

# Rio Linglong: Eco Uprising in Serbia

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**The case of the brutal exploitation of Vietnamese workers in the Chinese company LingLong and the servile attitude of the authorities towards the interests of the multinational company Rio Tinto have become central political topics in Serbia. The simultaneity of these stories dispelled geopolitical delusions about the “acceptable” origins of investors, whether Western or Chinese, and thus “opened” up the space for a more effective fight against resource plunder, environmental destruction, and human exploitation.**

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Due to the lack of a direct party struggle for power in Serbia, many are inclined to conclude that complete political apathy rules among the broadest masses. This conclusion is fundamentally incorrect, and in addition to revealing a specific political position, it can also be a major obstacle to the development of mass movements and mobilizations on specific issues.

This conclusion – that apathy reigns in Serbia and that political struggles are not being waged – has never been correct. In all previous years, there have been strikes, protesting factory workers, educators, medics, farmers, students, even members of military and police unions, freelancers, environmental activists... Some strikes and protests were successful, some were not, as in every fight.

For those who do not count anything other than the composition of the government as a result of social struggles, this was not enough. Meanwhile, Aleksandar Vučić and the Progressives (SNS) came to hold the absolute power, while the parliament opposition is reduced to a few members of national minorities; that, according to them, is the only relevant indicator based on which they draw conclusions about the situation in Serbian society.

On the other hand, in the so-called locale, the creation of local groups to fight on various grounds is accelerating. There are organizations opposing investors of various sizes and profiles. With the infamous mining company Rio Tinto entering the game, it became clear that this is not just a movement, but above all a topic that is, at this time, perhaps the only one capable of mobilizing the masses that traditional political parties, so much favored by the media on both sides of the government, can only dream of.

## **Their majesties: the investors**

First of all, the current situation in Serbia should be viewed in the context of a broader geopolitical and class plan, so that the complexity of the contradictions that characterize the current crisis of the

system that governs the world could be understood. First of all, Serbia's position on the periphery of the European order in the division of labor is to supply metropolises with cheap labor, subsidies for capitalists, and resources. At one point it was stated that in the fight for investors Serbia is competing with its neighbors – Macedonia and Bulgaria.

In that fight, Serbia is trying to use its foreign policy orientation called the “four pillars” as a comparative advantage, because NATO members with only one or two pillars in their foreign policy were forced to impose sanctions on Russia. This was a sort of an invitation to companies from the West to continue exporting their products from Serbia.

Of course, the neoliberal rhetoric about investors as demigods has continued with the same intensity since the SNS took power. The attitude towards the interests of capital is not at all different from the attitude of the “yellow” regimes, as their predecessors are called by those in power today. Beneath that narrative of job creation and progress that propaganda insists on, a lot of historical frustrations and hard-learned lessons have accumulated. Until recently, the masses expected politicians to fight for their interests, but it seems that this illusion has been largely shattered.

A good example of this could be the revolt against Rio Tinto's plans to exploit Jadarit, a mineral named after the Jadar River in Serbia, through its subsidiaries, from which they would then receive lithium to use for the production of batteries which they plan to launch. In a number of small towns in western and central Serbia, local organizations and movements opposing the plan have been created. In most of these small places, there was hardly any serious political life, so the intensity and mass surprised everyone – even, as it seems, the multinational company itself, whose start of a broad promotional campaign seems too late and inadequate. The propaganda video in which the company well-known for ecological catastrophes (among other things) assures the public of its good intentions was met with ridicule and anger. On the other hand, the counter-video in which the actors appear and in which several indisputable facts from the history of Rio Tinto are presented was not broadcast because the declaration in the accompanying documentation which leases the term was incorrect, according to the Radio Television of Serbia (RTS) management.

The very top of the government characterized the movement against Rio Tinto as something that “drives investors away”. However, the reputation of this company at the global level is such that it can hardly be expected the population of the targeted municipalities will give up because of these phrases. On the ground, it turned out that this is not exclusively an activist story, but that the general population has been alerted. This was confirmed by the research teams that encountered the barricades and a clear message that they were not welcome and that no further research would be tolerated. Samples were taken from some of these teams, while one of the foreign managers, Ross Cotton, had to confront the rebel farmers.

Despite this, the company – together with its allies, who have the power – is implementing the plan little by little, wherever it's possible. In that sense, the current phase of changing laws, and even the Constitution, is tailored to the company's needs. First of all, the law in question is Law on Expropriation, which leaves far too many possibilities for the state and big players to temporarily or permanently, even by urgent procedure, take away the land following their interests. Also, at the same parliamentary session, the Law on Referendum will be discussed, the changes of which are also alarming. According to the President of the Assembly, the idea is to pass this Law in this Assembly, unique because of the lack of opposition in it.

The scale of the entire operation regarding the exploitation of “jadarite” in Serbia is such that, above all, the inhabitants of the endangered areas are aware of the fact that it is necessary to act immediately and that any delay will be irreparable. Despite the strength of opponents that many in Serbia are not aware of, right now it seems the parts of Serbia which were seen from Belgrade as a

paradigm of the passive periphery are appearing as the bearers of the fight against a multinational company and the neocolonial principle.

A protest of these organizations will be held on Wednesday, November 24, because a session on the laws on expropriation and referendum is scheduled for that day – laws which, as is suspected, should ensure authorities can implement this project, despite mass resistance. A movement that grew so much in such a short time must necessarily be heterogeneous. In the interior of Serbia, everyone feels they are defending their yard, their drinking water, and arable land against Rio Tinto. Of course, even in that situation, many are trying to increase their own influence, and everyone is aware of that. There is a general fear of politicians and their manipulation. Virtually all currents that exist in society are represented in this movement.

### **First league**

As a kind of geopolitical counterweight to the movement against the Rio Tinto corporation, which is recognized as an epitome of the unscrupulous power of big capital coming from the West, China's role in the global environmental problem has been emphasized for months, especially by pointing out the companies currently active in Serbia, primarily in the Smederevo ironworks and Bor mine, and finally in Zrenjanin, where the Linglong Corporation's tire factory is currently being built. Until recently, this company was best known for being the sponsor of the main football league in Serbia, which bears its name.

Truth be told, this campaign and the news related to the problems in the eastern part of Serbia, where these companies operate, were not even close to mobilizing the masses at the scale the anti-lithium movement did. Then, in early November, a media bomb dropped: most of Serbia was appalled by the incident which involved Vietnamese workers, local security, and Zrenjanin activist groups. Activists came to support a worker, considered a whistleblower, who publicized photos of the terrible conditions in the barracks – containers – where, as it turned out, workers from Vietnam who were engaged in the construction of the factory were housed.

This event shed light on the hitherto almost unknown phenomenon of foreign workers and the conditions in which they live and work. In this particular case, it turned out that between 400 and 500 Vietnamese had their passports confiscated from their employers, which restricted their movement; that they were monitored by both Chinese and local security; that they were unsuitably dressed because they were in summer clothes; that they signed contracts in English; and finally – that they did not even know where they were going, and were brought to Zrenjanin during the night, in the dark.

Part of the public was, of course, appalled. The other part is ready to ignore such inhumane treatment of people in the name of geopolitical interests and orientations. This is not surprising, given the favorite key through which not only global but, obviously, also local processes that permeate them have been interpreted. In this case, the trap is obvious, contained in the belief that engaging against a Chinese company certainly means supporting the West.

However, the disturbing scenes from the barracks and the fate of those people who received one salary in four months and who are practically stuck without the possibility of exercising any rights, turn this type of complaint into a mere delusion. In addition, the Vietnamese media reported on the terrible conditions in which these people find themselves, and the news of the protest of relatives and people who support them in their home country and demand their return has spread. And not even Serbian nationalist spin doctors, in their proverbial arrogance, are able to attribute pro-Westernism to the Vietnamese media and their public.

The authorities in Serbia are mostly silent, as are the representatives of the Chinese state, that is, the embassies that pompously opened the beginning of the works in Zrenjanin. Minister Tomislav Momirović was the only one who tried to remove the responsibility from the state, justifying its inability to interfere in such matters, probably thinking of the respect of the law within the state's territory by their majesty the investor. For their part, RTS, along with the pro-government private televisions and tabloids, tried to show that the whole story is a malicious spin, presenting the thesis that Vietnamese workers are actually satisfied with the conditions of accommodation and work. That story didn't go well either. But, the Serbian political-media scene is in such a state that, undoubtedly, despite all the evidence, there will be those who want to differentiate the exploiters based on their origin and on how long their history of exploiting is.

### **Are the East and the West waking up?**

The Linglong case demonstrated to one part of the Serbian public that there is no difference in the capital relations when it comes to the side of the world the investors, that is – the bosses, come from. We also know that it should not be expected for the early, local resistances to have the same treatment by the entire society. But this is a kind of opportunity for all those who want to pursue a principled anti-capitalist policy to prepare their platforms for the future that is beginning to happen in the field of struggle for the labor market and resources in Serbia; for a situation in which global capitalism marks the end of the complete domination of Western capital and Western interest.

This is, therefore, an opportunity to trace a principled position against putting Serbia in the role of a local player and raw material base of any force in the world, which is now becoming officially multipolar, while simultaneously fighting against corporate-oriented legislation. The result of the fighting so far is the creation of a critical mass of activists who are now (to the extent more serious than it might have been expected) able to resist the attempts of companies to cover up their activities and to exercise a pressure strong enough to at least force the relocation of Vietnamese workers to Hotel Kastel Ečka and two other facilities in Zrenjanin, or to, for example, take the samples from the mercenaries of Rio Tinto.

There is indeed no ideological cohesion in these groups, which only means that differentiation will happen soon, regardless of whether it will be after the victory or after the defeat of the current attempts to prevent the colonial Law on Expropriation or to prevent threats against journalists, for example. Of course, in the current heated moment when the majority of political actors and the media are increasingly focused on election games and pressed by different interests, it will not be easy for everyone to orient themselves. It may seem more difficult at this moment than ever to withstand the pressure among so many opposing interests, which will, of course, only grow stronger, but it should not be forgotten that such circumstances at the same time present the greatest historical chance.

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**P.S.**

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Note from LeftEast editors: We translate this article by Nenad Glišić, which [appeared](#) in Bilten on November 24, 2021. It is the first text in a series of interventions LeftEast will publish on developments Serbia since last week.

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