

**SOCIOLOGY IN XXI CENTURY:  
CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES**



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# SOCIOLOGY IN XXI CENTURY: CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES

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## SOCIOLOGY AND WORKERS' STRIKES IN SERBIA IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

This paper deals with the state of sociological thought in Serbia about social conflicts and the characteristics of workers' strikes in the first decades of the 21st century. On the one hand, there are authors who believe this was due to the transformation into liberal capitalism. They rarely mention class conflicts and social inequalities, and strikes are beyond their analysis. On the other hand, sociologists emphasize that transition has led to the creation of a society on the semi-periphery of the capitalist economic system (Volerstin, 2005). They tend to perceive social conflicts and strikes from a wider perspective, above all because of the changes in the relationship between power and the character of the world and the domestic capitalist class. The underlying hypothesis reads: in Serbian society, the dominance of national and state issues over class issues contributes to the decline of the number of strikes. At the end of the transition, strikes became pseudo-strikes. The nature, the types and the dynamics of strikes are largely determined by the nature of the class society. At the center of the analysis are the characteristics of the social structure, the basic classes and the strikes of workers during the last two and a half decades. Based on this it is concluded that the working class has been systematically destroyed through privatization of social property, and its empirical class consciousness is confusing.

**Key words:** capitalist class, class consciousness, privatization, strike of workers, sociology

### Introduction

The text looks at the nature of the Serbian society at the beginning of the accelerated transition and privatization of social property. Sociologically, it analyzes, describes and explains the essence of changing the social structure and economy after 2000. Special attention is paid to the characteristics of the privatization of social property and the consequences that it had on the members of the working class. Basic social conflicts in the society of capitalist periphery are considered, workers' strikes being among them. The way in which conflicts, their forms of manifestation, flow, dynamics, and consequences will arise are, to a large extent, determined by the nature of society. It is very important for strikes since the class nature of society

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depends on the most important causes of strikes, the attitude of its participants and the final results. Even before 2000, strikes appeared in “waves”, with the suppression of national and state issues, and after that, they appeared as more powerful and more frequent. The starting hypothesis reads: in the Serbian society at the beginning of the 21st century, strikes were organized in “waves”, more often and more massively when the the national and state issues were not dominated by society. Over the last two decades of transition, workers’ strikes have crossed the path of open industrial conflicts of class character to pseudo-shocks. At the same time, a thesis is examined that labor strikes in the first decades of the accelerated transition of Serbia were more unpredictable than in the first decade of transition before 1990. This is to be proven by analyzing the nature of strikes, the characteristics of the social environment in which they are organized, the social power of the participants of the strikes and the most important causes of these open industrial conflicts in a classically divided society. For this, numerous scientific and experiential materials on the economic system, social structure, inequalities and conflicts, data from trade union archives and information of official state authorities and institutions are used.

### **Sociology and Social Conflicts in a Society in Transition**

Sociology in Serbia has been in crisis for decades. This is reflected in the methodology, but also in the selection of topics to be explored. On the one hand, there are sociologists who adhere to the ruling ideology of neo-liberalism and who believe that society is on the right path to become democratic and market-oriented. Therefore, they have problems with the subject of their research which does not call into question the chosen and realized concept of transition. There are not some “large” themes, such as classes, class conflicts and social inequalities. They are considered marginal and the processes of forming new elites, entrepreneurship, social inclusion, and sustainable development are at the center of attention. There is also an analysis of the position of marginal and vulnerable groups and a critique of the existing situation from the point of view of human rights. The existing social system (in the country and the world) is not at all called into question. It only tends to remove some of its visible shortcomings. On the other hand, there are few sociologists who explain the basic characteristics of the social structure, individual subsystems, classes and layers through old and new approaches and emphasize that this is a class society on a half-product of the capitalist system. For them, the notions of class structure, class conflict, exploitation, and social inequality are indispensable. Therefore, they consider that, in order to study the changes of the Serbian society, one must necessarily take into account developments outside that society, the whole of the capitalist system and the influence of the centers of economic, political and military power in the world. Only then can one understand the nature of the ruling capitalist class in Serbia, its attitude towards the “international community” and the way it relates to the employment of the working class. All of the above is complicated by the fact that ethnic and religious

conflicts have dominated the past three decades, which partly blurred the basic lines of class radicalization in society. In short, in our sociology at the beginning of the 21st century, there are few works dealing with social conflicts, especially strikes as open industrial conflicts. There are attempts in other sciences, such as economics, history, and politics, to analyze strikes in this region, but they are partial and do not relate to a longer period and in a wider social space. The collapse of the common state has led to the collapse of the sociological community, in which a gap has emerged between generations, which have the same or similar research topics (Bolčić, 2012, p. 1114).

This text starts from the view that the study of social conflicts is fruitful in the sense that it allows insight into the basic directions of changing the social structure, characteristics, social values and interests of conflict participants. Conflicts are considered a normal social phenomenon, not only destructive, but also important for the existence of social groups, for their identity and for the dynamics of the social structure (Kozer, 2007, p. 39, 50, 74). Systemic factors are most important for the nature of social conflicts between large social groups, such as classes. The class nature of society is also manifested through class conflicts, and strikes are just one of the ways of the manifestation of class conflicts. They are open industrial conflicts in which laborers and representatives of the capital clash. Relations between them are complex, and among other things, also affected by “concealed” forms of conflict (negligence, sickness, etc.). This was pointed out by critically oriented sociologists in their research (Neca Jovanov, Lidija Mohar, Nebojša Popov, Vladimir Arzenšek, for example (Novaković, 2007, p. 115).

In a transition society, labor strikes were driven in special conditions, occurring in “waves” and indirectly demonstrating the degree of presence or absence of the so-called “empirical class consciousness” of the working class. The most important process was the privatization of social ownership over the means of production. Therefore, the causes of strikes and the demands of their participants were different in times before the start of privatization, during privatization and after its termination. After 2000, strikers have not only been part of the working class from the production sector, but also employees in public companies and public and state services. The ruling elite, which is part of the capitalist class, has selectively addressed strikers and participants in public protests. The final result of the strikes is the decision-making power of their participants, so each defeat of strikers meant a further loss of their social power and seemed to be supported by other workers and other citizens.

### **Privatization of Social Property and Consequences for Workers**

The privatization of social property in Serbia entered the acceleration phase at the beginning of the 21st century. With the shift of the ruling political elites, on October 5, 2000, a new political environment was created for the continuation of privatization. The “international” factor became dominant, i.e. the interests of international creditors and other centers of political, financial and military power.

They have decisively influenced the behavior of the authorities in Serbia, with whom they have related (class) interests. Some of indirect pieces of evidence for this claim are system laws adopted after 2000. Among them, the Law on Privatization has special significance. It was adopted in 2001, after which it was amended several times. Its essence remained the same, i.e. the law is illegitimate and illegal, but in reality, it is applied. The illegality of the Law on Privatization is reflected, among other things, in the fact that it violated the highest legal act of the state (the Constitution), and then other numerous applicable laws. Moreover, the implementation of this law in practice followed the imposition of numerous by-laws and regulations, which were often contrary to the existing legal system of the country. They mostly protected the interests of the capitalist class and were at the expense of the working class and most of the members of other classes and layers in Serbia.

The Privatization Law accelerated the privatization of social property, the change of the social (class) structure of society. On the one hand, it has accelerated the creation of a new capitalist class, whose only part of the political elite is in power, and on the other hand, it has “degraded” all social groups that based their position on socially owned assets. It is the largest social group, i.e. the working class, which is also the biggest loser of privatization and accelerated transition of society. Instead of financial and social security, Serbia’s workers have suffered a massive loss of work and financial conditions for life leading to poverty and degradation to the margins of society. These are conditions that systematically prevent the recovery of the working class, the creation of minimal financial, institutional and political assumptions that workers need to protect their overall social position and improve it by collective action. A further fragmentation of the working class was accelerated after 2008, with the domestic capitalist class providing the greatest contribution to this fact, and only then the global economic crisis. The absence of genuine workers’ unions and political parties defending the interests of the working class further complicates the situation in which the working class has no ability to form empirical awareness of the class interests and provide even more serious class resistance to these processes.

The massive loss of jobs is a logical consequence of the accelerated privatization of social property and the creation of a society of capitalist periphery. Following it, there are two parallel processes – the de-industrialization and the growth of official and actual unemployment. Deindustrialization has left 700,000 workers out of work, brought about the destruction of entire strategic industries, the fall in labor productivity, disinvestment and the decline in industrial production below its level before the transition (Novaković, 2016, p. 746). The efficiency of invested funds also decreased, and according to this indicator, the new ownership structure proved even more inefficient than the one it replaced. The new private sector has reduced both the number of employees and the achieved economic, social and trade union rights of employees. This is indicated by research performed by state institutions, as well as research on wages and worker strikes.

The most important proclaimed goals of privatization have not been achieved: the development of an efficient market economy based on private property, the

creation of productive jobs and the reduction of unemployment, the reduction of indebtedness of the country, a better material standard of employees and the rest of the population. In the period 2000–2017, Serbia was among the slowest growing countries of the region, according to GDP growth, the country's indebtedness with foreign creditors has been extremely high, the share of domestic investments has fallen, and the dependence of both the economy and the companies on foreign creditors has increased. (Radenković, 2016, p. 25; Telesković, 2017, p. 11; Katić, 2018, p. 330). The country received 2.6 billion euros for socially owned property it sold, (Ćurčić, 2015, p. 78). The implemented neoliberal model of transition and “shock” privatization affected the economy and society as a whole so that according to economic and social indicators of development, the development is below the level before the beginning of the transition. The highest price was paid by the workers, and the biggest winners are the owners of domestic and foreign big capital.

The poverty of the employed and the rest of the population is a logical consequence of the economic and social development of Serbia after 2000. According to official statistics, poverty affects most of the unemployed, young people, citizens without regular or with a low income, with lower education, especially if they live in multi-member families with more dependent members. In the period 2006–2016, for which the statistical data were revised, absolute poverty did not decrease (Mladenović, 2017, p. 7). Being among the poorest, workers were also often protested in the streets, squares and other public spaces.

### **Workers' strikes in Serbia in the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century: the causes and consequences**

Workers' strikes a few years before the political changes in October 2000 were rare and with modest demands. The basic reason for this is the fact that the country was bombarded in 1999 and the years of the restoration of demolished buildings followed. There were 80,000 workers left without work, and social solidarity was introduced. The attitude to this issue also shows conflicts within the working class, changes in trade unions and attitudes of the middle classes in society. The long-suppressed dissatisfaction resulted in the aforementioned changes, in which, according to Srećko Mihailović's assessment, middle classes, entrepreneurs, and better-educated workers mostly participated. Peasants and unskilled workers did not get involved (Mihailović, 2001). The politicization of trade union centers and large branches has come to the fore. At key moments of change, demonstrations were supported by the Serbian electric company trade unions and the miners of “Kolubara”. They later launched their demands quickly and successfully. Among the strikers were workers employed in large retail chains (“Beograd”), in the metal and automobile industries (“Crvena Zastava”, Kragujevac), people employed in large agricultural companies, workers in state-owned enterprises, as well as employees in banks, education, and health care. Slightly fewer strikes were in private companies, some which had been sold to foreigners.



After that, there was a “crash” of strikes and worker’s protests, most often ignored by the authorities and capitalists. The state also passed laws that protected the interests of the capitalist class. Workers were deprived of the right to previous claims, and many of the obligations of the owners of the capital were excused and socialized by the state. Such action was undoubtedly the one in which the state, at the expense of all taxpayers, “correlated years of service with damaged workers”. Usually, these campaigns took place prior to important political elections, so government representatives gained the voters in this way. Of course, there were also easy promises, quickly forgotten after the elections. On this occasion, we only briefly outline some of the most important demands of the strikers and the attitude of the government and capitalists towards them. In addition, frequent strikes and protests by workers of the same companies, almost with the same requirements, indirectly prove their low social power and ineffectiveness of these strikes. The weak unions at the national and factory levels, close to the authorities and capitalists, contributed to this.

In companies and institutions that did not start privatization, the most common causes of strikes were the most frequent: 1. to avoid imposing bankruptcy on a successful company (“Srboteks”, for example), 2. to get out of bankruptcy, 3. to continue production and not to fire workers, 4. that the state pays the earnings in the companies it owns, 5. against the mass dismissal of workers, 6. to plan the reorganization of public enterprises, 7. for new job classification and social programs for redundant workers, 8. the signing or adhering to a special collective agreement, 9. payment of pension and disability insurances, and 10. better working conditions. Demands for payments, regular and overdue earnings and their increase were different. “Telekom” employees received 10% even at the time when the earnings were frozen (*Blic*, January 10, 2001). The state owed 17 earnings to the employees of the Karadordevo agricultural estate, and the prime minister personally threatened strikers with dismissals from work. In RK “Beograd” in Kragujevac, which was bankrupt, workers were deprived of 48 salaries and 55 payouts to the pension fund, which was a cause of a hunger strike in 2003. (Radovanović, 2003) The workers of the textile factory “Raska” from Novi Pazar sued against bankruptcy, and for the regulation of their property status. By April 2009, they received 188 earnings and payments to the pension fund for several years (Bakračević, 2009). In the second decade of accelerated transition, striker demands were more modest, and the outcome of strikes was lower. A special category is represented by publicly owned enterprises, upon which the state imposed restructuring. Workers’ strikes in companies “EPS”, “Telekom”, “Zeleznice Srbije” and “JAT” confirmed the firm intention of the state to prepare them for sale. The resistance of employees was accompanied by threat and use of force by line ministries, and most of their strikes only slowed down privatization (Novaković, 2013, p. 15, 16).

Workers in the companies in which the privatization began had special reasons for strikes and protests. For one, the problem was the way in which the privatization began, whether they had social programs, actions, and what the roles of the state and the new owner of the company were. There were several strikes against the imposed

privation on successful companies. Such were the strikes in “Ravanica”, which was repeatedly under pressure of the Privatization Agency and the courts (Bailović, 2011, p. 140). The resistance of these workers to the forced administration and sale of the company lasted for years. There were businesses that were repeatedly sold, then recovered or improved. Unlike them, the workers of the agricultural company “Godoman” from Smederevo asked for acceleration after 2 years of privatization. That is why they were staging a hunger strike, and at the time they claimed 12 unpaid salaries and payments to the pension fund for 96 months (*Sindikalni poverenik*, 2001). Workers at the “Partizan” raw-leather factory in Kragujevac were dissatisfied with the way the company was privatized (without the knowledge of small stockholders, through the stock market) and they went on strike for days to cancel the sale, claim 96 salaries and payments to the pension fund for 65 months. In the end, the state canceled the privatization, linked the length employment and paid for the social program. No salaries were paid (Kartalović, 2009). A large number of workers’ strikes in companies that started the privatization ended in failure.

The most common causes of strikes in privatized enterprises were the following: 1. obeying of the contract by the buyer, 2. that the Privatization Agency cancels the sale contract, 3. the payment of funds for the social program, 4. the start and/or continuation of production, 5. the investment in the company by the buyer, 6. the payment of salaries, 7. the payment of salaries, payment to the pension fund, 8. confirmation of the buyer intentionally destroying the enterprise and leading it to bankruptcy, 9. signing and respecting the collective agreement and 10. against the bad working conditions.

The sale of the Hesteel Serbia “Sartid” to the U.S. Steel, i.e. the daughter companies in Kosice was of great importance for the ruling political elite. The price was \$ 23 million, with a debt of \$ 1.7 billion. The company was in bankruptcy, and there was no production. Workers were on strike in the autumn of 2003. They were relatively successful in striking for salary growth, signing a collective agreement and hiring another 450 workers. (Novaković, 2017, p. 219) Two factory unions worked well and ended a relatively successful strike. In many other companies sold to foreigners, there were major problems. Kraljevo’s “Magnohrom” was sold to “Global Steel Holdings” (India). The owner destroyed the production, did not pay salaries and contributions to the pension fund, and did not even invest in the company. Numerous strikes by workers ended without success (Novaković, 2017, p. 221). In 2010, it was nationalized. “Trayal” was sold to the “Brikel EAD” Galabovo, Bulgaria. It ended production, laid off workers, and did not pay salaries and pension and healthcare insurance taxes. Strikers have requested salaries, books, insurance payments and capacity utilization. The management rejected them (Stanković, 2009). They were not supported by factory unions. It went bankrupt in 2011. Strikes and protests were often launched in Zrenjanin’s “Jugoremedija”. The workers asked for their ownership rights, the termination of the contract with the buyer who falsely recapitalized and destroyed the company and owed employees salaries and other material benefits. The rejection of the interests of the buyer, government, judiciary, and state authorities has

come to full expression, but at the expense of dissatisfied workers (Popov, 2011; Zlatić, 2013). The case was similar with other companies bought by this owner (“Srbolek”, Belgrade) (Bailović et al, 2011, pp. 178–189). Pharmaceutical, as well as the textile industry, collapsed. In Niš, “Niteks” was sold to an owner close to the government. He destroyed the precursor, owed workers earnings, a social program and insurance payments. It was only after several strikes in 2009 that the sale contract was terminated ([www.crvena.org](http://www.crvena.org), July 15, 2009). In GIP “1. Maj” from Lapovo, workers who were on strike did not even know who owned the company. The company did not work, and they were without 9 earnings and years of unpaid pension and healthcare insurance (*Blic*, November 14, 2009). In Kuršumljija, a “small uprising” broke out among workers whose businesses were repeatedly sold and destroyed. Solidarity was at the local level. Employees of SIK “Kopaonik” and “7. Jul” demanded the launch of production, salaries and health insurance. The authorities ignored the workers and the citizens (*Blic*, January 20, 2010).

## Conclusion

After 2000, the creation of a society of in a capitalist periphery was accelerated and completed in Serbia. It is such in all the most important economic, social, demographic, political and social indicators. The way, dynamics, subjects and the consequences of its formation were determined by class interests of domestic and foreign capital. This was especially evident in the selection and implementation of the model of neoliberal transition of society and of the (“shock”) privatization of social property. A new capitalist class was formed, which based its legitimacy on private property, entrepreneurship, and profit, and a marginalized working class was also destroyed.

Privatization has led to a massive job loss, the rise of official and unregistered unemployment, the destruction of the economy and industry, and the growth of the “gray” economy, and in particular the poverty of employees and workers who lost their jobs. They reacted differently to this, from a passive acceptance of the situation to the organization of strikes and protests in public spaces. In the first “wave” of strikes (2003 and 2004), labor strikes were more massive, more frequent and relatively successful. In the second “wave” (2009 and 2010), there was a higher number of workers’ protests than strikes. They were, among other things, a consequence of the failure of earlier strikes. Until then, most of the companies were privatized, and these strikers were mostly ignored by the authorities and capitalists. Solidarity between strikers was rare, usually at the local level. At the end of the second decade of the 21st century, strikers and protesters were workers in bankrupt companies, and there are no more than 55,000 officially employed. Occasionally, employees in public companies that have not yet come to the queue for privatization are on strike.

The causes and demands of strikers differed depending on the ownership status of the company and the institution in which they were employed. In fact, it can be

said that labor strikes were becoming more ineffective as the privatization of social property accelerated and was coming to an end. The main reasons are the superiority of the capitalist class, the absence of the rule of law, flexible labor legislation, the weakness of the unions, the lack of authentic workers' parties and the massive poverty of workers. At the end of the transition, the working class of Serbia was crushed and multi-marginalized, with confused class consciousness, as indicated by research on the characteristics of strikes over the last two decades.

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## **СОЦИОЛОГИЈА И РАДНИЧКИ ШТРАЈКОВИ У СРБИЈИ У 21. ВЕКУ**

### **Сажетак**

Предмет рада је осврт на стање социолошке мисли у Србији о друштвеним сукобима и радничким штрајковима у првим деценијама 21. века. То је у значајној мери одређено приступом друштвеној структури и начином на који се тумаче најважније промене. На једној страни су аутори који сматрају да је реч о завршеној трансформацији у либерални капитализам. На другој су они који наглашавају да је транзиција довела до стварања друштва на полу/периферији капиталистичког привредног система (Volerstin, 2005). Први ретко помињу класни сукоб и друштвене неједнакости, а штрајкови су изван њихове анализе. Други су склони да друштвене сукобе, па и штрајкове, посматрају из шире перспективе, а пре свега с обзиром на промене односа моћи тумаче природом односа светске и домаће капиталистичке класе. Полазна хипотеза гласи: у српском друштву превласт националних и државних над класним питањима доприноси осеци штрајкова. На крају транзиције штрајкови су постали псеудоштрајкови. Природа, ток и динамика штрајкова у највећој су мери одређени природом класног друштва. У средишту анализе су карактеристике друштвене структуре, основних класа и штрајкова радника у последње две и по деценије. На основу тога закључује се да је радничка класа приватизацијом друштвене својине системски уништена, а њена емпиријска класна свест је конфузна.

**Кључне речи:** капиталистичка класа, класна свест, приватизација, раднички штрајкови, социологија

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