



The difficult birth of an independent labour movement in Albania

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17 November 2019: The mineworkers in Bulqiza announce the formation of a bottom-up trade union organisation led by workers themselves – the Trade Union of United Mineworkers of Bulqiza (TUUMB). Those attending the public announcement of the union's formation in the town centre express frustration and anger with the severe poverty they have been experiencing, the death of their fellow workers in the mines, the hazardous working conditions, and feelings of betrayal by existing trade unions. But there are also expressions of hope at what a truly independent, worker-driven trade union could achieve.

22 November 2019: The chairperson of the new union (TUUMB) is sacked by the employer, AlbChrome, the biggest chromium mining company operating in the region, and which is also part of a very powerful corporation, Balfin. In response, the workers go on strike to protest the dismissal of their trade union leader and eventually to demand higher wages and a review of the production targets. The strike ends on 5 December, with a promise by the Labour Inspectorate to start an investigation on the union busting practices of the company.

31 December 2019: The number of dismissed trade union leaders goes up to four. Many workers have been threatened that they will lose their jobs if they join the new union or continue to be members. In addition, some trade unionists have been temporarily detained, questioned and intimidated by police, and some labour activists have been beaten up and imprisoned. Unsurprisingly, the investigation of the Labour Inspectorate concludes that the company has not committed any legal violation in dismissing the trade union leaders. The decision is hailed as a victory by both the employer and the old, existing trade union.

This is not China. This is Albania, a small country in the Western Balkans, considered to have some of the highest emigration rates in the world (Gedeshi and King, 2018). Indeed, in 2015, Albanians were second in number only to Syrians among asylum seekers in Germany. Since the country's transition from a command economy to an open market economy in the early

1990s, Albanians continue to take up any opportunity to leave their reality of poverty, poor public services, unemployment and underemployment, low paid jobs, unsafe workplaces, insecure jobs and authoritarian workplaces where workers have no voice. Meanwhile, more than four decades of a brutal Stalinist regime and three decades of massive privatisation and neoliberal reforms, which have gone unchallenged by the old trade unions, have left Albanian society apathetic, cynical, and unwilling to engage in any form of collective response.

Breakthrough for independent unionism

Despite this bleak reality, 2019 marked a historical breakthrough for the labour movement in Albania with the establishment of democratic and independent trade unions in call centers, universities and mines. The emergence of these new trade unions, however, is by no means spontaneous. It has involved hard and consistent organising work by a group of (young) labour activists who have also been heavily involved in organising the student protests against tuition fees that rocked Albania in December 2018/January 2019 (Xhafa, 2019). Trained initially by the Global Labour Institute in June 2017 and then by the UNI Global Union, the activists went on to support worker organising and the establishment of bottom-up, genuine trade unions in call centers and in the mines.

The formation of TUUMB, the new union of mineworkers, in particular represents a remarkable development for the labour movement in Albania. In this case, workers are standing up against the richest man in Albania, the billionaire Samir Mane. Not surprisingly, the new union is faced with extreme repression and attacks by an unholy alliance among the employer, the state institutions, the police, and the media, which has remained by and large silent on the struggle of mineworkers.

The fiercest attacks, however, have come from the old trade union which claims to have a collective agreement with the employer. This agreement, which according to the old trade union itself expires in January 2020, is not accessible, however,

and no worker has ever seen it. TUUMB has asked for a copy of the collective agreement from the company, the old trade union, and the respective state institutions, but to no avail. None of them has answered the request. The local Labour Inspectorate has reportedly said they are not aware of such an agreement. When the Commissioner for the Right to Information and Protection of Personal Data intervened to request the concerned ministry to make available a copy of the collective agreement, the ministry replied that they do not have a copy of the collective agreement either. Meanwhile, the employer is refusing to respond to TUUMB's demand to bargain a fair collective agreement with the legitimate trade union.

Old union echoes employers

Lacking any legitimacy among workers, the old trade union has joined forces with the employer to destroy the independent, democratic, and legitimate trade union of mineworkers. Similar to the role of the unions under the Stalinist regime, the old union has acted as an extension of the employer's propaganda machine by boasting about the investments of the company in the mine. To the workers' demands for higher wages, the old union has responded by echoing the employers' arguments of falling chromium prices in international markets and portraying the new organising as a strategy of the competitors to bankrupt the company.

The old trade union, just like the employer, has insisted that the workers are being manipulated by the labour activists. Clearly, both the old trade union and the employer have underestimated the capacity of workers to understand why Bulqiza remains one of the poorest regions in Albania, although the chromium exports from this area generate revenues of more than €100 million per year. Both are blind to the workers' deep frustration with the low wages they receive and the very dangerous working conditions they are exposed to in the mines where many have lost their lives and been declared responsible for their own deaths. And both are obviously unable to perceive that workers have finally decided to build a genuine trade union which can represent their interests.

The struggle of mineworkers in Bulqiza to exercise the fundamental worker rights of freedom of association and collective bargaining continues as the repression and the attacks against the democratic and independent trade union are escalating by day.

Lesson in democracy

The significance of this struggle, however, goes well beyond mineworkers. By electing their leaders directly from the membership and by asking for an open ballot to determine the most representative trade union to bargain for decent working conditions and fair wages, the new union is giving a basic lesson in democracy. At the same time, the struggle of mineworkers is exposing and challenging the widespread corruption in the country, which has locked Albania in a vicious cycle of poverty and desperation pushing people to migrate.

The courage of mineworkers, who are standing up to the most powerful man in the country, is exceptional for the Albanian reality. However, their struggle has more chance to prevail if there is international support for the workers and pressure on the government and the company. So far, the old trade union has used its membership in international trade unions to undermine the international support for the workers, thus directly helping the employer. The remarkable resistance of mineworkers is a unique opportunity for the international trade unions to pursue a clear strategy of supporting the emerging democratic and independent trade unions in Albania. What is at stake is not just the future of these organisations, but of the long-awaited birth of an independent labour movement in the country.

- *If you would like to learn more about the struggle of mineworkers, please visit this page: smbb.substack.com*
- *You can sign the solidarity call at Labour Start here: <http://www.labourstart.org/go/albania>*

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