Society for the Anthropology of Work

Care, Publicity, and Worker Politics in Late Industrial Bosnia and Herzegovina

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Published on: Nov 17, 2019

DOI: 10.21428/1d6be30e.e8c8d4dd

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Conditions in postsocialist Bosnia and Herzegovina introduced new dilemmas for industrial workers in the wake of mass privatization. One of them was how to pursue a demand-based politics when the usual tactics focused on the shop floor—labor strikes, work-to-rule actions, factory occupation—are unavailable. This is particularly true if the demands are to disburse unpaid salaries and social insurance contributions or to restart production when a factory has been idled by the debts, neglect, or rapacity of owners who have no interest in running a viable company. Given the number of firms across the country in economic free fall, the stakes can feel like much more than just the jobs in question. For industrial workers it can feel like the viability of the model of human flourishing and social reproduction made possible by industrial production is on the line. Such political dilemmas are not unique to Bosnia or even the postsocialist world; one might recall similar conditions facing workers in Argentina in the aftermath of the financial crisis at the last turn of the century. In Bosnia, however, these dilemmas required new forms of worker publicity, or being-in-public. This photo essay both documents some of these forms and responds to some of the representational lacunae they revealed. As such, we contribute to a visual anthropology of postsocialist industrial worker politics, pointing to new, experimental, and risky ways that workers and their supporters confront the possibilities and limits of media publicity.¹

Any demand-based politics requires a response-able and response-willing addressee, and many workers in Bosnia have had a hard time finding one. Absent owners have a way of remaining inaccessible and government officials usually declare worker demands a “private matter” and thus outside of their competency or responsibility. Such situations have compelled workers to experiment with ways of forcing a response from owners or, more often, from government figures, and this has pushed workers out of the factory and onto the streets, before the courts, into the halls of government ministries, and—when possible—into the news media. They have thus found themselves newly reliant on the production and circulation of mass-mediated representations, for in order to pressure the government to become a response-able and response-willing addressee, they need to be able to claim a public audience before whom officials could be embarrassed, ashamed, angered, or otherwise provoked: anything to conjure up relations of obligation on the part of the government. This was the case for the workers of the Dita detergent factory in the industrial city of Tuzla in northern Bosnia, whose struggle to restart production is the backdrop for this photo essay. Our research shows that their struggle pushed Dita workers out of their comfort zone and required them to newly assess what they were good at and where they might

need the help of others, in particular the publicity made possible by sympathetic journalists. Indeed, workers experienced media attention itself as a form of care because of the kinds of responses it could generate.

We found that in Tuzla, industrial workers from Dita and other firms in similar straits carefully considered the kinds of action and representations that might succeed in forcing the government to care about them—and maybe even care for them. Such representations usually fell into two broad categories. First, workers often staged public actions in a humanitarian register that called attention to their immiseration and destitution. These included hunger strikes and other threats of suicide, or the occupation of public space and articulation of worker suffering and impoverishment—and then the placement of the government in a position of responsibility for that dispossession.

The defiant spirit that Dita's workers sought to demonstrate indexed a broader attempt to differentiate themselves from workers at other firms with whom they sometimes collaborated. Dita workers were all too aware that creating and circulating images in a humanitarian register was risky and could distract the public from the dispossession at the root of their condition and, thus, from their overall aim to restart production. Indeed, images of suffering might instead lead people to see industrial workers as just another category of “needy subjects” seeking money from the government, alongside invalids from the 1990s war, families of killed soldiers, single mothers, and other more typical “welfare cases.” Even images of protest could be seen as part of a broader effort to extract financial resources from the government. For this reason, as the Dita strike leader told us, the public often misrecognized their struggle. Yes, Dita workers wanted the payment of the outstanding salaries and insurance contributions that they had earned, but the larger goal was to again be able to live from their work. This aim, however, was harder to publicize through images and the existing interpretive framework that drove most news media attention.

The mediascape that workers sought to navigate was made up of local, regional, and national publicly funded and private broadcast media (radio and television), print media (multiple daily newspapers and weekly news magazines), as well as local and regional online news portals. At times the workers' struggle also attracted some attention from international or internationally funded news media. Our analysis shows that there was one dominant interpretive framework in the Bosnian news media when it came to the story of industrial labor in Tuzla: that of “former industrial giants” (*bivši industrijski giganti*) who were now “failed companies” (*propalih preduzeća*) in various

states of ruination and inevitable collapse. We would argue that there were political and economic forces that had a vested interest in this declensionist narrative. After the 1990s war, successive rounds of privatization had had catastrophic effects on Tuzla's industrial economy. The process was poorly understood and even more poorly regulated, and this enabled workers and others to trade, sell, or buy ownership shares in industrial firms, often without having a clear plan for how or whether to keep them working. Instead, some borrowers sought to use these firms as collateral for loans that they would never fully pay off; when it came time to repay the debt that they had loaded onto these firms, new owners would (without consulting workers) declare bankruptcy or sell off the real property and other assets, effectively shutting the company down. It was in this context that the narrative of decline and failure took hold, and over time it contributed to the devaluation of remaining industrial companies, making them cheaper to buy and making it easier to disavow any responsibility to repay loans. The framework of inevitable decline and failure also benefited government forces who wanted to reject responsibility for the condition of the economy.

So while publicity—or being-in-public—was critical to their demand-based politics, in order to attract media attention workers were compelled to fit into this narrative framework, either as miserable and suffering subjects, defiant (but nevertheless doomed) subjects, or some combination of the two. Of course, staging actions that mixed representations of destitution, defiance, and disemployment were not without effect. The ability of mass media to generate and circulate forms of public affect—like indignity, compassion, and rage—contained an unpredictable but undeniable potency in “Red Tuzla” because of the city's proud industrial heritage, working-class culture, and rebellious history of labor uprisings. Government officials could never completely ignore publicized scenes of worker suffering or defiance, although they were relatively adept at evading worker demands. And even when—or perhaps especially when—public actions failed to move government addressees to meet worker demands, they often inspired minor but crucial acts of support by fellow citizens. Still, workers were rarely able to describe their perspectives outside of short soundbites that fit the larger narrative of failure and decline, and this made any calls to restart production appear unrealistic.

This is what made Dita so unique. In 2015, after twenty years of postwar and postsocialist privatization, it was the first company of its size in Bosnia to enter bankruptcy proceedings and be given the chance to restart production, rather than suffer the usual job losses and liquidation of property to pay banks and other creditors.

The chance to restart production was made possible by a number of factors, perhaps primarily the fact that the workers had patrolled the factory grounds in around-the-clock shifts for over two years. This prevented the owner from selling off any part of the factory, and it kept at bay the ubiquitous metal pickers who prowled the ruins of Tuzla's vast industrial zone. Dita also benefited from a mass uprising in February 2014 that forced the government and mass media to pay more attention to socioeconomic issues.

Once again, however, Dita's middle-aged workers faced new and unprecedented challenges, namely, to demonstrate to themselves and the state-appointed bankruptcy lawyer that they were a viable firm. This meant producing and selling their products under nearly impossible conditions: they had almost no raw materials or advertising budget and no financial resources or access to bank credit. This situation was exacerbated by the fact that the factory's well-worn machinery was in an unknown state after having been idle for at least two years (and some of it for considerably longer), and the fact that the pipeline that delivered hot water to the factory from the nearby heating plant had a gap of about 400 meters, which the metal pickers had managed to remove from an area that lay outside of Dita's factory campus. No hot water meant that even if access to raw materials were not a problem, they could only produce a few of their most important product lines. Yet no long-term solution for the factory could proceed until the workers had proven it was viable, which meant demonstrating that all of their production facilities still worked and that there was still a market for their main product lines. Images of defiance or suffering were of no use here, but publicity nevertheless played an important, if unexpected, role.

Most of our images come from this period of the Dita workers' struggle: the revival of the factory. We want to highlight two aspects of this phase. The first has to do with the production of value through an extraordinary media campaign animated by the owner of a Tuzla-based online news portal, *Front Slobode*. This campaign was organized largely independently of workers and cost them nothing. It sought to enlist ordinary citizens in the effort to "save Dita" by buying one of their products, taking a selfie with it, and posting it on social media sites created to document the campaign. In Tuzla, and more broadly in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the campaign had nostalgic underpinnings, relying upon the population's broad familiarity with the Dita brand and products, particularly their associations with a more prosperous time when the socialist firm produced for all of Yugoslavia and markets from Europe to the Middle East.

The selfie-with-Dita campaign, in turn, had a cascading effect: citizens from all walks of life spontaneously responded, with both well-known and upcoming musical artists creating and circulating songs, graphic artists designing advertisements for donated billboard space, and a local grocery chain giving Dita products valuable shelf space in its stores and calling upon customers to take pride in “buying domestic.”

Visit the web version of this article to view interactive content.

Pjesma za Ditu - Sheyla - Official Video

Visit the web version of this article to view interactive content.

Dubioza Kolektiv DITA Reklama

Another action was to organize volunteer days, inviting ordinary citizens—including young men and women who had no relationship to Dita—onto the factory floor to help clean areas where production would soon be restarted. The news media was invited to report on these actions, creating even more sympathetic publicity for Dita’s cause.

This campaign was novel in Bosnia and Herzegovina for how it used social media to create new participant roles for ordinary and extraordinary citizens to support Dita in its efforts to become a rare “success story” of postsocialism. It both circumvented and infiltrated existing news media and prompted a change in the dominant narrative of industrial decline and failure. It did this by creating an economy of images that produced value for the company. By turning Dita into a social cause (to “save Dita”) with high public visibility, they sold more of their products. This, in turn, changed the political calculation for the government officials evaluating Dita’s bankruptcy status, in the workers’ favor. It also created incentives for local politicians and state-owned firms to publicly support Dita, such as those who eventually arranged for the replacement of the missing pipeline. The new pipeline enabled workers to revive still more product lines. Scenes from this revival are included in our essay’s final selection of images and they index the second aspect of the worker struggle we highlight.

When workers complained that the public did not recognize their struggle, they meant more than the interpretive risks inherent in circulating images of suffering or defiance. We believe it was also a complaint about the limitations of news media frameworks more generally, and the way they erased crucial aspects of worker lives and worker struggles. While the media campaign to support Dita workers resulted in an expanded

set of narrative possibilities regarding industrial labor, most news media images of the factory or of workers at work reflected conventional representations: machines operating, products being assembled and loaded onto pallets, workers arriving for their shifts, and so on. Missing here was the materiality of the labor process itself, as well as the affective and kin-like attachments that workers have with one another and with the factory. Such attachments were built up over decades of work under a self-managing socialist system that made the factory the socially owned property of all of its workers, a center of social life and human flourishing.

Dita workers' complaints about the narrow vision of news media representations when it came to their struggle to restart production led us to observe a lacuna in the anthropological scholarship regarding labor politics. This scholarship tends to focus on the labor process or the labor of organizing workers or relations of exploitation or union activism or protest actions, but we find few examples of research that links worker relations with the factory, with one another through the factory, and with public struggles outside the factory. Our last selection of photos seeks to respond to this lacuna by attending to the materiality of production and workers' relationships with the machines. These include images of care, of repair and restoration, likened by workers to reviving an inert body. These images index key components of industrial production's infrastructure of care—where the workers cared for the machines whose proper operation was also a way for workers to care for each other, for these machines enabled the production that allowed workers to care for their dependents. Such relations played a critical role in animating the struggle of Dita workers, and we imagine that this might be true for other late industrial workers in the postsocialist world and beyond.

Photos

Photo courtesy of Front Slobode.

Worker protests were designed to work on multiple levels. On a visual level, they were meant to communicate fearless opposition or critique of government. Indeed, one of the hallmarks of Dita workers' public actions was the willingness of both male and female workers to confront government authorities, despite the threat of force. Many of the men referred to their military experience in the Bosnian war as being far worse than anything that police or private security could do, and as having trained them in how to engage in a fight. However, knowing that the news media does not always allow workers to articulate the substance of their opposition—and, indeed, may seek to fold images of opposition into preexisting narratives of postsocialist industrial decline—workers used signs to communicate directly with viewers regardless of what the journalists might say. The text of the signs was always meant to be provocative and address multiple audiences: government officials, fellow workers, members of the public. In this particular photo, two workers from Dita casually position themselves in

front police in riot gear, who have blocked the entrance to a government building. Their signs read: *We don't want bankruptcy; Dita workers are suffering, who knows who is next?*; and *Dita is collapsing, citizens keep quiet and the government is taking advantage of it all.*

Photo courtesy of Front Slobode.

In this photo, signs demand an audit of privatization processes, which is connected to a common complaint among workers that privatization was rife with illegality and criminality. Visible to the left is an enlarged photo of Tito, communist revolutionary and president for life of socialist Yugoslavia. In Bosnia, his likeness is often used to give voice to socialist-era values or achievements considered publicly popular. In rhyming verse the text of the sign (not visible here) exhorts Tito to rise from the grave to see the appalling things that his “pioneers” (here, meaning the children of socialism) are doing to the workers of Dita and the achievements of industrialization more generally [*Ustaj Tito iz te zemlje hladne pa da vidite šta nam tvoji pioniri rade*]. This and the preceding photo were taken in February 2014 on the first day of a routine

street protest of a few hundred workers and other social groups that grew and spread across Bosnia-Herzegovina over the course of three days and, in some towns and cities, resulted in running battles with police. In Tuzla, the protest crowd eventually grew to over ten thousand, overwhelmed police forces, set fire to two government buildings, and forced the resignation of the cantonal government. While Dita workers were clear that they did not participate in or condone any of the violence of these protests, most pointed to the 2014 uprising as a turning point in their struggle, including an increase in the presence of workers and of socioeconomic issues in the news media.

Images from the Selfie sa Ditom Facebook page.

In part, the Selfie-with-Dita campaign drew upon elements of nostalgia and the population's broad familiarity with Dita's brand and products to counteract a dominant narrative in postsocialist Bosnia, namely, that consumer items produced in a socialist-era factory were outdated and had no value. An early entry from the campaign featured Tuzla-based hip-hop superstar Frenkie, showing his purchase of the only three products Dita had for sale at the time.

Images from the Selfie sa Ditom Facebook page.

Knowing that not everyone would be able to find a Dita product in their local store, a small group took oversized sculptures of two of the most popular products and placed them at main squares in several Bosnian cities, inviting passersby to take a selfie with the sculpture. Here, conceptual artist and sometime politician Damir Nikšić takes a selfie at the Children of Sarajevo Square in front of Sarajevo's biggest shopping mall.

Images from the Selfie sa Ditom Facebook page.

The campaign combined new and old symbols such as this banner, which was shared on Facebook and Twitter. With the 2014 uprising still fresh in people's minds, the campaign sought to make purchasing Dita products an act of protest and solidarity. The text here, "We're actually supporting people," plays off of a well-known advertising slogan for Dita laundry detergent: "It actually smells white [*Fakat miriše bjelo*]."

Photo by Andrew Gilbert.

In Dita's bankruptcy phase and attempting to restart production of its full product lines, it became important to provide an alternative to the narrative of loss and destitution which was in common use in Bosnian media reporting on the country's industrial heritage and workers. Dita workers were much more interested in displaying the fruits of their decades-long labor, and in showing that the factory had the capacity to benefit future generations as it had benefited them. Volunteer actions helped to do that and may have even contained resonances with socialist-era *radne akcije* (work actions), collective labor designed to build the common good. Here, two youth

volunteers help to clean up the third floor of Dita's factory, likely the first time they had ever been in an industrial facility like this one.

Photo by Andrew Gilbert.

Volunteer cleaning actions were not only valuable for their impact on participants and workers. Regional and national media were invited to report upon these events, demonstrating citizen support for Dita and its campaign to restart production. Here, local activist, university professor, and longtime Dita ally Damir Arsenijević answers the questions of local journalists.

Photo by Haris Husarić.

During the bankruptcy period, one way the workers kept hope alive was through fastidious care of the machines and built environment of the factory, which many of them remarked felt more like their home than the houses and apartments they lived in. It is not surprising, then, that the revival of the factory was suffused with the language of kin-like obligations: of children to care for their elders, of workers to care for one another by caring for the machines that secured their livelihood, of workers to provide jobs for coming generations. As one middle-aged female worker put it, likening the factory to a woman (playing with the fact that the Bosnian word for *factory* is a feminine noun): “When Dita began operating more than 35 years ago, she was elegant, she was polished, smelled good, was beautiful.” But then the factory began to break down, particularly during the period that it was idled:

I had this feeling that she became an old woman . . . [she] stank, she was cold and silent. But when someone says that they will extinguish her, I say no, you will not. I will bring her back. So we cleaned her . . . maybe she will never again be that beauty that she once was, but she will be much better than an old woman. Thirty-eight years is not even old. She can still give a lot of herself.

Once hot water was restored to the factory, Dita workers strove to revive a very complex process for certain products, often working through the night when it was

cheaper to run the factory. The worn machines required constant monitoring and adjusting for any possible malfunctioning due to the years they sat idle. Even under the best of circumstances, the combination of heat, pressure, and chemicals required for the production of high-quality detergent made this kind of factory work potentially dangerous.

Photo by Haris Husarić.

A number of workers we spoke with felt that the public did not really understand what working with machines was like. In particular they pushed back against the idea that production was carried out automatically, independent of the workers. One mechanic described a more symbiotic relationship between workers and the machinery of production, with the former constantly adjusting and responding to and helping the latter to accomplish its tasks. Another argued that you had to dedicate yourself to this work, particularly to the demanding machines (*zahtjevne mašine*) that required the attention of multiple workers to operate successfully. Without such attention, there was significant risk involved: workers could show us scars and missing digits that resulted from accidents with machines. Despite such risks, industrial production had a quotidian value. As one mechanic put it, those machines “fed hundreds of worker

families.” Here, during one of the night shifts, a worker runs a hose pouring cold water over a valve in an attempt to cool down a pipe that is running too hot.

Photo by Haris Husarić.

Work in the Dita factory is intensely sensorial, particularly the sounds and vibrations of the production process and the attempts of workers to yell above the din. Part of the practical knowledge of production—like knowing how well the machines are working—comes from listening and sensing them in the body, in addition to the various instruments and gauges.

Photo by Haris Husarić.

One of the best ways to test the quality of the laundry detergent is through smell and touch as it runs along the conveyer belt before packaging. This too is a hope-sustaining sensorial experience. For workers fighting the pessimism that has threatened to overwhelm them every day since their struggle began, the sensation of warm washing detergent powder slipping through the fingers, and its smell of cleanliness, is the feeling and scent of success. One worker described her reaction when they initiated the full detergent production process for the first time since re-entering the factory:

That sound, all of those machines, those pumps, burners, the powder detergent . . . all that throbbing and shaking—that is the sound of life. When the powder started to flow on the belts, it was coming out clean in excellent condition, that was that Dita that I remembered. It works, no matter how, whether it's pretty or not. We saw that we can earn money . . . and live solid and civilized lives.

For workers who spent over three decades of their working lives at Zrno, reviving the factory meant reviving a valued sense of community and expertise—and this

meant demonstrating a fierce commitment to quality control. This commitment was bound up in the same feeling of ownership that underwrote their struggle from its inception. As lab technician and strike leader Minka Busuladžić, pictured here, put it: “My coworkers and I were here from the very beginning. It has always been our factory and it has to stay that way.” Such statements belied the uncertainty about the future that hung over this period of their struggle.

Photo by Haris Husarić.

Another important sign of Dita’s revival was the presence of younger workers; it was a confirmation that even those without decades of life invested in the factory could see a future in it. This was one of the core arguments of the workers during their struggle while the factory was idle: they were not seeking to restart production just to maintain their own jobs, but also to offer viable prospects for good work in a region which was losing young people to outmigration by the tens of thousands. As more than one worker put it, Dita ought to exist for more than one generation. Here, the presence of a young lab technician turns the narrative of postsocialist decline on its head, offering evidence of possible future prosperity.

Photo courtesy of Dorian Juric.

Once production of the powder detergent was underway, the factory began to resume promotional practices. Here, they are producing small “gift” or sample packets of their laundry detergent. However, the machine they use requires a lot more human aid than it once did. Pieces of it were needed to make other machines work, so that what would have previously been a more automatic process supervised by a single worker, now takes the efforts of four: one to pour the detergent into the top, one to press the button that drops the detergent into a plastic bag and seals it, one to poke a small hole into the sealed bag to release excess air and prevent it from exploding, and one to place the bags into a box for shipping to grocery stores.

Author Bios

Andrew Gilbert is a sociocultural anthropologist who has been doing research in Bosnia and Herzegovina for nearly twenty years. His first research project focused on the politics of international intervention and the relationship between the historical imagination (how people conceive of history) and the political imagination (how people conceive what is politically possible). More recently, he has investigated the conditions that create openings and closures to political experimentation and social

transformation, focusing on a series of worker-initiated protests and their aftermath in the Bosnian city of Tuzla. This has led to a growing interest in collaboration and in the political and ethnographic potential of diverse media, such as the [graphic ethnography](#) he is working on with Larisa Kurtović and Boris Stapić.

Haris Husarić is a Tuzla-based sociologist who contributes to academic and popular publications in the region and internationally. His contributions to the Zagreb-based publication *Bilten* can be found [here](#). Husarić holds a master's from Masaryk University in Brno. Bringing together features of visual storytelling and scholarly rigor, his work investigates how ordinary life changes with the decline of postsocialist industry.

Acknowledgments

The research that underpins this photo essay was financed, in part, by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, and the Wenner Gren Foundation. We thank, above all, the workers of Dita who shared with us their time and allowed us to learn from them. We also thank Alen Haman, Dorian Juric, and the participants in the [Workers University](#) initiative at the time that most of these photos were taken, many of whom helped us to develop our thinking on the issues we take up here: Damir Arsenijević, Jasmina Husanović, Azra Jašarević, Sanja Horić, Vanessa Vasić-Janković, and Pavlina Vujović. We are grateful for the engagement of our two reviewers, Čarna Brković and Matthew Durlington, whose comments helped us to clarify and improve an earlier draft of the essay [**Editor's Note:** to read them, expand the Comments section at the bottom of this page, click the funnel icon, and then enable "Browse archived comments"]. Thank you also to Marcel LaFlamme for shepherding this photo essay through its various stages to completion.

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Footnotes

1. This essay can be read fruitfully alongside the work of Rory Archer and Goran Musić (2017), Chiara Bonfiglioli (2013, 2014, 2017), Deana Jovanović (2018), Ognjen Kojanic (2018), and Ivan Rajković (2018), which explores the complex lives and afterlives of late industrial labor in post-Yugoslav states and societies. [↵](#)