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Tailors Turned Activists: Surviving the  
Demise of the Croatian Textile Industry

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### Abstract

This article examines the case of closed Croatian textile factory Kamensko and the non-profit organization Kamensko Opened, formed by the factory workers when they lost their jobs in 2010, after working without pay for seven months. It seeks to show the ways in which textile workers brought novelties into the Croatian labor struggle and provided means of subsistence while facing an array of challenges—bogus privatization and real-estate speculations, weak law protection, lack of political representation and gender-based discrimination. These ways can become rather creative and turn the group of factory workers into exemplary, although unlikely activists, who voice the concerns of an aging population of Croatian industrial workers while developing a small business to support themselves. The results were obtained through qualitative analysis semi-structured interviews with nine former Kamensko workers and an extensive review of newspaper coverage of the events related to factory closure. The findings show that political struggle and work within the framework of a non-profit organization have empowered the workers and brought them the support of the wider community. Their method could be used by unions to a certain extent, for the sake of creating connections and allies within the rest of the civil society.

*Keywords:* Textile workers, Privatization, Unions, Protests.

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## *Introduction*

The East-Central European region entered the post-1989 era with a considerable industrial strength, skilled unionized labor and an established social contract upon which the power of different communist regimes used to rest. As political structures eroded to pave the way for new, democratic developments, economic change took place as well, promising a bright future with the free market. For industry, this largely meant a switch to private ownership—instead of being centrally regulated by bureaucratic governments, or self-managed by the collectives of workers, factories were now to attract private capital that was supposed to ensure the quality of production and success in the competitive, increasingly globalized market. Globalization and liberalization of markets and capital flows threatened that if labor was not obedient and cheap enough, it could always be found elsewhere. The workers started losing the rights previously guaranteed by the state in the neoliberal reform process that has (as yet) been neither completed nor reversed.

Burawoy (2002) admits that the workers reacted to such development much more calmly than expected. He explains such a state of affairs as a result of ideological disappointment in socialism, the idea now forever tainted by the experiences from the period under communism. Capitalism promised a better future, and when it failed to deliver labor found itself in an ideological dead-end, with no alternative to turn to. Another important factor comes from labor's insufficient capacities to act: the potential for joint action of the industrial workers only weakened as numerous factories, former central places of economic and social production, got dismantled. With the state and capital standing firmly on the same side—against labor, as that is the way leading to higher profit margins and pleasing capital, which the new political leadership of the region rushed to satisfy, and with pressing political changes often driving public attention away from the rights of workers toward the questions of national and religious sentiments, it is no wonder that labor has lost its local power and its transnational awareness. The future, according to Burawoy (2008; 2010), might see either the Polanyian-type counter-movement to marketization, encompassing all parts of society hurt by capitalist commodification and concentrated on solving local problems caused by global capitalism, or the Marxian-type struggle of exploited workers united across the national borders.

The following study of the textile factory Kamensko in Zagreb, Croatia, showcases the locally organized counter-movement started by dissatisfied workers and joined by students, non-governmental organizations, researchers, consumers, artists and activists concerned with labor rights, social justice and privatization of public space. The analysis shows how the workers gradually lost the rights of factory ownership and management, how they kept clinging onto the ones they still had—to work and to have at least some monthly income and social insurance—and how in the end they were left without any of it, due to the liberalized labor laws, the connections between city planning and private speculative developers, and flawed Croatian judiciary practice that has not protected the workers' rights even five years after the event. Furthermore, it shows how global capital moves around in search of the cheap, skilled labor that is closer to home than the sweatshops of Asia, keeping the largely

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exploitative textile industry in the Eastern Europe alive (see Baševska, 2015). Finally, it shows the condition of the rights of the female workforce in Croatia and the inception of cooperation between diverse social actors, the aim of which was to publicize the problems workers of Kamensko faced, to improve the condition of labor, and to point to the issues of speculative real-estate developments and submission of public space in the interests of capital. A rather obvious connection between the rising value of the plot of land the factory occupied and the increasing troubles workers had with getting their monthly salaries was investigated, bringing workers and the organizations of civic society together for the first time in the short history of Croatian neoliberal capitalism (see Ivandić et al., 2015). These new alliances and the ripple effect they have already produced are important for the future of Croatian labor movement, whatever else that might hold.

Other labor initiatives in the region are sporadic, but exist nevertheless. One of the experiments now underway is a detergent factory Dita in Tuzla, Bosnia and Hercegovina, taken over by the workers who succeeded in restarting production and are currently struggling to keep the company afloat. Even though the workers of Kamensko and Dita are going through similar processes and acting in similar environments, there is no cooperation or exchange between the two collectives, other than possible sympathy for one another's struggle. The reason most probably lies in a lack of capacities to sustain regional activities (the labor ties built in the time of former Yugoslavia no longer exist), but also in a greater interest of workers to focus on the local issues, as that is where their problems are most likely to be resolved. If the potential benefits of cross-border cooperation in this disintegrated region were greater, the actions of labor would probably move in that direction as well.

It is uncertain that the attempts of Kamensko workers and their allies to improve the condition of industrial labor in Croatia will come to fruition. However, the persistence they showed thus far in advocating for their rights, building the network and pointing to problems that should no longer be ignored deserves recognition. Other groups of workers in Croatia and the rest of the region of former Yugoslavia—those employed in services, as well as unemployed, underemployed and precariously employed people—might soon see the benefit in supporting causes such as this, against the damaging reforms of labor laws and further cuts in social services.

Finally, even if the actions of Kamensko do not result in an improvement of workers' rights and better law protection for them in the future, it is still important to investigate such initiatives and the problems they struggle to articulate. While we recognize that traditional labor history has lost much of its appeal both for methodological and ideological reasons, there is a new global labor history,<sup>1</sup> which continues to search for new perspectives while documenting labor struggles throughout the world as a continuing critique against the inequalities brought about by global capitalism.

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<sup>1</sup> See e.g., Linden (2008).

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*Declining unions and new labor struggles: The case of Croatia*

'I live off 2000HRK salary, which I never receive. You can imagine how I live.' A poster with this slogan took a prominent spot in one of the protests of DTR workers in Zagreb, where they demanded their salaries to be paid and their textile factory to be saved from collapse. It says a lot about the post-socialist condition of the textile industry and its workers in Croatia. Official data show a constant decline in number of workers: according to Milat (2012), 110.000 textile workers in Croatia have lost their jobs since 1990; the number of employees dropped from 130.000 in 1990 to 21.400 at the end of 2011. At the same time, the pay stays low: average salary in textile industry is 50 per cent lower than the national average in Croatia, while salaries of women in this sector are 30 per cent lower than the salaries of their male colleagues (Milat, 2012).

The textile industry is only one drastic example of the setback Croatian economy suffered in the post-1989 era. In the pre-transition period, Croatia (as one of the Yugoslav republics) was among the top ten newly industrialized countries in the world, according to the method and criteria of the UN (Kokanović, 1999). Back in the 1960s Yugoslavia aspired to become one of the core industrial economies of Europe; however, the crisis of the 1980s followed by the 1990s breakup destined the states that succeeded it to re-peripheralization (Schierup, 1992). In the case of Croatia, according to Kokanović, it was a consequence of many mistakes made in the process of privatization, which encouraged bad business practices and the creation of monopolies and oligopolies, contributing to an environment with 'numerous deviations (...) ranging from corruption and small crime to organized crime at all levels and in all sectors of the economy and of society' (1999: 205). Bohle and Greskovits explain Croatia's 'weak state capacity' as a 'combined effect of an unbalanced nationalism, war and its aftermath, and the semiauthoritarian nature of the Tudjman regime that undermined an originally capable state' (2012: 194).

Inadequate privatization decisions, political clientelism and weak state capacity have characterized the climate in which Croatian industrial workers have been trying to preserve their economic and social rights inherited from the Yugoslav period. For decades they have been not just workers, but self-managers of socially owned property; the whole socio-political system of Yugoslavia rested upon their shoulders (see Musić, 2011). The values and rules of self-management did not survive the transition to the neoliberal system; as Grdešić (2015) points out, workers are now seen merely as somewhat annoying relics of the past with no power or importance, their lingering rights standing in the way of business development. As de-industrialization progressed and new economic environment shaped without workers as important constituents, the unions started losing significance too; became smaller and disintegrated. Membership rates have been in constant decline, particularly in the private sector, with sporadic joint actions of limited success (Grdešić, 2008; 2015). The necessity for the unions in Croatia to get a grip, strengthen their capacities, bridge the differences and put up a fight for retention and expansion of the rights of workers has been voiced over and over again (Grdešić, 2008; 2015; Kokanović, 1999; Kubicek, 2004).

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Although the work of unions might not be sufficiently organized and effective, workers keep fighting their battles. Ivančić and Livada (2015) have given a rather detailed overview of the forms the labor struggle in Croatia took since the beginning of 1990s. These include occupation of companies, wildcat strikes, prolonged actions aimed at preventing bogus privatizations (known as Stožeri—Headquarters), cooperation between craft unions, efforts to empower, educate and involve rank-and-file-workers, and joint actions with civil society organizations. The last one is a rather novel idea, with Croatian non-governmental organizations (NGOs)<sup>2</sup> starting to show deepened interest in labor struggle only in 2010. The motif was the strike of Kamensko Textile Industry workers who protested in hope of retrieving their salaries and preventing closure of the factory, which was likely set up for bankruptcy in order to be torn down and its land used for the new real-estate development. As NGOs Pravo na grad (Right to the City) and Zelena akcija (Green Action) aim to prevent the takeover of the public space by private capital, their interest aligned with those of workers and they joined the protest, extending substantial technical support to workers in the process. Since then, non-governmental sector became rather active in advocating the workers' rights (Ivančić and Livada, 2015). However, that is not the only novelty the Kamensko strike helped bring to labor struggle in Croatia. The other one is Kamensko Opened, the first non-governmental organization in Croatia founded and led by industrial workers. Organization funds its activities by doing tailoring and sewing work and advocates for Kamensko workers, whose rights have not been honored even five years after the factory was closed. What exactly is the difference between workers' NGO and workers' union will be discussed in a moment. For the start it will suffice to notice that forming an NGO opened a space for action previously inaccessible to these workers. Can new models of civil organizing such as this help further the interests<sup>3</sup> of industrial labor in Croatia? If yes, to what extent? I will explore these questions by analyzing the case of Kamensko.

Prior to taking a closer look at the case study, it is important to determine the motivations behind civil and union organizing, and how both of them are, or can be, perceived in the post-socialist context. Kubicek (2004) provides an analysis of the position of unions within the civil society of post-communist states. He notes the prominent role assigned to the civil society in the process of democratization, which it should be using to promote and guard common interests. Unions are by all means part of civil society, but with a purpose of taking care of their particular concerns, which do not necessarily have to be aligned with those defined as common—those that are, again, composed of various and not necessarily corresponding interests of various civil organizations. Unions are also political organizations, taking an active part in political negotiations and decision-making. Belonging to both civil and political camp makes unions imposters in both of them. To complicate matters further, unions are

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout the paper I will use “Civil society organization” and “Non-governmental organization” as synonyms.

<sup>3</sup> These interests include enforcing the labor law, increasing visibility of industrial workers and the problems they face, lobbying with the state institutions and political parties for the extension of labor rights, helping in servicing workers' economic needs.

loaded with the baggage of socialist past which new democracies, as Grdešić (2015) notes, would rather not be reminded of. Kubicek concludes (2004: 12): ‘Civil society as a whole, with all its normative assumptions included, is lauded. Unions are, to put it mildly, another matter—groups that need to be beaten or subdued if democratic consolidation and marketization are to have a chance.’ This difference in how interests and activities of unions are perceived compared to the rest of civil society is basis for the differentiation between the unions and the NGOs that I make in this paper.

The evidence of declining membership and relevance of the unions is overwhelming. As a way of overcoming these problems in post-communist Eastern Europe economies, Ost (2002) suggests that unions turn towards economic unionism model, where servicing the needs of their membership would be the priority. He emphasizes the importance of history of contemporary unions, tied to communist past and broader social movements which often clouded the importance of particular workers’ interests in the workplace. These particular interests, Ost argues, need to be revived and prioritized in order for unions to attract new members and regain influence: ‘What successful unions are beginning to do differently today is make clear that they seek to represent labor’s particular interests in capitalistic society, not lead a social movement fighting a former kind of society’ (Ost, 2002: 48). He does not neglect the importance political and social movement unionism can have, but argues for economic unionism to be at the core of all unionized activity. With this in mind, I want to try to examine if workers’ can organize around their shared interests outside the union—that is, circumvent its bureaucracy and burdened history—and successfully provide services for their peers, while also reaching out to the wider community.

### *Methodology*

To answer the questions posed, I will analyze the case of Kamensko workers as a specific example of labor action in Croatia, bringing the non-governmental organizations’ activism and the labor movement together. The press material that covered the case was used for the first level of analysis, as a primary source which provided me with the information necessary to understand the case and position it within the Croatian context. In order to learn about workers’ experiences and their own perceptions of the action they took up, and to answer the questions on how this action might influence the Croatian labor movement, I interviewed nine former workers of Kamensko factory. Eight of them were women, as the textile industry employs predominantly female workforce. I met Djurdja, Štefica and Biserka at the office of their new organization and got the contacts of the other six interviewees - Bega, Mara, Marija, Suada, Božica and Damir—by snowball sampling. Interviews took place in January and February 2015. All of the interviewees were in their 50s or 60s, long-time employees of Kamensko, who spent 10 to 34 years working for the company and were or were not involved in the work of NGO formed after the factory was closed. Once the interviews were done, I spent three afternoons in Kamensko Opened workshop, using this opportunity to observe them doing their job and see how the community that uses their services interacts with them.

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The interviews were semi-structured, with questions designed to examine how the changes in their factory and their reaction to these changes influenced their lives, their community and their understanding of the issues industrial workers face in Croatia today. All interviewees were asked about (1) the way in which factory work was organized (2) the relationship they had with the collective and the management, (3) the process of decision making in the factory, (4) the methods used to advocate for their rights while they still had a job, (5) the process of NGO formation and (6) the activist work. By creating this long overview of interviewees' careers I was able to identify the issues at the workplace and within the society that influenced workers the most and led them to first disobey the managers, disregard the union and try and save the factory from closing, and then to create an NGO in order to continue the fight for their rights.

What follows is the detailed account of the process in which Kamensko workers lost their factory jobs, fought for their legal rights, gained allies, and established non-governmental organization as a continuation of their factory collective.

### ***3. Losing the Factory***

#### *3.1 History*

Kamensko was founded in 1949, by the Yugoslav government, with the aim of producing clothes for the army. During the 1950s it started exporting, first to the Middle East and later to several European countries. During the 1960s two new factories were opened in other parts of Croatia, in Grižani and Gračac. At the beginning of the 1970s the expansion of the main factory in Zagreb (Picture 1) was finished, giving the building the form it has today. In the period from the 1952 to the 1973, the space that factory occupied increased eight times.<sup>4</sup>

(Picture 1 here)

The company was licensed by Piere Carden in 1990 to produce garments for men and women and continued production for export as well as for the Croatian army during the civil war in Yugoslavia. In 1993 it was turned into a shareholders' company. Workers were given an option to buy shares first and become owners of the company themselves, which was accepted by the majority. This was not the prevalent model of privatization in Croatia, as the government's general inclination was towards privatizing through public auctions and direct deals and retaining control over who could the future owners be (Grdešić, 2008), which resulted in numerous failed processes and corruption affairs, and contributed to economic downturn. By buying the shares Kamensko workers managed to keep the ownership of the company, but not for long. Low earnings and the crisis that spanned through 1990s pushed them to trade shares within the company, leading to smaller number of workers and managers owning most

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<sup>4</sup> Kamensko Company (2004) A Simplified Prospectus for Listing the Shares of the Issuer Kamensko in the Stock-Exchange

of company's shares and transferring them to a third party after the stocks became listed for public trading in 2004. By this time all the production facilities outside of Zagreb were closed, due to the lack of business and physical damage suffered during the war, which additionally lowered the value of Kamensko. External buyers gradually became majority owners and installed their own managers. Several interviewees refer to the moment when 'the people from the outside' became managers as the moment when the factory started declining. Božica, who used to work as a supervisor, claims the new management had no real concern for the workers, or the factory: 'They would yell and insult us. They had no understanding for the process of production.' The number of people at the managerial positions started increasing—controllers, supervisors, administrators—while the workforce involved in the actual production declined in numbers and worked under a lot of pressure, trying to achieve demanding norms. Štefica and Biserka, now active members in the NGO, pointed out the importance of stability, and how in the previous decades of their work at Kamensko directors and managers would change only when the time came for them to retire. These sudden and frequent shifts during the period from 2005 until the closure in 2010 contributed to the feeling of disorientation among workers and hostility towards the new management, but it might have strengthened the ties within the workers' community as it became obvious they no longer share history, values nor interests with those in the managerial positions. This relationship was very important during the era of self-management; as Musić notes, workers' alliance with company managers rather than the Party representatives was one of the distinct features of the Yugoslavian model of socialism: 'Solidarity with the technical and managerial cadres, who were close to the producers inside the enterprise and contributed to the total income of the work collective, seemed to make more sense than political alliances with the distant and unaccountable government bureaucracy' (Comisso, 1979: 47). Hence, the disruption of this inner-company cooperation was even more troubling for workers than it would be without the self-management heritage.

As opposed to the new and ever-changing leadership, workers of Kamensko knew each other very well. Apart from working together for years—often even decades, what connected them were similar socio-economic and educational backgrounds. The company data from 2004 show that 533 of the total of 1703 employees had secondary school education—probably related to the work with textile, while 1083 had lower qualifications. Most of the workers interviewed for this research came to work in Zagreb when they were young, from one of the surrounding towns or villages. Their experience illustrates the trends of urbanization, with young people pulled towards industrial centers in pursuit of opportunities to master a skill and get a job (Bonfiglioli, 2012). Women's emancipation through access to labor market was an important part of Yugoslav project. In order for women to keep the position of the main caretaker while at the same time participating in labor force the 'working mother' gender contract was established: 'Working women gained access to free healthcare, free abortions, free education, extended paid maternity leave of up to a year, canteens and childcare facilities in the workplace, and could benefit from shorter working hours to take care of small children (although all women did not benefit from these possibilities in the same way due to the uneven development of welfare services



throughout the country)' (Bonfiglioli, 2013: 6). Workers of Kamensko benefited from such provision, which made their living situations all more difficult when this system fell apart (Baševska, 2015). Being working women in self-management system did not protect them from gender discrimination at work either; as Biserka remembers: 'Most of managerial positions were occupied by men. They climbed the company ladder faster than us, they were promoted much sooner than we'. Men were also doing the work in the warehouses and in machinery maintenance, but the women were the ones who had to do difficult and stressful labor of sewing on the norm. These shared experiences made a strong basis for the development of compassion and solidarity among predominantly female workforce of the factory. An experience workers shared regardless of gender was union membership, which was treated as obligatory and paid for on monthly basis. One of the benefits union provided during socialist times was an affordable summer vacation at the company's summer resort in Crikvenica, at the Croatian coast, where workers and their families would often spend their summer vacation together.<sup>5</sup>

Before privatization, workers participated in managing the factory through workers' councils—another institution characterizing the era of self-management which, according to Grdešič (2015) gave the workers a sense of empowerment and entitlement. Members of these bodies were chosen by their working units; they held meetings regularly and the management was obliged to inform them on how the company was doing, while they could take part in suggesting solutions and making decisions. Some form of this body was kept after privatization for a while, as now workers were the shareholders and preserved the right to have a say in how their company is doing business. However, this did not last for long—multiple interviewees suggested the councils were shut down because they often opposed managerial decisions.

At the end of 2010, Kamensko was left with 426 workers. Talking about the closure, Bega says: 'Younger people sought other jobs and left if they found any. We had to stay, as we had nowhere to go: if you are 50 years old, you're too young to retire, but too old for anyone else to want to hire you.' This is another symptom of how women have been gradually losing the rights gained during state socialism era. 'Due to traditional and renewed forms of gender discrimination in the productive and reproductive sphere, women have been more vulnerable to unemployment and poverty, and have often been pushed to the margins of the labor market as well as into the informal economy' (Bonfiglioli, 2013: 25). As witnessed by several interviewees, many Kamensko workers suffered chronic illnesses, lacked good healthcare and remained unemployed for extended periods of time once they stopped working in the factory.

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<sup>5</sup> Benačić (2014) Intervju o nekim drugim vremenima: znate li da su nekoć naše radnike tjerali da se odmaraju na Jadranu?

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### 3.2 Protests

The closure of Kamensko was preceded by seven months long period during which the workers were not paid at all. Working days and shifts were organized as usual, but the salaries kept being postponed ‘until tomorrow.’ Bega admits that it is difficult to understand why someone would keep working under these conditions: ‘I used to say that people should not work if they are not paid—if they don’t get the salary for one month, they shouldn’t just keep working. But it’s different when it happens to you, you keep hoping. Besides, you don’t have anywhere else to go and work, there are no other options.’ The situation went so far that the controllers for the public transportation started remembering the ‘Kamensko gals’ and let them ride without a ticket, expressing in this way their solidarity and hope that the workers would soon get their money and be able to pay for the ride. Working for months without pay while hoping the conditions will improve is not unusual in Croatian factories, nor in other post-Yugoslav countries.<sup>6</sup>

After the seventh month without the pay had passed, in September 2010, group of 20 workers started the ten days long hunger strike in the park in front of the factory. Many coworkers supported them, but could not join due to legal restrictions concerning public gatherings. They slept in the park, worked their shifts and demanded to be paid, but also aimed to draw the public attention to their problems and struggles of Croatian textile workers in general. One of the Croatian online magazines wrote a supportive story about the strike, but ended it with a note on how ordinary it is to see workers of some fallen factory protest in Zagreb and how sad that the protest of Kamensko will only have the usual five minutes in the spotlight and then disappear from the public eye.<sup>7</sup> That is the sense of hopelessness that even the participants of the protests had, aware that their stories are far from unique and that the wider community seldom has the time or interest to invest in supporting their cause.<sup>8</sup> The support, however, arrived spontaneously: first the neighbors living in the buildings close to the factory joined, then came university students (who at the time were fighting their own battles against privatizing the education) and Red Cross. Citizens signed the book of support, while media covered the strike extensively. Although this experience was physically and emotionally exhausting, the worst memory of the strike for Bega was a visit paid to the workers by the director of the factory, few days after the protest started. He offered to buy them some ‘ćevapi’—traditional, sausage-like grilled meat, popular fast food in the Balkans. This was an insult to the workers who opted for hunger strike because they could not sustain themselves after working without pay for months. However, no one was surprised: such behavior was another indicator of the degree to which new management was unable to empathize with workers. The union did not support the strike and advised

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<sup>6</sup> In her study of a case in Leskovac, Serbia, Bonfiglioli (2013) notes how the local textile workers worked without salary for two years, from July 2001 until July 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Bačić and Opačić (2010) *Glad i bijeda radnica Kamenskog*

<sup>8</sup> Grdešić, (2015: 7): ‘Although strike and protest levels appear to be moderately high, it should be mentioned that they occur in a public climate and political environment that shows little interest in worker struggles.’

workers to enter negotiations with the company; according to Djurdja, one of the leaders of the strike, this was not accepted as workers no longer believed the management would honor any potentially reached agreement. Public statements later released by both the workers and the Textile Workers Union (TOKG)<sup>9</sup> have shown mutual distrust, personal disagreements and, overall, inability of workers and the union to work together.

Ten days after the protest began, no solution was found. 'We had to make a decision: we could either die of hunger and exhaustion in the park, or we could continue this in some other form,' says Djurdja, Workers moved inside the factory and started organizing daily protests by walking from the factory to the city center and back (Picture 2), accompanied by sympathetic citizens, students and the media.

(Picture 2 here)

Workers felt that the especially important support to their cause came from the two representatives of an Italian company which was one of Kamensko's main foreign customers. They walked with the protestors and encouraged the management to find a solution, offering assistance in restructuring the factory. Božica claims this company offered to rent the factory space for two years and continue production by keeping at least half of the workers employed. This suggested alliance between the foreign customer and the workers of Kamensko reveals two particular interests: the willingness of foreign company to invest in keeping the low-paid workers to whom they have been outsourcing the sewing and finishing phases of work with textile, and workers' interest in any sort of arrangement that would help them keep their jobs. Workers main preoccupation is to keep working and get paid: they are not necessarily interested in improving and changing the system in which they have been exploited and underpaid. This comes as no surprise; as Grdešić writes, this is typical of labor struggle in Croatia: 'Workers have either demanded that their back wages be paid, that corrupt privatization be stopped or that their rights in collective agreements not be cut further. Very rarely have workers gone on the offensive and attempted to expand their rights and influence' (2015: 8). The proposal by the Italian company was never publicized or acted upon, even if it might have been a real possibility. Instead, the factory soon closed for good. Mara remembers: 'One Saturday, the supervisor came and gave us our documents, informing us that we will no longer work as the factory is closing. He told us that we should go to the Unemployment Bureau. It was awful when on the following Monday more than 400 of us gathered in front of that office, it was sad. I have never been to that place before in my life. The job at Kamensko was my first and only job.' Workers were forbidden to return to the factory premises. The protest walks stopped, as it became clear they will not help in trying to reopen the factory or get the money.

The newspaper have written about Kamensko filing for bankruptcy at the beginning of October 2010, following the request for the debt payment filed by one of

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<sup>9</sup> TOKG (2011) Istina je samo jedna

the foreign creditors.<sup>10</sup> Less than two months later, on November 26th, the factory was closed. Some of the economic analysts explained the end of Kamensko by suggesting that the closure was an inevitable result of the company's low productivity and inability to compete with low-cost garments of international clothing chains, arriving to Croatia together with the market liberalization.<sup>11</sup> This, however, is not a satisfactory explanation: according to workers' testimonies, much of Kamensko production was done for the export, which makes it less exposed to the competition in the domestic market. The low productivity was an indicator of poor management decisions, also recognized by the workers as increased pressure and borderline harassment they started experiencing at work in the period leading up to closure. Further evidence of the managerial abuse of power can be found in the fact that multiple members of the board of directors were prosecuted by the state because of the misconduct of the bankruptcy procedure and misuse of the company's funds. In 2011 the Commercial Court found that Antun Crlenjak, the former director of Kamensko, was guilty; he was sentenced with approximately 3.000€ in fines. In a separate processes, members of the managerial and supervision boards were sued by the workers, with the NGOs Right to the City and Green Action supporting them and providing the necessary technical guidance.<sup>12</sup> Since then several managers and supervisors of Kamensko have been indicted for different crimes related to financial fraud and speculation and have spent time in prison<sup>13</sup>, but none of these processes has been brought to an end yet—another showcase for the inefficiency of the judiciary, if not even its bias. For now, there seems to be strong evidence that people leading the factory through its final years have had ties with companies and individuals involved in real-estate speculation in Zagreb, and would benefit from shutting down the factory in order to build in its attractive location.

Concerns about the possible takeover of the land belonging to Kamensko by the real-estate speculators has been a trigger that started the cooperation between the protesting workers and the NGOs invested in protecting the public space. Factory building is located in the wider city center area, across the street from a beautiful public park (Picture 3), and hence suitable for new luxury developments. The idea to relocate the industrial activity from this area has been around for more than a decade<sup>14</sup>, and plans were made to buy a new piece of land and move Kamensko to the suburbs. The workers were familiar with this idea, but did not believe it would come through—Božica explained they were aware of the factory's bad business performance and the lack of money to buy the land and build the necessary facilities. The production was never moved; after it got closed, the factory was locked and put under guard of a private security company. Part of the complex has been torn down

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<sup>10</sup> Kuskunović and Milovan (2010) Hrvatska će biti gladna

<sup>11</sup> Bošković (2012) Nisu htjeli promjene. Zaduženi i bez pomoći bili su lake žrtve krize

<sup>12</sup> Gaura (2011) Bivši čelnik Kamenskog kažnjen sa 22 tisuće kn

<sup>13</sup> Hina (2014) Slučaj Kamensko: počinje suđenje za aferu Kobilje mlijeko

<sup>14</sup> Remić (2010) Lenucijeva potkova 21. stoljeća

in July 2015 (Picture 4), presumably to make space for a new mixed-use building that is supposed to be built in place of an old Kamensko shop.<sup>15</sup>

(Picture 4 here)

The implementation of a new redevelopment project for the whole area, named Integrated City and heavily promoted by the city government, is supposed to start soon<sup>16</sup>. It entails relocating the railway and tearing down whole blocks, then building from the scratch. The plan has been criticized by the experts in the field<sup>17</sup>, activists and citizens as exclusive, secretive, dismissive of the city's history and Kamensko workers while benefiting real-estate speculators. As Mucko (2012) writes: 'The planned translocation of the factory, the recommencement of production, and the payment of delayed salaries seemed marginal in terms of the market, unimportant and burdening compared to signifying the factory space as reduced to its essentials—as real-estate. (...) Endorsement of the interests of gross capital and the systematic destruction of Kamensko are parts of the same process.' The stance local government took by ignoring the legitimate concerns citizens voiced and excluding the social groups such developments might affect is illustrative of the neoliberal policies of urban development Croatia adopted. Harvey (2007: 9) describes such stance thusly: 'The municipal government was no longer about benefiting the population, the municipal government had to address creating a good business climate. That was the goal, create a good business climate. And if there is a conflict between creating a good business climate and the wellbeing of this or that segment of the population, then to hell with this or that segment of the population'. By not ensuring that transparency of planning process and supporting the project that would ultimately hurt the workers of Kamensko, the local government became a common enemy that brought the workers and NGOs Right to the City and Green Action together. A lot of support that came from citizens, activists and artists seems to be inspired by their disapproval of how the governing structures encourage dubious business projects. The relationship between shady privatizations and real estate developments has usually been disastrous for workers of the privatized factories, leaving them jobless more often than not. This has recently been pointed out even by a popular Croatian punk rock band Hladno Pivo. In the video for their song Firma (Company), which is a tribute to the industrial workers, several Kamensko workers appear and share bits of their stories.

#### ***4. Kamensko Opened: A new Approach***

##### *4.1 Let's stay together*

After the factory was closed and the protests stopped, workers appealed to the court in hope of getting the money they earned. The group was advised by a lawyer who, as

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<sup>15</sup> Pandžić (2015) Ruše Kamensko: na mjestu uništene tvornice niču stanovi

<sup>16</sup> Simić (2015) Projekat uređenja Trga Franje Tuđmana

<sup>17</sup> Milas (2010) Zaustavite Fabijanića: Protest protiv gradnje na Trgu Francuske Republike

Mara remembers, suggested forming an NGO that could represent all the workers in the process. Some of the students who joined them during the protests had the same idea in mind; although they did not know how to lead such an organization, workers accepted and a group of them registered an NGO in 2011 under the name Kamensko Opened (KO) and with a goal to help the group cope with the new circumstances of joblessness and uncertainty. This was an attempt to provide some space and continuity for the community created at the factory, to keep the mutual, internal systems of support as the external ones - the union, the company and the state institutions—were proving to be unreliable. Djurdja, appointed president of KO, estimates the organization has somewhat more than 100 members.<sup>18</sup> New challenge was to find a place where the organization could gather regularly, which could be turned into an office, a sort of Headquarters from where future actions could be planned. While acknowledging that some organizations offered them their offices for limited use, Djurdja admits they wanted to have their own space. By utilizing media attention and contacts obtained during the protests, KO managed to exercise some pressure upon the local government and the mayor himself and got to use an office space owned by the municipality, with affordable costs of rent and utilities (Picture 5).

(Picture 5 here)

As they were out of work, members of the organization started a campaign to obtain tools and materials necessary for a workshop that could function within the NGO, and maybe make some income by fixing old and making new clothes for private customers. They used the media spotlight, which their story still attracted<sup>19</sup>, to inform the public about their plans and to ask people to donate the old sewing machines, or cloth and other materials such as cotton and buttons.<sup>20</sup> 'Donations came from all over Croatia. People's support made our work possible,' says Djurdja. The relevance of Kamensko story was also kept from fading away by their public performances, such as the one Croatian theater director Lenka Udovički organized with several workers and professional actresses (Picture 6), titled *The Unbreakable Threads*, on the topic of hardships the women of Kamensko suffered after losing their jobs.<sup>21</sup>

(Picture 6 here)

Gradually, the NGO expanded: in an improvised sewing workshop, using old machines and donated materials, former Kamensko workers started making their own designs, which they presented to a broader audience in a runway show (Picture 7)

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<sup>18</sup> Although it advocates for the right of all former workers of Kamensko, not all of them were eager to become members of the NGO. Of the workers interviewed for this research, Mara and Božica were not affiliated with the organization. They chose not to be because the closure of factory was so traumatic that they want to leave everything related to it in the past.

<sup>19</sup> Majdandžić (2011) Sutra obilježavanje godišnjice gladovanja radnica Kamenskog

<sup>20</sup> Tportal (2013) I vi možete pomoći radnicama Kamenskog

<sup>21</sup> Tportal (2011) Performans o socijalnoj propasti Kamenskog

organized in September 2013, with the support from the local government.<sup>22</sup> This was a way to mark the date when the factory filed for bankruptcy, and to have a conversation about the problems of employment for women. The organization started getting orders from other NGOs, small Croatian boutique businesses and even political parties—the last presidential campaign of the former Croatian president Ivo Josipović had the jackets for the campaign made by Kamensko Opened.<sup>23</sup> They managed to rent another, bigger space beside the one they already used, where they permanently set up the sewing machines (Picture 8). The old space is now an office equipped with a computer, a printer and a scanner—all second-hand devices donated by the mayor's office, Djurdja explains. The public support Kamensko Opened amassed in the meantime, with theater performances, fashion shows and the story of 'losers of transition taking matters into their own hands' helped a lot in negotiating with the local government, as it gave workers the media platform to use and express their grievances. It is important to note the change in workers' position: from a collective of more than 400 unsatisfied workers demanding their earned salaries and their factory to be spared from real-estate speculators, they became a small NGO (pacified part of civil society, one that does not 'break any windows'—Kubicek, 2004) that still demanded their earned salaries and sued the speculators, only this time they could make the local government look good for providing a couple of used computers. The same group of workers was treated differently when they wanted to claim their rights as industrial workers and when they asked for support as an NGO with entrepreneurial aspirations.

(Picture 7 here)

To generate more income, KO started organizing courses where they teach sewing, tailoring and knitting, driving a lot of interest from mostly women, young and old, wanting to learn these skills and support troubled workers. At the time of interviews, organization employed eight women and engaged several volunteers, including the president and the accountant, who were both retired—hence, receiving a pension and not in urgent need of an additional monthly income. The accountant is not a former worker of Kamensko, but a woman who found out about workers' struggles and activities from the media and who offered her services for free in order to support the organization.

(Picture 8 here)

#### *4.2 Building Community*

So far, the noted effects workers of Kamensko achieved by turning to NGO activism have been as follows: increased media presence, widened network of public supporters and business partners, better cooperation with local government, and jobs

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<sup>22</sup> Gradske vijesti (2013) Zagreb za Kamensko

<sup>23</sup> Špoljar (2014) Josipović posjetio udrugu Kamensko

for eight women (out of 426 people who lost work when the factory got closed). It is difficult to speculate what would have been the outcome were the other methods of struggle employed—if cooperation with the union was better, or if workers occupied the factory. Having in mind the state of Croatian economy, government and unionism, and the fact that factory closures and workers' protests are mostly treated as 'business as usual' by the public, it's safe to say that Kamensko workers managed to grab the attention and make some difference. Apart from becoming a framework in which eight workers can provide the means of subsistence, Kamensko Opened also became an important informal community center. Benefits of KO as such center manifest in three ways.

First, it informs the former workers of Kamensko who are not involved in organization's daily activities about the court proceedings and news related to workers' claim of their salaries and severance pays. The organization also uses its visibility to help in solving economic problems of the former colleagues. Damir, who used to be a warehouse worker and is only male employee of Kamensko participating in this research, is thankful for the organization's help in providing wood for heating his home over the winter, which he could not afford as he does not have a regular job and receives unemployment benefits of only 700 HRK (around 90€) a month.

Second, the organization presents the case of the Kamensko workers to the general public through the media channels, keeping the story compact and focused, hence easier to understand and empathize with. If there was no such organization, individual stories of Kamensko workers would likely dissolve and disappear among the multitude of similar records of former industrial workers of Zagreb. This benefits all the former workers who are waiting for their money, as there is a sense that not only the former employees, but the general public as well are waiting for the epilogue of this case and expect it to be fair to the workers. It might, however, result in the story becoming somewhat simplified, deprived of details about particular cases and individual struggles, as well as oriented more towards the short-term relief that belated severance pay would bring to the workers than to the need to evaluate, criticize and change the system which left workers in this position in the first place. Kamensko Opened makes no secret of the fact that their primary goal is to retrieve the money the factory owes them. Still, organization participates in public events and conferences<sup>24</sup> where their representative, most often their president Djurdja, speaks about the need to support workers, protect them from possible manipulations by employers and help them get timely law protection. While KO is visible and active in supporting the workers' and women's rights, they do not support any political party in Croatia. 'We cannot support anyone who contributed towards creating the system in which we now cannot get justice, even though we have been actively fighting for it for almost five years,' Djurdja says. Social Democratic Party supported their cause and

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<sup>24</sup> European Commission Office in Croatia (2014) *Žene, ekonomsko nasilje i stakleni strop u Hrvatskoj* (Women, Economic Violence and the Glass Ceiling in Croatia). March 14, Zagreb.; FemCities Conference (2015) *Uticaji ekonomske krize na zapošljavanje žena u europskim gradovima: Sličnosti i razlike. Smjernice za gradove* (The Influence of Economic Crisis on Employment of Women in European Cities: Similarities and Differences. Guidelines for Cities). June 1-2, Zagreb.



Kamensko Opened made some promotional material for their presidential candidate, but did not endorse them: 'We did business with them. Supporting us is nice, but it doesn't solve the problem. We need systemic failures to be fixed, and there seems to be no political party in Croatia who is committed to doing that now.'

Third, Kamensko Opened does not limit their activities to helping only to the other former workers of Kamensko. Djurdja admits this is something they decided after discussing it at length, as involving other people in their work would mean devotion to goals not tied specifically to their shared history and their main objective. At the end of 2014, organization hired a woman who is a trained tailor and a domestic abuse survivor, in need of a job so she can provide for herself and her kids. 'Others rejected her over and over again. She was a woman in trouble and we had to find a way to help. Now she works with us and everyone is very content with her contributions to our workshop' says Djurdja of the only KO employee who is not a former Kamensko worker.

While I observed organization at work, they had two visits, both of them illustrative of how the local community perceives Kamensko Opened. One was by an older man whose wife recently passed, leaving behind many hand-made pieces of clothing and a lot of textile materials. He brought these as a donation, to support the women's work in honor to his wife's memory. The other visit was by a young woman with a master's degree in textile design, who was searching for an opportunity to work. 'All the ads for jobs that I see through the Unemployment Bureau are fixed for someone in advance, and there is not many of them anyway. I was hoping I would find something here,' she explains. Djurdja instructs her to apply for a paid internship, funded by the state, available for young professionals of all profiles and done in one of many companies or organizations around the country who decided to participate in this government-sponsored training. Kamensko Opened has already had several such interns—young people with broad theoretical knowledge would come to acquire some practical skills in working with textile. 'It is nice to be a teacher,' says Štefica. Participation in programs such as this shows how Kamensko opened, as an NGO, got its members plugged in the system in a completely new way. They were now providing the training for youngsters similar to the one they received at the factory decades ago, only in a much different, uncertain and precarious environment which these young people are now entering.

By engaging in community life and providing services for former, current and future workers, Kamensko Opened found a way to engage in activities that support their peers, while at the same time investing in community building. What they are doing might be both servicing the workers and going beyond the factory gates, in Ost's terms (2002)—finding the balance between economic and political engagement, although on a very small scale.

### ***5. Conclusion: The Unlikely Activists***

The case of Kamensko and its successor, Kamensko Opened, is an interesting example of industrial workers' collective searching for its place in a new, uncertain

capitalist environment. I used it to examine if the new models of civic organizing in post-socialist Croatia—such as non-governmental organizations—can be used in furthering the interests of industrial labor, abandoned and almost unnecessary in the new, largely de-industrialized economy. After studying how the workers' NGO attracted and sustained public attention over the time of almost five years, advocated for the rights of all former Kamensko employees, connected with the community, created alliances with other civil society actors and started its own economic activity, it is tempting to say that yes, it is possible to improve the condition of industrial workers by encouraging them to get involved with the public in a new, organized and possibly non-unionized way.

Why is it important that Kamensko Opened is an NGO and not a union? As explained earlier, unions have fallen from grace in the post-socialist period, largely unable to gather strength and assert their importance to either their members or the employers. According to Hymen (2003), unions in Europe became increasingly dependent for their survival on institutionalized internal routines and formalized external relationships, which puts them in danger of losing contact with those they aim to represent. This is largely true for Croatian unions as well. Rigid and out of touch, could these institutions find inspiration in a smaller, yet formalized and organized workers' actions such as Kamensko Opened? It depends.

It is important to consider the limitations. Workers who run Kamensko Opened have lost their factory jobs, so they had the strongest motivation to find a new way to provide means of subsistence, while protesting over their breached labor rights. Although they are advocating for the rights of more than 100 former co-workers, they are a small organization, which simplifies managing and decision making processes. They have been active in the community, but they have never aspired to become activists—merely to survive and publicly state their problems while waiting for the money that factory owners still need to pay them. They have learned a lot in their new endeavor, but this emancipating potential has been mostly limited to a small number of workers involved in the organizations' day-to-day activities. Many of their friends and colleagues are either unable to work due to health issues, like Marija, or trying to make ends meet by doing low-paid jobs in the black market, like Bega and Suada. They are aware that they have not made any big difference, and still consider their position to be in a sort of waiting space until their belated money arrives, or they get old enough to retire.

Kamensko Opened, however, is surely not insignificant. It operates on a small scale and manages to give little but important contributions to the community, while developing its own capacities in the process. The biggest lesson the rest of the Croatian labor movement could learn from its experience is the importance of this small, human scale. By choosing to encourage grassroots action, build connections and concentrate on small problems, unions and their allies might eventually get strong and relevant enough to make more of a difference within the socio-economic system.

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Picture 1: Factory building of Kamensko in Zagreb. Photo: Author



Picture 2: Protest of Kamensko workers; Photo: G. Mehkek



*Picture 3: Park and a parking lot across the street from Kamensko factory. Photo: Author*



*Picture 4: Tearing down parts of the Kamensko complex, photo: T. Kristo*





*Picture 5: Office of the Kamensko Opened. Photo: Author*



*Picture 6: Workers of Kamensko in the “The Unbreakable Threads”, photo: D. Lovrović*



*Picture 7: The first runway show of the Kamensko Opened organization, Photo: S. Jandjel*



*Picture 8: The workshop of Kamensko Opened, Photo: Author*