unions participation in the period of 'system change' in Serbia is remembered solely for its affiliation with the controversial Serbian national mobilization. Many plants and workers actively participated in the Serbian 'happening of the People' of 1989. In contrast to other Eastern European countries, the most unusual feature of the Serbian 'national', 'democratic' 'anti-bureaucratic' mobilization was that the attempt to redefine the political community and its central institutions was initiated, controlled and carried over by the League of Communists of Serbia, and its emerging leader, Slobodan Milosevic. Systematic analyses on the actual impact of 'nationalism' on the trade union movement, along with other processes of democratization and economic transformation are absent from the scholarly literature.

This chapter assesses the changing (or new) practices and changing (or new) organizational forms within the Serbian trade union movement, during the years of democratization, redefinition of the political community and economic transformation. The main aim is to show how economic recession, half-hearted restructuring and democratization, and especially the Serbian attempt to redefine the political community and war affected the formation of the Serbian labor movement, and on the other hand, how trade unions and organized workers responded to challenges and actively participated in the fluid institutional space, and in the construction of the new space.

The topic of this chapter is the changes within the Serbian trade union movement in the period 1988-1992. In more analytical terms, the subject of analysis is the self-positioning of trade unions in the new arena, which includes changes in the organization, strategic and collective action in accordance with the interpretation of the external environment and internal organizational adjustment to it. Empirically I focus on the organization of the peak level trade union (federation), and on the workers in the metal industry and their organizations, especially in the Belgrade industrial basin. As I will later show, metal workers in capital-intensive firms near Belgrade were in terms of structural and associational power in the most beneficial position, with emerging new opportunity structures, such as the access to

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<sup>1</sup> 'Negde izmedju' Contemplations of Nebojsa Savic, Rad 26 February 1993  
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most visible public space and attention of the media.<sup>2</sup> The paper relies on trade union documents, newspaper articles published in Serbia in the 1988-1992 period, short interviews with workers and union officials from trade union journals, workers' diaries, as well as recent interviews with union representatives, labor activists by the author.

The argument of the chapter is that the failure of the Serbian union movement stemmed from aggressive centralist state policies, dictating instrumentalization, façade inclusion and marginalization of trade unions. Nationalism and increasing economic deprivation due to isolation and war was a detrimental force, undermining workers' collective identity and solidarity. On the other hand, the democratic and economic reform initiative and preparedness and knowledge for a significant role in decision-making within the union were weak. Such an outcome contrasts starkly to Poland and Slovenia<sup>3</sup>. In Poland, the two main trade unions were the greatest social forces which were central to the (re)creation of democratic political authorities. Such an involvement, along with great economic crisis, however, decreased the unions' capacities to deal with strategies of economic interest representation. Finally, in Slovenia organized labor was crucially needed and therefore included in the political and economic reform process. Yet, in contrast to both Poland and Serbia, Slovene unions had the advantage to operate with responsible but dependent democratic political authorities. It was only here that unions could fully concentrate on and meaningfully participate in economic deliberation and interest representation.

The chapter is structured in the following way. In the first part I focus on the period of 1988-1990. I describe in more detail the effects of the Serbian late communist attempt to redefine the political community, political and economic opening and its interrelation with changes in the national level trade union organization, on one hand, and workers' and unions' participation in public life. In the second part, which concentrates on the period of democratization in 1990-1991, I assess the reform of the existing trade union, and the emergence of new trade unions, as the impact of democratization and economic transformation. I also pay attention to (new) available social coalitions for workers, as well as the limits of worker self-organization. Given the extreme structural vulnerability of labor, aside from the exit option, I argue that there were two coalition-making options for organized workers: internal coalitions with the managerial strata and a paternalist coalition with the political elite, depending on the plants' position in the economy and its political weight. In the last, third part, I outline the effects of economic and political crisis as the conditions of absolute deprivation and marginalization of workers. In the concluding section, I summarize the main characteristics of Serbian trade union movement as it was by 1992. The metaphor of the bridge which was never built in the title, symbolizes the gap between the peak level organization on the one hand, and plant level unions, grassroots worker initiatives on the other. Before that, in this introductory part, I shortly outline the conceptual and analytical frame and introduce (Serbian) late communist trade unionism to the reader.

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<sup>2</sup> A second reason, following from the previous statement, is that we have the most available data on these protests.

<sup>3</sup> This is shown in the other two empirical chapters.

After 1989, trade unions in Eastern Europe, as organizations mostly inherited from and related to the discredited (communist) past, have lost (some) institutional bases, but certainly had distinctive organizational legacies, and were considered legitimate (or not). Moreover, they faced systemic constraints, the need to adapt or to change in accordance to the expectations of the new environment, a recognized need for self-reform by their own leadership. The period connecting the last years of socialism and first years of post-socialism is, as Campbell and Pedersen warn, a dynamic sequence of time filled with a process of struggle among different actors, where some try to preserve positive institutional elements of the past, while others try to dismantle them (Campbell & Pedersen, 1996: 209). That is, this period can be considered as decisive in respect also to the establishment of new organizational principles of existing organizations such as trade unions, and their recognition by other actors and organizations, i.e. institutionalization of roles, within the new political and economic system.

Trade unions had to face a few challenges connected to the system change from communism to market democracy. The first, which is relatively well discussed in the literature, was economic transformation, meaning industrial restructuring and definition of ownership rights. Since it affected severely industrial workers (job losses, insecurity and lower wages), we expect that industrial restructuring also affected (negatively) unions. For unions it was a special challenge to establish the principles of economic interest representation between defensive bread and butter unionism and responsibility for the economic reforms. Second, democratization and liberalization allowed greater participation of unions in public life, and new modes of influence (cf. Berins Collier 1999). A constraint in the new democratized arena was the issue of relations with political parties and inter-union relations. Finally, the issue of the redefinition of the political community, nationalism and inclusion in constitution making policies could make a difference for unions<sup>4</sup>.

I understand the trade union movement both as an expression of workers' self-organization (especially on the workplace level) but on a holistic-systemic level, the national peak level organization is an intermediary interest organization. Intermediary interest organizations (Möller Jentsch 1985, Schmitter, 1974) have general roles on the systemic macro level; they are organizations which (are required to) adapt to changes in the environment, and strive to survive (on the meso level). Finally, on the micro level, trade unions have membership functions: they need to adapt to the demands of the membership, both member organizations and the rank-and file. Such a conceptualization allows analytical differentiation among trade unions in ideal typical, but static terms. On the one hand, a union movement might be an outcome of bottom-up initiatives stemming from strong plant based organizations with tight relations with rank-and-file. On the other end of the spectrum, a union movement can be a highly systemic organization, initiated from 'above', from a peak level organization close to political and economic decision making on the highest level, and which establishes/organizes plant level organizations. Needless to say, the reality is in between these extremes, but with significant variations across national settings.

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<sup>4</sup> For historical examples of the detrimental influence of nationalism and war see the literature on unions in Western Europe before WWII (e.g. see contributions at Katznelson & Zolberg 1986, for Britain see Rubin 1984, Hoague et al. 1940, Fraser 2008).

From a dynamic perspective, important for the empirical assessment of union movement formation, the national union movement, a 'union regime' (Hancké 1993) its structure, functions and organizational principles is understood as the outcome of the three processes (micro, meso and macro), especially as the outcome of the interaction among plant level and peak level trade union organizations. This is in accordance with the observation that in early post-communist countries the plant and the peak level union organizations are the most active (Thirkell et al. 1998). In other words, the formation of the trade union movement on the organizational level is assessed as the outcome of (a.) pressure, interaction and adaptation of trade unions to grand processes of change and its agents (state building /nationalism, economic transformation; democratization); (b.) as an outcome of national level and plant level unions' interaction – including workers' self-organization and interaction with the peak level organizations.

What kind of organizations were late communist trade unions? To what extent were trade unions in late communist Serbia comparable to their counterparts in the West? Under the Yugoslav self-management decentralized system with fragmented labor, trade unions did not play an important role in organizing workers. During communism, Serbian trade unions did not have a significant say neither in the workplace nor an influence on policy making. Since their role was to foster 'worker self-management', trade unions were not conflict generating but a pacifying body. Instead of interest representation and collective bargaining, trade unions were among the responsible 'subjective', 'socio-political forces' necessary for self-managerial- socialist system stability and growth. The top occupation of Serbian trade unions on the plant level was provision of food and consumer goods to workers; to a significantly lesser extent (!) it was social protection, electoral activities, recreation and organization of excursions (Marković 1989: 86). In the 1980s, trade unions in Serbia had marginal political influence, their constitutional role in 'production development' and 'relations in production'; distribution of income, economic policy issues; and employment was rather declarative (cf. ibid.). Workers relation with trade unions on the workplace level was either weak, or in hard times, critical. In a self-management system, where officially workers were in power, trade unions did not organize strikes, but (mostly) strongly opposed them. Industrial conflicts and more broadly, industrial actions of workers in Yugoslavia and Serbia, up until late 1980s happened on the plant level, mostly within work organizations, without the participation or support of the trade union. Striking workers sometimes confronted the trade unions together with representatives of institutions at the site of labor. Finally, on the higher Yugoslav, and republican levels, trade unions were part of a horizontal rotation game of the political elite: trade union leaders could expect to sit at a different, more important position of the federation after the end of their term of office in the union (Goati 1991: 443-4). The reform of the trade union, its transformation to an 'independent' interest organization started with a strong normative claim: a must to 'return' to authentic representation of workers interests.

### ***1. Serbian workers' don't leave socialism behind? Economic liberalization and workers' and the trade unions' 'inclusion'<sup>5</sup> into the Serbian state building project***

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<sup>5</sup> Inclusion denotes participation, both as a reactive involvement, and an authentic, defined 'voice'

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## 1.0. Economic transformation, liberalization and weak unions

By 1988, late communist Yugoslavia and its constituent republics made a full turn to IMF advice, and started to introduce anti-inflation legislation, strengthened federal administration, the role of the central bank and the market. New regulations introduced privatization, bankruptcy and enabled massive lay-offs. In Serbia, as well as in Yugoslavia, most of the large industrial plants were in debts. Since firms were forced to appear on the market without state protection, many large plants could escape closures if their debt was spread, or 'socialized' with the balance of other firms. The new monetarist policies introduced the possibility of plant closures and mass layoffs in some industries very real. In such situation, the industrial workforce was in an extremely vulnerable situation.

Serbian trade unions did not participate meaningfully in economic decision making during the years of intensive economic reforms in 1988-1990. Partly this was the case since decisions on the economic reforms were decided on the Yugoslav federal level, after protracted and difficult negotiations among republican leaders. In 1989 until early 1990, only the Yugoslav federal trade union attempted to negotiate with the federal government. The federal union was however unprepared, unskilled and lacked the necessary knowledge to negotiate with the federal government. Moreover, the last reformist Yugoslav Markovic government did not recognize trade unions as fully legitimate organizations to negotiate with. [ADD ref]

Public life in late communist Yugoslavia and Serbia was liberalized to an extent. As an outcome of this process, the communist party control over industrial enterprises relaxed, but did not disappear. With the shock of economic austerity measures and political opening, a new space emerged for worker participation and discontent.

### 1.1. Workers' mobilization...

In a late industrialized patriarchal country, as it was the case in Serbia, a vast legitimacy of the communist party rule throughout the communist period was based on the welfare of male industrial workforce. The rise of nationalist discourse in late communism was accelerated with the precarious position of Serbia in the federation, but also due to the fact that ethnic Serbs lived in different parts of the communist Yugoslav federation. 'Nationalism' was additionally spiced with the feelings of insecurity and dissatisfaction due to the economic austerity measures, wage freezes and threat of mass unemployment.<sup>6</sup> The self-perceived precondition of the newly elected communist leader, Milošević's project for the re-building of the communist Serbian state was the mobilization and creation of 'people's unity' of all 'progressive forces' for the 'greater good'. The by-product of the 'homogenization' process was 'differentiation': to

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<sup>6</sup> The original effects of the original introduction of market like economic changes on the existence of workers in 1988-89 is forgotten, and never received the sufficient scholarly attention, especially by local scholars. The anti-inflation legislation, and strengthening the federal administration and the role of the central bank affected very negatively especially the most vulnerable, non skilled industrial labor. The introduction of real interest rate policy offered little incentive for small businesses to counteract unemployment. There was also a tax rebellions by republican governments, which refused to pay to the federal state, also in order to protect local funds in order to preserve their welfare function. (Woodward 1995: 352-3)

oust the opposition from all leadership positions, and seating supporters in their places. Worker organizations, trade unions were not exempted from taking stances on the general processes: unions were affected, and necessarily participated in them. Most importantly, support for the chairman Novica Filipovic was withdrawn and a mounting pressure for the recall of Radivoje Mihajlovic from his office as a member of the Presidium of the Trade union Council. In 1989, informal pressure was exercised also on the union secretary, Dragoljub Dragosan to resign<sup>7</sup>.

In the period of great economic and political reforms of the late 1980s, in the period of inventing remedies to the crisis workers felt marginalized. The only occasion when workers' voice could actually reach the public were strikes and public protests. The characteristic feature of Serbian strikes is that, in the absence of legal regulation of industrial conflict, these can be rather termed as strike-protests, rather than 'wild cats' (cf. Arandarenko 1996: 197).<sup>8</sup>

In 1988-89 was the peak of strikes in communist Serbia<sup>9</sup>. The strikes in Serbia in 1988-1989 were better organized, and they also lasted longer than in earlier periods: the relative majority of strikes lasted longer than one working day. Newspaper articles on 1988 strikes in Serbia<sup>10</sup> inform us about the repertoire of the protesters, and symbols used during workers' collective action; actors involved aside from workers; the role of trade unions in these protest events, as well as about other organizational forms of protesting workers, the demands of strikers and the perceived cause of strike, but also about the outcome of the strikes.

Among the incentives of strikes, economic grievances were listed among the main incentives of collective action, such as 'delay in salary', 'falling living standards' or framed as 'price hikes'. There were however other types of incentives too. I categorized the additional incentives as political; grievances caused by the management or organization/institution; or other. Political reasons were also listed among as the straight reason for workers' action in Serbia (e.g. 'slow resolution of problems in society'). In some cases, according to workers, the management practice triggered the protests.

Organizationally, in some instances, existing plant level trade unions took active part in organizing strikes. This was so in more than one quarter of cases, with almost equal number of strike actions where workers self-organized<sup>11</sup>, and usually established own strike committees. Strikers in few cases attempted to mobilize other workers directly calling them to join.

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<sup>7</sup> E.g. 'Serbian Trade Union Council discusses work stoppages' *Tanjug* Belgrade March 25 1988. See: *Uzaludni zapisi* a trade unionist diary.

<sup>8</sup> With the introduction of strike legislation nevertheless the strike routine did not change much – also since in many instances workers would protest or strike without trade union involvement and would not respect regulations.

<sup>9</sup> Compared to the 1986 level (which again represented a peak) for 1988 it was an increase in the numbers of strikes of 208%, while in terms of participants it was an increase of 441%; for 1989 the respective numbers were 284%, and 892%.

<sup>10</sup> For the strikes in 1988, I used information from 104 newspaper articles on 21 strikes or worker protests. Although these are not representative of all strikes, I believe that drawing tentative conclusions are possible even from biased sources, as it is the case with media.

<sup>11</sup> for 8 strikes, or 38% there was no information

The demands of all strikes included pay increase or payment of bonuses. The variation in demands after this is extreme. In Serbia, during five strikes workers demands were formulated in the predominantly 'official' communist spirit, that is, in many respect following the official discourse of the Serbian League of Communists, such as: calling the League of Communists to oust those responsible for the crisis; stopping of 'counter –revolution' in Kosovo and further disintegration of Yugoslavia; reform of LCY as the workers vanguard. Interestingly enough, in all these cases the strikes were the best-organized, with plant level trade unions being the main organizer, and communist activists actively involved in formulation and interpretation of demands. In the remaining cases, workers more often confronted management and local political or trade union functionaries – demanding resignations, a more just distribution of incomes, vis-à-vis 'bureaucratic structures' in the plant. This suggests strong influence of official intermediary organizations on public statement raised on behalf of workers in Serbia. There was only one authentic demand of workers, formulated by the workers of Rakovica (IMR). The exceptional proposal was to create a workers chamber in the parliament – in order to institutionalize producers' say in politics.

In terms of symbols used, the most-characteristic march-like rallies, usually organized by the plant level trade union included a parade like march with few workers in the first row, holding the picture of Tito, party and Yugoslav flags. Characteristic chants included 'You betrayed Tito/the people' 'Down with bureaucracy' 'We want bread.' In the big protest rallies, workers referred to themselves as 'we the workers of the plant', but also as 'the people'.

The repertoire of workers' action showed little variety. The elementary collective action was 'work stoppage' or 'gathering within the enterprise premises': the protests presumably all started in this way. Serbian workers in some cases also marched to public squares, gathered in front of buildings of political institutions or local officials, or gathered in public halls. I found only one additional tactic of Serbian workers: formulation of an ultimatum and threats, and sending letters to officials.

In the case of public rallies, interaction among workers and rather conciliatory management or state representatives happened in a tense atmosphere, with workers jeering and whistling to officials addressing them. The negotiating bridge between the standpoints in Serbia were either the strike committee, composed of highly skilled workers, or plant level trade union leaders who enjoyed the trust of the workers. The strikes caused in all cases immediate negotiations. In three cases, workers demanded Slobodan Milošević<sup>12</sup>. In terms of the outcome, the Serbian strikes of 1988 were successful. In Serbia many strikes ended in immediate or promised wage increases, without thorough

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<sup>12</sup> Among which, there were the two famous strikes-protests by two separate plants of the Rakovica metal workers where, according to a Serbian social scientist, Nebojsa Popov, Milosevic transformed hungry workers into obedient Serbs (cf. Stanojevic 2003). Interestingly enough in the third case when female workers employed in a Belgrade textile (wool) factory were protesting with a similar repertoire, and demanding 'Slobo', the new Leader did not find it necessary to come. 'Potka od sto rupa' *Borba* November 11 1988.



negotiations; more often however, they ended in partial fulfillment of demands. In the least successful minority of cases, the results were only new negotiations but also plant level investigations were initiated on ‘security’ issues with the involvement of the military related ‘Committee for People’s Self-Defense and Protection’.<sup>13 14</sup>

An available study tells us that in 90 percent of cases the incentives of strikes in 1989 were related to incomes; but other incentives were also present, in almost 5% such as strikes against the intervention measures; dissatisfaction with distribution within the enterprise; conflict with management; solidarity with other workers etc. In half of the cases the strike remained on the enterprise level, and 30% at the factory courtyard. In 20% cases workers took to the streets and gathered in front of buildings of political organizations (Petkovic 1990: 55-6). In 15 percent of cases the management resigned, mostly directors and their deputies. Equally in these 20% there was no need to compensate for the lost working time<sup>15</sup>.

Most interestingly and indicatively, 40 percent of strikers were communist party members, and one quarter was also worker council member. This is a strong reversal of the trends: party members rarely participated in such numbers in strikes until 1988 (Stojiljkovic 1989: 67, Arzensek 1984, Jovanov 1979). For example, only one fifth of strikers in 1987 in the Belgrade industrial area were communist party members. In terms of communist party membership, the numbers are thus at least doubled compared to the earlier strikes. Most importantly, it suggests that in many companies most party members joined the strike. The strikes in terms of CP membership showed thus a reversal of earlier trends. As I showed elsewhere, during the 1988 strikes in Zmaj and Rakovica, communist cadres could skillfully redirect workers’ demands to political issues. These two strikes were the best organized strikes-protests in 1988, by the plant level trade unions.

Almost 20 years after the actual event, I asked the two leaders of the Rakovica protest, why did workers demand ‘Slobo’ so vehemently. Since workers at that time had extremely strong resentments against ‘corrupt’, ‘armchair’ careerist politicians, the puzzle was even stronger. National feelings of mobilized workers had undoubtedly an important role. But probably more important were the resentments against political ‘bureaucracy’: these were not only the perceived ‘parasites’ living from the values created by productive labor, but were also pitting people against one another<sup>16</sup>. After he won all the internal party battles, Milosevic was the star of Serbian politics, enjoying the myth of both a true democrat and a defender of Serbs, who advocated also a strong centralized, ‘anti-bureaucratic’ Yugoslavia. The explanation lies also in the specific history and political connections of the Rakovica plant. It was ‘always’ ‘Red’: a pearl of capital<sup>17</sup> intensive motor industry employing highly skilled labor (a subcontractor for a Boeing), but also a nest of skyrocketing communist careers. Many informal communist party networks on the plant level probably shaped

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<sup>13</sup> probably against the organizers of the strike

<sup>14</sup> The outcome of 9 strikes out of 21 is unknown.

<sup>15</sup> Although these numbers may suggest correlation and causality, I do not have the original data, to cross-tabulate the occurrence of public protests, percentage of communist party involvement and resignations of managers.

<sup>16</sup> The project of federation, and even more of potential confederation was seen as an additional sign of bureaucratic manipulation.

<sup>17</sup> Or mixed capital-labor?

workers' opinions. Thus the desire of workers to find a way of hope in better future, a relatively strong sense of national identity found its right match with the activities of communist party cells in the plant, which strengthened the myth of Milosevic, portraying him as the only trustworthy person in politics to their rank and file<sup>18</sup>.

After the strike of Zmaj and Rakovica, some plant level trade unions, and many workers participated in the organization of political strike-protests or rallies. The Rakovica strike leader, Nikolic was later also active in organizing workers to attend the great rally in Gazimestan in 1989. Looking back, he admitted his short sightedness 'I was strong enough but I was not clever enough.' He pointed out the limited knowledge he, as a worker had: he knew much more than his colleagues did, but did see only 'up until a certain wall.' One thing did not change all these years: his firm belief in and justified stance of workers-producers against the bureaucracy<sup>19</sup>.

Undoubtedly, up until the multiparty elections of late 1990, a large segment of industrial workers, probably the majority was indeed supporting Milosevic (Mihailovic 1991). This support can be explained with deep disillusionment with the institutions of the system, where the conspiracy of ('corrupt', 'counterrevolutionary') bureaucracy offered a persuasive explanation for many unsatisfied workers. In the eyes of many production workers, even trade unions, especially those at the top level were considered to be part of the bureaucracy. This explains why a 'strong' Leader was necessary to deal with the reform of the system, oust corrupt bureaucratic politicians. It also sheds light on the weakness of alternative intermediary organizations of workers. The 'anti-bureaucratic' mood, highly mistrustful character and proletarian way of strikes rarely allowed room for an intermediary organization. If a strike was organized by a trade union, the hesitation of workers' 'leaders' to negotiate on behalf of workers-protesters had a dual reason. On the one hand, there was a fear of punishment from the coercive apparatus. More importantly, however, the strike organizers were aware of the fact that the rank-and-file may consider them traitors, as soon as they negotiate separately with representatives of the state.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, non registered organizations could hijack workers revolt.<sup>21</sup> Such development suggests that highly disadvantaged workers had limited capacities and resources to come up with alternative organizations. Instead, a solution from above was hoped. As in a diary of a union expert stands: '[t]he political temperature increased with hysterical provocations, while the people in the midst of poverty and misery started to believe that they became a political subject.'<sup>22</sup>

## **1.2. ... and trade union reform?**

From 1988 onwards, intellectuals and some workers-strikers heavily criticized the non-binding statements of trade unions, along with their lack of initiatives. Protesting workers often confronted at the same time peak level trade union representatives, along with the Serbian or Yugoslav government representatives. In Serbia, by late 1980s there was an increased demand that the trade unions become 'less bureaucratized' – and return to represent the 'working class' and,

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<sup>19</sup> Author's interviews, with Milan Nikolic; and Slobodanka Brankovic

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Slobodanka Brankovic, on the Rakovica strike

<sup>21</sup> such as the organization 'Committee for the Rally of Truth' see e.g. 'Puc izveo odbor mitinga istine' *Borba* January 8 1990.

<sup>22</sup> Gradimir Ivanic, *Uzaludni zapisi*.

on the other hand, to become independent from the Communist party and, more generally from the state (Marković 1989: 90-98).

In conditions of deep economic and political crisis, in late communist Serbia and Yugoslavia the dominant, emerging collective identities of workers were framed and vehemently discussed by both union officials and experts as exclusively 'class' and/or 'nationally' driven. The 'class' and the 'national' became a hotly debated topic also among Yugoslav republican trade union leaders, accelerating in the late 1980s. In September 1988, it became clear that organized workers would take stances in the overall political quarrels and confrontations on the future of the country among the warring factions of Yugoslav communists<sup>23</sup>. In that month, metal workers in Rakovica in the industrial basin of Belgrade, formulated demands which followed the 'official' line of the new Milosevic dominated Serbian communists. Their 'homogenizing' claims, in effect fully supporting the suggestions for centralization of the Yugoslav league of communists, were the following:

We want to persuade our class comrades all over Yugoslavia, that behind the working class and the Alliance of Communists of Serbia [which are aiming at finding] the solution of the situation in Kosovo and the changes in the constitution of SR Serbia there are no less than honorable intentions with which the Albanian or any other nationality could lose their rights, nor interests of any constitutive nation [narod] would be harmed. [...] [W]orkers of Rakovica have no patience to listen to the quarrels among the [Yugoslav] leadership [on Kosovo]. The moment demands to say the truth, to confront the counterrevolution, because the crushing of [Albanian] separatism is the condition of survival of Yugoslavia. The crisis requires to implement the economic reform, make changes in the political system of the country, and to oust all those people from all institutions who oppose such changes.<sup>24</sup>

The then member of the Presidency of Yugoslav trade union federation indirectly criticized the Serbian trade union leadership in a public statement for supporting the nationalist claims of the Rakovica workers, claiming that the Serbian trade union was 'losing the class orientation to the other [i.e. national] orientation'<sup>25</sup>. The statement was published in the Serbian media and led to an uproar and counter-attack by the Serbian trade union federation<sup>26</sup>. The statement was interpreted in Serbia as an attack 'which the Serbian trade union and the working class of Serbia experience not as a help to progressive forces [represented by the achieved unity of the 8<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Serbia], but as an encouragement to nationalists, and especially to the aggressive Albanian nationalism and separatism.'<sup>27</sup>

In the beginning of 1989, Kosovo Albanian workers, first of all miners organized in their 'alternative' trade union, launched a political strike. Until 1989 strikes were very rare in Kosovo, this time the strike came in defense to ousted

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<sup>23</sup> The LCY was divided to leagues of republican communists. The division corresponded to a some extent also to 'ethnic' divisions.

<sup>24</sup> 'Rakovica: da zavlada razum' *Rad* 16 September 1988. Unfortunately the space does not allow me to analyze this authoritative, also patronizing discourse, written in an auto-suggestive, communist spirit.

<sup>25</sup> Note that (a charge of) being a 'nationalist' was a serious political sin, among the main charge during political show trials against political opponents of communist factions.

<sup>26</sup> J. Jovanovic 'Ipak nacionalno, pa klasno' *Rad*, 30 September 1988 p. 6-7

<sup>27</sup> *Rad*, *ibid*.

Kosovo-Albanian political leaders, as a reaction to Milosevic's steps. The strike and the demands of Albanian miners in Kosovo, before and after the military intervention of the Yugoslav army was interpreted as opposite to the official standpoint of the League of Communists. Such statement received a 'must' echo also in the Serbian trade union journal. After crushing the strike, the work process in Kosovo was strictly controlled by the coercive apparatus. An article titled from the trade union journal indicates well the official discourse towards Albanian workers after the strike. The article especially stressed the damage done to the Serbian and Kosovar economy, a great material loss to the plant due to destroyed social property, and that the main aim of the action was to take over control in the plant.<sup>28</sup> Later on the Serbian trade union boycotted the alternative trade union of Kosovo Albanians and opposed its membership in the Yugoslav federation of trade unions.

The preparation for the Serbian trade union reform started in the summer of 1989, with the call for internal debates. 1989 in Serbia witnessed the first warning general strike organized by the peak level Serbian trade union. The warning strike was a half-an hour work stoppage, directed against the federal government, against wage freeze. The organizers also claimed that the economic reform program of the federal government cements the unequal position of Serbia to the other republics of the federation<sup>29</sup>. Such a move was launched as a first step to regulate industrial conflicts, and establish the authority of the peak level union organization among workers. Politically, the dissatisfaction was channeled against federal structures – the government and the Yugoslav trade union, in alliance with the Serbian republican leaders.

### *1.2.2. The 'reform' congress of January 1990*

In January 1990, at the 'reform' congress of the Serbian trade union, for the first time a program was adopted. This change also meant a shift from a communist socio-political organization into an interest representative organization. The reform process followed a 'cabinet strategy' of directed changes from the top, in accordance with the old practice. Large majority of Leadership elected-selected, from local to top leadership were proposed and elected in the 'old' way, through coordination system for cadre policy of the Communist Alliance of the Working People of Yugoslavia. Many

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<sup>28</sup> Radomir Grujic 'Radili da bi unistavali' *Rad* 16 March 1990. The article read as follows: 'The almost forty day long of [workers] shrinking their jobs ['nerad'] in [a list of plants and mines] led the Kosovo economy into a catastrophe. [...] The majority of ethnic Albanian workers came regularly to their sites of labor by [company] buses, took the hot meal [topli obrok] and then sat near machines or went back home. In the meantime, workers of other nationalities were trying to work, but they were not seldomly even physically prevented. [...] 'Politics must disappear as soon as possible from all enterprises in Kosovo, because it brings to fatal consequences. Some Kosovar alternative leaders think differently: after they made steps on the political scene, they started to disseminate 'recipes' for normalizing the economy. They are, of course, against firing of the protesters and they see the only cause for the difficult situation in the economy in differentiation, which was implemented last few years and months in order to remove the organizers and the provocateurs of the unacceptable and nationalist behavior. Those who have alternative views do not agree with the statements that the causes of the difficult situation in the economy is inaction, laziness, lack of discipline [nerad, javasluk, nedisciplina] of workers, obstruction, and all of that, of course, undermines the economic bases of society. For those with alternative views the decree on mandatory work is even more 'drastic', which they claim is 'uncivilizational and non-constitutional' although they know that they are introduced in extraordinary situation which is the case now in Kosovo. On the other hand, those with alternative views do not have a "recipe" for those who organize chaos, inspire others [?] and in such way most directly harm the economic and political reform of the federal government.'

<sup>29</sup> 'U strajk po "bontonu"' *Borba* December 20 1989.

on top positions were appointed directly as ‘Milosevic’s’ people. The old-temporary president, Tomislav Milenković was reelected at the congress.

The reform procedure included an initiative by enlightened leadership and old electoral rules. The Serbian trade union thus did not break radically with its past, nor did the problem of its legitimacy appeared problematic. This is in accordance of the findings of the ‘Edvard Kardelj Yugoslav Center for Theory and Praxis of Self-management’ on Yugoslav trade unions. The Serbian trade unions were neither the initiators of either political or economic reforms, nor their main opponents, but organizationally inert, the late and hesitant ‘greeters’. Together with other intra- Yugoslav federations, the Serbian peak union was unprepared and reluctant to meet new challenges and tasks. Trade union documents showed no clear strategies, were inconsistent, and full of politically or conceptually contradictory statements.<sup>30</sup>

Besides the part on collective agreements and economic reforms, the adopted document in the congress reflected in many ways the official statements, policy and ideology of the presidium of the communist republic of Serbia on the reform of the political system, but it echoed also some old official language. Milenković, used similar (populist) paternalist and populist discourse as the new Serbian political elite: ‘Relying on its own brain [pamet] and strength, the people and the working class of Serbia are prepared and determined to persist on the course of reform and to create a better, happier communist society.’<sup>31</sup> The new chairman also followed suit in other parts of the discourse of the Serbian communists, denouncing multipartism, expressed negative judgments against oppositional, ‘nationalist’ political parties, and ‘extremists’ in other Yugoslav republics populated also by Serbs. The chairman was famous also for his later statement according to which the ‘Serbian working class wont give up (abandon) socialism.’<sup>32</sup>

In its adopted program, the Serbian union followed in many respect literally the official standpoints of the Serbian executives.<sup>33</sup> In terms of the identity of the organization, the SSS is defined as the organization of all employees<sup>34</sup> (only private employers are excluded from membership), and the mission of the union is the ‘realization of self-managerial relations of production in the social sector and workers’ participation in the decision making in the mixed sector’, raising productivity and levels of production; preservation of the values of the communist revolution, integral

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<sup>30</sup> Summarized by DMITAR MIRČEV ‘Stari sindikat u novoj odeći?’ *Rad* 29 May 1990. The research focused on the period from early 1989 to May 1990. The analysis showed that trade unionist goals were defined in a pragmatic and arbitrary manner with no clear vision on the trade unions’ stance vis-à-vis the social system or the position of labor in the economy.

<sup>31</sup> *Rad*, 19.01.1990 cf: Arandarenko 1996: 136

<sup>32</sup> *Rad* ‘Radnicka klasa ne da socijalizam’ [ADD REF]

<sup>33</sup> Most importantly, the points 23. and 24 of the adopted program were highly political: on ‘development of undeveloped regions’ and on the ‘stabilization of the situation in Kosovo’. The first point stressed the SSS support for swifter way of development of Kosovo, more investments etc. The aim is also to ‘prevent migration of Serbs and Montenegrins from Kosovo.’ The latter point is especially political: ‘SSS actively participates in the removal of the causes and consequences of the counterrevolution in Kosovo, first of all in stopping the migration of Serbs and Montenegrins from Kosovo under pressure, and for the creation of necessary conditions for return of emigrants and all others who want to live and work there.’ also ‘It engages in removing of the weak parts in the system and process of education in Kosovo which stimulates the formation and expression of nationalist and separatist consciousness of the youth.’

<sup>34</sup> Thus: including directors.

Yugoslav market etc. The tasks of the trade unions are defined very broadly: SSS organs participate in the development/definition of the economic system and economic policy measures; planning the development plans of enterprises; adoption of self-managing acts, regulations etc, election of political and plant level management. The SSS also cooperates and negotiates with representatives of other (private or mixed) enterprises and political organizations in representing the interests of its members. The SSS is territorially organized federation, gathering plant level, local, city level and provincial organizations. However, a novelty was the introduction of the possibility for sectoral/branch level organization, along with a role in collective bargaining.

The program of SSS has a slightly poetic tone: ‘With its activity for realization of this program the Trade Union Federation of Serbia creates the conditions for work, competition of knowledge and skills, happier and better life of its members and all individuals.’ In the extremely normative-declarative introduction of the program, there is also a reflection on global challenges, and the current crisis to be overcome, and declaration on the need for ‘deep reforms’ based on ‘market laws, independence and responsibility of economic subjects, equality and competition among different forms of ownership.’ In so defined context, the strategic goal of the trade union was ‘development of the society and change of the status/position of the workers’ class, workers and working people through engagement on redefinition and reaffirmation of self-management, radical expression of creative abilities, nurturing of the cult of work and productive usage of the effects of activated abilities of living labor’. But no specifications were outlined how this was to be achieved. The trade union also expressed a sincere interest for ‘development of SFRY as a strong, politically and economically independent, communist, self-managerial, democratic country of equal and free citizens, nations and nationalities<sup>35</sup> in which SR<sup>36</sup> Serbia is equal with all other republics. Furthermore, it acknowledges the ‘historical role’ of Josip Broz Tito, for both the strengthening of the federation and for the trade unionist movement.

Among its goals, the SSS fights for different socio-economic and cultural rights, social justice and solidarity, improving the position of the most vulnerable groups: unemployed youth, young women/mothers and pensioners. Among economic goals it fights for full employment, development of the economy with pluralist ownership forms. Without mentioning *how* SSS declared a fight also for political goals of radical changes in the political system and further development of communist democracy; and also development of self-management with full participation of workers in decision making; development and realization of communist democracy based on interests of workers, democratic elections, constitutionalism and rule of law. Additionally, among goals were listed international cooperation, education of its members and fostering the operation and work of the trade union.

The second section of the program, titled ‘directions of trade union activity’ lists 25 points<sup>37</sup>. The unions role in the affirmation of moral values<sup>38</sup> makes this organization a rather disciplining organization (in a Foucaultian sense); with

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<sup>35</sup> In original ‘narod’ and ‘narodnosti’. See a ‘Very modern war’ Cornelia Sorabji 1995

<sup>36</sup> Socialist Republic

<sup>37</sup> These are: 1. defining the price of labor, 2. collective bargaining; 3. realization of full employment and security of workplace; 4. introduction of new technologies and modern organization of labor, 5. developing and improving the conditions of work; 6.

*COMMENTS WELCOME, PLEASE DO NOT QUOTE!*

the additional comment that these were the institutional values and bases of a military-based independence and self-government. The trade union thus did not question, but supported the old bases of Yugoslav 'third' way self-positioning in the international arena.

Mixing a Marxist with new technocratic language, the section on reform of the economic system consists of supportive statements SSS demanding 'reform, policy of development and realization of economic stability on the basis of market criteria' while this reform was to improve the 'position and self-managing strength of workers.' More specifically, it supported modernization of enterprises, invention of new technologies for increasing productivity which could adapt to changes on the market. Moreover, the Serbian trade union stressed that there is a need for 'directive planning of social development by socio-political organizations', with full autonomy of enterprises.<sup>39</sup> There is also a declarative statement on a specific way of restructuring and modernizing the agriculture (!). Most interestingly, SSS is 'taking stance that agricultural development gets a priority in overall development.'

The third section included normative claims on the need for reform of trade union. It includes statements on the development of SSS as an independent, autonomous and authentic organization, fostering all activities which strengthen these attributes (ranging from collective agreements, its' high quality work, international cooperation), but also statements on fulfilling its goals and democratization of the organization and the whole society through means of interest articulation and representation, usage of technical and scientific knowledge etc.

All in all, the document is highly normative: it does not describe the mechanism of the unions operation (how the aims are to be achieved), nor control mechanisms so necessary for a democratic, accountable organization. The issue of half-hearted reform, as it will be seen in the following section, haunted the trade union organization at its subsequent sessions especially in the next two years.

## **2. Democratization and ownership transformation: the revitalization of authentic worker representation? (1990-1992)**

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protection of work and wider environment; 7. securing the conditions for vacation, recreation and recovery; 8. supply, feeding (boarding) and standard of workers and working people; 9. solving the needs of housing; 10. improvement of health and social protection; 11. improving the economic and social protection of retired workers; 12. education; 13. science; 14. culture; 15. changes in the political system; 16. development of self-management and participation of workers in decision making; 17. realization and further development of All People Defence and Social Self-Protection<sup>37</sup>; 18. strengthening of the system of responsibility; 19. development of a new cadre policy in the trade union and in the society; 20. affirmation of moral values; 21. reform of the economic system; 22. policy of development of agriculture; 23. development of undeveloped regions; 24. stabilization of the situation in Kosovo; 25. transparent work and information.

<sup>38</sup> This unions disciplinary role, regulating the behavior of its members and the wider society is fantastic, and it is worth quoting. 'SSS is against [social] deformations like receiving (demanding) an unjustifiably high portion of the overall income; all types of bureaucratic usurpations, privileges unrelated to work, corruption; nationalism, chauvinism, separatism and centralism; questioning the dignity of a human, brown-nosing [poltronstvo], petty-bourgeois mentality, demagogy.'

<sup>39</sup> This part also includes an unconditional support for the recovery program of the Serbian government, called Zajam for industrial renewal of Serbia, in which citizens were mobilized to invest in industry. The curiosity of this program, in its later development, was that people who invested never saw their money back.

*COMMENTS WELCOME, PLEASE DO NOT QUOTE!*

## 2.1. The revitalization of the (workplace level) union scene?

Not only that the Serbian peak level republican trade union was not among the main actors during the democratization wave but hardly had any contribution (Arandarenko 1996: 135). The picture gets less gloomy if we incorporate into the picture some plant level union initiatives. There were few thousand of new trade unions registered in the period 1990-94, many of which probably insignificant in terms of membership (Arandarenko 1997: 146). Among these, the most important is probably the trade union of employees of Electric Industry of Serbia established in 1992, with more than 60.000 members, maintaining a semi-autonomous status. According to most plausible explanation, it was established based on an insider-coalition with the management (Arandarenko, 1997: 148)

The establishment and development of 'alternative' or 'independent' trade unions started in 1990. First of all professionals and highly skilled workers, the labor elite, established their new trade unions. In such manner the trade unions of journalists, engine drivers, pilots, truck drivers were established. These organizations attempted to resist the 'leveling', bread-and-butter pressure of the low skilled workforce. More inclusive, 'alternative' trade unions were established also on the plant level. The most famous initiative came from export oriented Copper Mill in Sevojno, which formed the ambitious initiative of 'Trade union of workers of Yugoslavia'. The trade union was formed with the full support of the then enterprise directors<sup>40</sup>. The idea was to establish a confederation of independent union organizations, organized on the basis of skill/occupation in all Yugoslavia. The program was strongly against the communist legacy, but also against the newly 'reformed' trade union, and supported the all-encompassing economic reform of the federal government. Although this was a marginal, but a more ambitious initiative, without a significant echo, and any immediate impact on workers-self organization, it is worth quoting from the original program:<sup>41</sup>

With the communist parties taking over power in all so-called communist countries, as well as in Yugoslavia, practically the worker and union movement ceased to exist. Almost 50 years of monopolistic rule of statist-party trade unions brought about many and long term negative consequences to the workers and to the society as a whole. With this is connected the loss of faith of workers in the possibilities of improvement of their own social-economic position. Apart from the army of unemployed, workers are all over the country brought to the brink of existence, without base of economic certainty. ... The state easily surrendered many experts, inventors, medical doctors, skilled workers, and farmers... which spread all over the world. [...] With the reduction of human rights and liberties, in accordance with the dogmatic consciousness of the bureaucratic-etatist oligarchy, consistently and infinitely postponed the deep democratic transformation of the society.

The trade union initiative, which was mostly boycotted in the media, harshly attacked the 'reformed' trade union:

All "changes" till now in the way of organization and activism of the trade union did not meet the demands and the interests of workers, because they were, as is the case with the present "reform" proposal, were initiated by the bureaucratized top of the "trade unionist movement"[...] Those who brought us almost to the bottom of Europe and of the civilized world, destroying great economic goods [...], educational-cultural potentials and the spirit of the

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<sup>40</sup> *Tek smo poceli* 2006: 40

<sup>41</sup> if nothing else to see that anti-communist ideology was present in Serbia too, but definitely did not have a mass base as it was the case – to mention the most notable case: Poland.



people, have no moral, or political or historical right to represent any institution or movement of the Yugoslav society...<sup>42</sup>

The general absence of self-organization of workers outside the existing trade unions had also an additional reason: workers, especially the semi-skilled and low skilled labor, poor knowledge on their social rights<sup>43</sup>. A plant level union activist, who created an autonomous trade union in 1991 in the Smelting plant (Livnica – FAP/IMT) in the Belgrade area, remembers how he was stunned with the very low knowledge of workers on their social rights, and their fear to self-organize, or join the new trade union<sup>44</sup>. Workers did not dare to talk about the new union in the plant. They were in doubts that it might have negative consequences on their job security, or that it is somehow has to do with ‘dirty’ politics.

According to the same activist, a significant portion of the workforce was simply confused by the speed and direction of changes after 1990. He thought that the cause of workers confusion but also fear was that during socialism the bulk of workers’ rights were regulated through various self-management decrees and acts, and that there was only one worker organization. Regulations were lifted, doubts in the official union increased, while institutions such as the workers council was anticipated that it would cease to exist. Although worker rights during communism were often only formal, at least workers knew whom to issue a complaint.

During the transition years of 1988-1992, competences of the plant leadership increased, without adequate protection and mechanisms to limit directors’ will. The process was initially imagined as professionalization and higher autonomy to the management (as a function) within the enterprise. On the other hand, with the introduction of collective bargaining in 1990, the interests of the workforce would represent a separate interest within the enterprise, dealing with issues of unemployment and wages.

Another important incentive for the (re)formation of trade unions on the workplace stemmed from the changes in property rights. One of the bases of the Yugoslav economic transformation was the definition of new property rights regime and privatization. Assuming that workers under self-managed enterprises already developed entrepreneurial behavior, the legislation<sup>45</sup> favored internal buyouts, allowing workers to become shareholders of their firm<sup>46</sup>. Workers’ shareholding was thus the building bloc of the process of privatization, making the whole process acceptable to the workers’ themselves too<sup>47</sup>. Such arrangement was valid for the two thirds of Yugoslav competitive industry, logically not applied to the monopolistic companies, which went into state ownership. In addition, existing private firms,

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<sup>42</sup> Djordje Pilcevic ‘Dobra volja iz Sevojna’ *Borba* February 23 1990

<sup>43</sup> Workers thus continued to pay their dues to the union although very greatly disappointed with the organization.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with Nebojsa Savic 30 October 2006

<sup>45</sup> Most notably the Law on enterprises, of 1989, later Law on social capital of 1990 (capital owned by the society - not to be confused with ‘social capital’ as a term used in social sciences) which definitely opened the process of privatization (the latter legislative act was nevertheless heavily criticized by economists)

<sup>46</sup> See also Law on wages of 1990, which allowed increase in wages through receiving company shares.

<sup>47</sup> Aside from the actual employees, former employees could also get shares under beneficial criteria – with a maximum of 70 percent discount and a ten year limit for repayments of the purchased shares. (Ivanic 2001?)

especially micro and medium sized plants were encouraged to develop. There was a relatively wide consensus among economists and decision makers on this arrangement, including the trade union, which was called – the mixed property regime.<sup>48</sup> The law also stipulated high competences to the management. At the same time, the work councils still existed, but they were perceived as if they will cease to exist soon<sup>49</sup>. In such circumstances, the role of the plant level trade union was supposed to increase. There is also evidence that at least some plant directors perceived the role of trade union as a partner organization in co-determining the fate of the enterprise. Most notably, the union was, according to one registered account, perceived as the representative of workers-shareholders, i.e. owners.<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, there was also, for workers less beneficial, and possibly a more probable option, which made the rule of director possible through a clique of employees, controlling all the privatization, production and employment processes<sup>51</sup>.

However, economic deprivation of a significant portion of the workforce and reminders of political duties further limited potentials of self-organization and undermined solidarities already on the workplace level<sup>52</sup>. Even within the existing trade union, the successful ‘push’ for workers’ self-organization came from ‘higher’ bodies: management, or state actors.

## ***2.2. Discussion: The limits of worker self-organization: the need for two of the post-communist tango***<sup>53</sup>

Since the Yugoslav economic system was highly decentralized, fragmented labor necessarily had to follow the constraints and opportunities of such base. In comparison to other Eastern European countries, Yugoslav and Serbian workers were segmented by work place organizations, with own rigid labor markets. Large differences existed in income levels and in conditions of work by branches and plants, to a lesser extent within plants by skill and education, creating walls of envy or fear and isolation. Following such segmentation, the position of labor and opportunity structure for its self-organization can be portrayed in the following economic and political space. It is meaningful to argue that the potentials of ‘associational power’ (Olin Wright 2000) of trade unions depended on the size of the plant, along with traditions of self-organization. On the other hand, ‘structural power’ refers to the significance of the position of a given plant or economic branch in the national economy. Structural power of the plant or branch varied,

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<sup>48</sup> See Round table discussion, especially ADD ref>>

<sup>49</sup> A slight reversal of this process and the rules of the game in Serbia were made in August 1991. The adopted Serbian law on changes of the law on enterprises introduced the institution making the estimation of the social property obligatory, and limited the rights of workers purchase of shares, most notably by decreasing the available shares and the percentage of discount. Second, the funds from privatization were to be paid to the Serbian republican fund, instead to the federal funds.

<sup>50</sup> Gradimir Ivanic, *Uzaludni zapisi*, unpublished diary

<sup>51</sup> On the informal power bases under self-management see Rus and Jerovsek 1989

<sup>52</sup> Arandarenko mentions an additional factor: namely, that if workers wanted to participate in public life, participation in political parties was more inviting, which in that sense stifled union activism (1997: XXX)

<sup>53</sup> I borrow the tango metaphor from Franzosi

depending whether it was affected by economic restructuring, or had a secured market, the extreme case being if the plant enjoyed a monopoly.

Diagram 1 about here

What can be seen from the Diagram? In my view, the size of the firm with its possible ‘associational power’ as well as its position in the Serbian economy mattered for the political and economic weight and bargaining power of organized workers. Thus workers of smaller and (un)successful, often private enterprises had limited associational power and insignificant political weight, also but not only since they were not well organized. Similar was the case also with larger enterprises in structurally vulnerable (e.g. prepared to be closed down) or dependent position, as in the mining and textile industries.<sup>54</sup> The difference is that class solidarities among textile workers across firms could be established. However, in the situation where state protection and subsidies were needed to continue successful production, plants in the textile industry, where female workers were in majority, were sidelined, I believe first also due to the fact that politically female unemployment never worried decision makers, and could not cause legitimacy problems. As of mining, the industry was a subcontractor to the energy industry plant, and could not emerge independently on the scene. There were thus the two remaining clusters of industries and firms. There are several ‘privileged’ plants/companies which enjoyed monopolies such as the EPS (energy industry), and NIS – Naftagas, where the salaries of workers were high, and internal solidarities were possibly also high. On the other hand, the privileged monopolistic position also pushed the workers of these plants into isolation from their class colleagues. Finally, for the present study the most interesting were the large, at times successful export oriented plants in the metal industry, especially, but not necessarily located in the Belgrade industrial basin. Politically these plants had a dual weight: both since these were large plants and many of them (thus cross-plant solidarities could be established). Second, these were capital intensive plants employing highly skilled male workforce, with the traditions of collective action (Jovanov 1979: 115). Protests or strikes of metal workers could both strengthen, or cause legitimacy problems for the regime.

We reached the point where we can see the (dividing) lines of fragmentation of the Serbian organized workers. In the highly unfavorable structural conditions, for labor creating political or economic alliances was of crucial importance. Unionized workers’ could possibly form alliances with managerial and/or political (either on the local or on higher levels) entrepreneurs. Thus we get the following matrix:

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<sup>54</sup> I would argue, distance from the center (Belgrade), as well as the position of specific branch in the economy mattered in this respect.

A. Workers/trade unions allied with management and political entrepreneurs: the 'Big coalition'	<b>D. Workers/trade unions allied only with political entrepreneurs/state actors: the 'Vertical coalition' dominated by bread and butter issues</b>
<b>C. Workers/trade unions allied with management, against political entrepreneurs/state: the 'Insider coalition'</b>	B. No coalition. Organized proletarians (?)

The first two cases (A and B) are of lesser interest to study, therefore I outline them first in short.

- A. Big coalition. In effect, since part of the workforce is co-opted either for the welfare of the plant or higher good, the role of organized labor in such settings is instrumental. In practice, such a coalition would assume at least a portion of 'patriotic' workers supporting and/or manipulating enterprise politics with the enterprise director, who would, in turn, be an obedient soldier of the ruling party. Arguably, the strikes of Rakovica workers in 1988 could be clustered here.
  
- B. No coalition. Workers of firms in absolute deprivation, at the edge of bankruptcy would belong to this cluster, but also firms where the links between the party/political entrepreneurs and enterprise directors would be strong. Similarly, factions of workers in a plant where there is a 'big coalition' in place would also belong to this cluster. In terms of strikes and protest activities, the unsuccessfulness of the proven repertoire is a case in point when workers are on their own.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, in the new 'democratic' regime, informal pressure would be used occasionally against enterprise directors, but 'help' from the 'state' would not necessarily come<sup>56</sup>.
  
- C. Vertical coalitions. In the case of no internal, 'micro corporatist' coalition, the only option for workers was to rely on more encompassing, paternalistic coalitions between state and spontaneously organized workers, or their union organization for short term benefits. As it was already shown in the previous section, in the late communist period, protests of organized labor were instrumental in ousting directors of plants, or to change local political leadership. These temporary coalitions were used *against* directors, and internal structures,

<sup>55</sup> Such was the case e.g. in 1989 when workers appealed against their directors' corrupt practices directly to Milosevic in 1989. However, workers were persecuted instead! (see 'Ko je u stvari cutao' *Borba*) After 1990, worker appeal for change of directors would similarly not listened to. From 1993, isolated workers would start to pose drastic forms of protests in their repertoire – such as hunger strikes.

<sup>56</sup> See e.g. 'Obecanje od 250 miliona' *Borba* March 4, 1992

mostly for short term economic benefits, such as temporary wage increases. In some of these cases, strikers were organized by the semi-legal *Committee for the Truth about Kosovo*.

Finally, but most interesting are:

- D. Internal or ‘insider coalitions’ (Arandarenko 1996: 203) or micro-corporatist arrangements. These were especially characteristic to the plants in the Serbian metal industry.<sup>57</sup> The other branch of the Serbian economy which was structurally in similar position to the metal sector was textile. Characteristically, these were plants with the tradition of receiving state subsidies, and most hit by economic opening and losses of market. The building block of the agreement between directors, the union and the workforce was the common interest in the long-term survival of the plant. One sign of the existence internal coalition was the internal transformation of the plant into joint-stock company. Second, in the case of larger plants, where privatization was not possible, internal coalitions were attempts to influence economic decision making on the state level. Plant level trade unions usually announced strikes with the open or silent support of the plant directors. The directors’ influence could be, in these cases, be easily detected in the very precise formulation of demands, which required very specialized knowledge on the business cycles of the plants. The demands were addressed to higher political and economic structures, such as the Chamber of commerce, the government, or local structures.

In my reading, available internal coalitions enabled strengthening of cross union links on branch levels. Most importantly, the 1990-1991 threats and the general strike of metal and textile workers came from this coalition. In the case of the threat and preparation for the general strike, the directors radicalized workers’ demands by offering an ultimatum that they will resign if demands remain unfulfilled. In the textile industry organized workers from plants in Uzice, Pozega, Arilje, Bajina Basta, Paracin, Prijepolje participated. Metal workers from plants in Belgrade (Ikarus, Zmaj, Teleoptik, TIZ, Industrija Lola Ribar, IMR, 21. maj, Petar Drapsin), Uzice and Kragujevac were participating in the preparation of the general strike. Interestingly, the strike generated also a conflict with and within the peak level trade union<sup>58</sup>, as well as with the republican government. The last such coalition was made with the metal sector in 1992.

I do not claim that workers self-organization was not possible without support from management or state bodies. In the highly unfavorable conditions, I believe management and the state actors gave a special boost and encouraged workers to self-organize. These boosts and coalitions were more often temporary and fragile. Nevertheless, workers could learn and continue self-organizing after such an episode to participate both at workplace politics and on higher levels, in lobbying for resources.

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<sup>57</sup> The metal sector was certainly among the most subsidized sector during communism. Internal coalitions, ‘small coalitions’ (Županov 1971) were especially characteristic to the privileged branches of the Yugoslav economy, capable to lobby for investment and redistribution.

<sup>58</sup> See later

### 2.3. Formation of a movement: The opportunity lost – or where did it go wrong?

In my view an authentic trade union movement in Serbia could have been formed on the branch levels, as a reconciliation of grass-root worker union initiatives and the peak level organization, led by the two dominant sectors of metal and textile, and a retreat of an imposed territorial organization, and a controlled, alienated peak level organization. In turn, such a movement could come into being only through managerial support (insider coalition for union activism) and given the state recognition of the autonomy of the movement, along with respect for the rule of law.<sup>59</sup> This is, however, not what actually happened.

In Serbia, the general elections in December 1990 were overwhelmingly won by the communist inheritor SPS which presented itself as the Serbian ‘state building’ party. Milosevic in turn became the first democratically elected Serbian president. Times came, however, for the government to fulfill the promises. As an outcome of the democratization of the system, organized labor swiftly targeted the new Serbian government. The state replied with a hostile propaganda. Milan Nikolic, the leader of the (in)famous strikes of Rakovica workers in 1988, was again active in organizing strikes. Since he was born in Croatia, he was charged of being a ‘destroyer’ of Serbia’ in conspiracy with the Serbian opposition and with Tudjman’s party (HDZ).<sup>60</sup>

From mid 1990 tensions occurred within the peak level union organization (SSS). Most notably, cleavages occurred between the SSS union chairman Milenkovic and its secretary Dusan Mitrovic. The secretary led a reformist faction in the union, encouraging worker initiatives. Aside from holding regular press conferences, the ‘reformists’ were also initiating changes in the union structure<sup>61</sup>; ‘freeing’ the plants from the influence of political parties, a statement on transformation of the property, and standing up in defense of alternatively unionized white collar and highly skilled workers.<sup>62</sup> The real cleavage occurred within the peak level organization when the branches of textile and metal workers announced that they started to prepare a general strike. The general strike of metal, textile and leather workers was postponed several times and obstructed internally, most importantly by SSS chairman, legitimized with higher patriotic reasons: problems of Serbs in Croatia, demonstrations in Belgrade. There was a great damage done to the union due to internal obstruction: many workers were not informed about the strike, or preparedness of other unions to launch a collective action.

When metal and textile workers threatened with general strike, the presidency of SSS Council, headed by its chairman stated that the announced strike was ‘an outcome of the activity of the gentlemen from the US embassy’, ‘the Serbian

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<sup>59</sup> Even so, I would not expect a strong, but certainly an authentic trade union movement.

<sup>60</sup> ‘Selektivno jedinstvo’ *Rad* 22 March 1991.

<sup>61</sup> (a shift from territorial to a branch based federation)

<sup>62</sup> ‘Parnica sa sudbinom’ Dusan Mitrovic, Sekretar Veka VSSS. *Rad* 25 May 1991

opposition and of the Albanian separatists' and that the two branches are destroying the unity of SSS.'<sup>63</sup> In contrast, the secretary of the union headed a faction within the peak level union who supported the grass root, and branch level initiative. The general strike in April 1991 was supported by the 'reformists', during which organization an open fight within the peak level organization began<sup>64</sup>. The reformists initiated an internal campaign against the president of SSS, who was publicly accused to be an agent of the Serbian executive. In the eyes of the rank and file, such a conflict significantly damaged the reputation and credibility of the union.

The settling off the score between the competing factions happened at the 11<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Council of SSS, in May 1991. The result was unexpected to all: the initiative to dismiss the chairman of SSS proved to be successful; at the same time no-one from the old Council was reelected – i.e. the reformists were ousted too. After a temporary stalemate, in June 1991 the new chairman became Miodrag Vujasinović, who committed himself to internal organizational reform, but remained sensitive to the issue of Serbs outside Serbia.

In November 1991, the reformist faction, led by journalists from RTV Belgrade and faction of workers from a few plants in metal industry established the first alternative confederation "Nezavisnost" on pacifist and democratic principles<sup>65</sup>. Organizationally it was conceptualized as a loose confederation, with branch based structure, and large autonomy of the branches. Programmatically, it urged for swift and transparent privatization, and inclusion of workers in the process, favoring worker shareholding.<sup>66</sup> When a window of opportunity for real multipartism emerged in 1992, the trade union entered the oppositional coalition DEPOS.

For sure, "Nezavisnost was not an encompassing, but more about a symbolic movement, established on 'moral grounds' of opposition to war. "Nezavisnost" was not recognized by the officials as a legitimate representative organization of workers, but it was also put under pressure and surrounded by hostile propaganda, often labeled as the 'traitors of national interests.' Nezavisnost could not have a significant impact, since, even its leadership felt that it is in danger, and it cannot protect itself. Over 1992 it attempted to organize strikes sporadically, but with little success. The new trade union also lacked resources: it had no assets, buildings, while fees from membership were minimal. It mostly relied on help and funds of European trade union organizations, resembling the operation of non-governmental organizations. Finally, since its leader was a white collar journalist, it was an intellectual, slightly elitist organization, with little appeal to industrial workers.

The national peak level federation, along with its territorial county level organizations, on the other hand, if not exposed to financial 'injections' from the state, was pushed into a defense with the threat that its assets might be taken

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<sup>63</sup> 'Selektivno jedinstvo' *Rad* 22 March 1991.

<sup>64</sup> This was reflected also in the trade union bulletin 'Rad', which supported the 'reformist' faction. (Arandarenko, 1997)

<sup>65</sup> Most notably: 'UGS N' is striving for democratically institutionalized relations in all spheres of social and political life, for full freedom of political, trade unionist and any other interest-based organization of citizens, for a state of social justice in accordance with the Constitution.'

<sup>66</sup> Resolution of UGS on Property transformation, November 1991

away<sup>67</sup>. The unions' fund at a newly established bank disappeared<sup>68</sup>. According to trade union reports of late 1991, it is clear that the union movement had financial problems, and had not even a clear idea what assets does it have. In its official documents the union presented itself as an all-encompassing and politically neutral organization.<sup>69</sup> However, there was no break with the 'normativism' of the earlier period. That is, although the general directions of union activity were listed the logic of union action was not outlined, nor controlled. Such situation made the peak level organization extremely rigid, and defensive. The issue of internal reorganization, due to internal tensions between territorial and branch level structures were not solved.<sup>70</sup>

### **3. Marginalization: the start of war and UN sanctions (late 1991-1992)**

With the first real signs of inter-Yugoslav war in 1990-1991, broadcasted programs caused both bold enthusiasm, but more often, silence and fear in the audience. Historical documentary films as well as 'live' reports caused 'panical fear, insecurities, feelings that everything [worst] is possible, [...] aggressiveness ... and the mood for war.'<sup>71</sup> From the late summer of 1991, most of male employees could count on being drafted to the reserve units of the rump Yugoslav army. Had they refused to join, they would lose their jobs. Many workers thus saw the theaters of war ['ratiste'] in Croatia and Bosnia. Although some were enthusiastic to join in order to defend either Yugoslavia, or the threatened Serbs, the legitimacy of the militarization was questioned. Pressured by their members, the peak level trade union exerted a significant pressure on the government and the parliament to overcome the international isolation. Yet the union did not demand the end of involvement in the war, and/or peaceful settlement of the conflict. Instead plant level solidarity funds were created collecting food, cigarettes and clothes, as a support for the 'comrades' who were temporarily in the army.

In the period especially from 1992, in the conditions of acute crisis spiced up with hyperinflation, trade unions' function was to achieve pure survival of the workforce. The trade union movement on the national level experienced a further drawback, also due to fee distribution cleavage between the peak national, territorially organized and the branch based structures. The national peak organization introduced a mechanism according to which plant level trade unions should have send a higher proportion of collected fees to both structures. In practice, the plant level trade unions were resisting to send any fees, with the resources remaining on the plant level. Resources were in turn, with the help of state and increasingly state-controlled management for the most 'obedient' and strategically important plants, used to purchase basic foodstuff. Instead of primary goals, such as legal protection of rights, as formulated in

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<sup>67</sup> Author's interview with Milomir Boskovic, local head of SSS in Valjevo, Belgrade

<sup>68</sup> Interview with Slavoljub Lukovic, secretary of Nezavisnost, Belgrade, XX October 2006.

<sup>69</sup> SSS is an autonomus, interest-representative, democratic and voluntary organization which is formed by workers of different occupations, education, sexes, age groups, ethnic identities, religion, political and ideological orientation with the aim of realization of their original economic and labor-rights

<sup>70</sup> until 1998 (own account of SSS) or 2000 (Ivanic 2001)

<sup>71</sup> Gradimir Ivanic 'Uzaludni zapisi' Unpublished diary



collective agreements, even the newly created trade unions were forced to deal with pure existential survival of the rank-and file, and find semi-informal ways to purchase basic foodstuff and distribute it among union members.

After the UN sanctions, introduced in April 1992, with further deterioration of economic activity and industrial output, the situation for workers even worsened. The Serbian peak federation announced a general strike a few times during 1992, only to postpone, and call it off due to internal obstruction within the union. Most notably, the trade union branch of metal workers gained guarantees on receiving subsidies from the state, necessary to restart the production. Therefore it did not support the strike. Additionally, the new appointed leader of the metal workers on branch level was a male, radical nationalist supporter<sup>72</sup>. The seemingly strong coalition between metal and textile workers proved to be temporary. The government avoided general strikes and turmoil through concessions and subsidies to the metal sector, whereas textiles were marginalized. In a predominantly patriarchal, male-breadwinner society, and in conditions of war, female workers could not pose a political threat for the regime.

In addition, the government initiated and enacted, and later on several times prolonged a “Law on the ban of firing of workers during the time of economic sanctions of the UN Security Council”. In an attempt to erase the issue of international sanctions from the agenda, a paternalist ‘ask whatever you want’ type of concession was made to the trade union. Such a stance created the illusion that the ‘government was a greater trade union’ than the union itself<sup>73</sup>. The trade union abandoned its’ rights of setting tariffs’ while a concession was made that no employee will lose his or her job during the sanctions.

The substance of this legal act is easy to grasp. Yet, although there were no layoffs and plant closures, workers were sent to ‘forced leave’ and were guaranteed that they will receive 70 percent of their wages. Such an arrangement pleased the ‘leveler’ (uravnilovka) ideology of many production workers, especially the low skilled workers. In economic terms, the outcome was a hyperinflation – by now the second largest in history (Arandarenko 1996). The government’s promise that the sanctions would be only temporary and would last only a few months were false. Yet, the trade union did not radicalize: it remained at a verbal demand to get rid of sanctions. At the same time no demand was formulated to end the Serbian involvement in war. Instead of organizing strikes, the trade union representatives on the national and Belgrade levels insisted that ‘for the trade union it is the most important to demand from the government that everyone will be equally burdened with sanctions’ and that no one can lose his/her job. Representatives of some plant level trade unions, as well as county level unions were thereafter occupied with paperwork to address the ‘Fund for help’<sup>74</sup>, as well as to instruct plant level unions to organize material support for

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<sup>72</sup> interview with Slobodanka Brankovic. See also: ‘Korak blize clanstvu’ *Rad*, November 27 1992. ‘Podeljeno clanstvo’ *Rad* December 28 1992

<sup>73</sup> Interview with Slobodanka Brankovic, *ibid*.

<sup>74</sup> ‘Odgovornost vlade’ *Rad* 18 September 1992

drafted workers.<sup>75</sup> Real wages plummeted, so that until the end of 1993 the real wage could cover only 6.2% (!) of the consumption basket (Eremić and Bešević 1994: 88). By 1994, 48.7% of industrial workers lived in extreme poverty (Pošarac 1995: 343-344)

In situations of absolute deprivation, often abandoned also by local trade unions<sup>76</sup>, worker wildcats were necessarily unsuccessful. As a local political scientist observed, during strikes workers demands became appeals and pleas. Usually, during the strike there was a media blockade, and disinformation on the nature of the protest and the demands. The start of negotiations was intentionally postponed in order to tire the strikers. If at all, fake authorities were sent to negotiate, without adequate competences to solve the situation. Finally, if that did not help, protesters were offered partial fulfillment of demands (Stojiljkovic 1995: 22). Pressed by mobilization for the new Yugoslavs army, and economic needs to survive and support their families, most workers made an exit to the semi-criminal grey zone of economy<sup>77</sup>. The alternative for the few bravest workers became to radicalize their action: to organize and start hunger strikes.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

What was the degree of involvement of unions and workers in democratization, Serbian 'state building' and economic transformation, and the effects of these grand processes on trade unionism? The effects of the redefinition of the political community, the 'Serbian national question' and nationalism, spiced up with war was detrimental for workers' self organization and unionism in the analyzed period. Conditions of absolute deprivation offered little possibilities for workers to invest in intermediary, professionalized interest-representative organizations. Nationalist mobilization and often instrumentalized voice of industrial workers significantly undermined class solidarities on cross-ethnic lines. Equally importantly, political entrepreneurs, the designers of the Serbian project did not encourage, even less support the establishment of particularistic class based organizations necessary for a viable, comprehensive civil society and democratic system. The Serbian involvement in the last Balkan conflict, through aggressive media and a massive Serbian coercive apparatus marginalized and demobilized unions from the public space. After late 1991, worker solidarities were limited to reactive actions, such as contributions to funds for male colleagues who were sent to the theaters of war, and desperate wild cat strikes. Workers, as well as 'their' plant level unions were guided by strategies for pure survival, and were thus necessarily exposed to corruption of various kinds.

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<sup>75</sup> The parallel with late 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany and the *Burgfrieden* is illuminating. Mary Nolan's (1986) description of state policies vis-à-vis workers especially fit the Serbian workers' situation: 'the question of the relationship of the working class to the state and society, was to be given a social welfare rather than a political answer'. [...] State policy was thus an ambitious attempt to preclude working-class political independence while integrating workers into a hierarchical social order. [...] In both its repressive and paternalistic forms, state policy promoted [??] not only working-class political opposition, but the very process of working class formation.' (p 360-61).

<sup>76</sup> See e.g. "Radnici krše sindikalni protokol

<sup>77</sup> Savic Razmisljanja>>

Up until 1990, Serbian unions were not the initiators of political or economic reforms. What is more, they did not have even any significant role during democratization and economic reforms. Although worker strikes and protests widened the political space for influence, the role of the unions, especially of the peak level union was limited to mostly following suit and supporting the reform proposals of Serbian executives, even if they were in contradiction with the interest of the non-agricultural workforce. Similarly, democratization, measured in participation in public life in Serbia started very late, and union initiatives and pressure groups became more active only from 1990. Even so, the highly unfavorable economic conditions, as well as the limited scope of democratization (non-existent multiparty system) did not support a comprehensive and consistent worker initiative, which could have its base on the grass root.

Finally, trade unions supported wholeheartedly the ownership transformation project of the Yugoslav and later Serbian governments. Interestingly, the process of ownership transformation on the plant level gave a significant role for unions, as well as to the management, in organizing and facilitating insider privatization, transforming 'self-manager' employees into workers-shareholders. On the other hand, the peak level union did not have its own original proposal for industrial restructuring, thus it could not influence in any way the course of reforms. The most significant alternative proposals came from plant level insider coalitions between management and production workers. With the start of the war and international isolation, however, both the project of restructuring and the ownership transformation were frozen, and thus sentenced to failure.

In this chapter I also showed the limitations of organization on class basis after 1988, and more particularly, what options workers had to advance their general-particular interests. Worker organizations or trade unions were structurally in extremely unfavorable conditions, and they could do almost nothing without external allies. In a significant minority of industrial plants, workers formed an (temporary) internal coalition with the directors. In practice the coalition meant either participation of all or most employees in the ownership transformation (privatization) of the plant, or in exercising joint pressure against the state agencies for subsidies. If it came into existence, the coalition was a victory of economic unionism, with the ultimate credo in helping the plant to survive and prosper. Yet, internal coalitions were often fragile and temporary arrangements. From the workers' point of view, cooperation with the management depended on directors' good will. Dependency from higher state structures, and short term interests of both workers and the managers, often made insider coalitions unfeasible. The episode of the general strike of April 1991 shows excellently the limitations of the Serbian union movement, but also its greatest achievement until today.

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**Diagram 1. Workers organized on plant level? Plant level trade unions' potentials of action/opportunity structures in the Serbian Political-economic space**

