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### **Worker narratives of blame and responsibility during the 2018 crisis: the case of the Uljanik Shipyard, Croatia**

Andrew Hodges\*

\* Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies (IOS), Landshuter Straße 4, 93047 Regensburg.



Landshuter Straße 4  
D-93047 Regensburg

Telefon: (0941) 943 54-10

Telefax: (0941) 943 54-27

E-Mail: [info@ios-regensburg.de](mailto:info@ios-regensburg.de)

Internet: [www.ios-regensburg.de](http://www.ios-regensburg.de)

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## Abstract

This article describes worker narratives of discontent in relation to a series of crises that occurred at the Uljanik shipyard over the course of 2018. It draws on five months of fieldwork conducted in the period between two worker protests at the shipyard surrounding the late payment of wages, the second of which transformed into a large-scale strike. Emphasis is placed on the oft-repeated trope of “systematic” or “all-encompassing destruction” (*sustavno uništavanje*). This trope was often used to describe the perceived non-transparent, destructive activities of agents positioned at the top of a hierarchy (the firm management, the local authorities, the national government), acting with the hidden agenda of deliberately running the shipyard into the ground for their own personal gain. The article begins with a vignette highlighting several of the key actors and narratives present. The context of worker organizing and of the shipyard crisis are then elucidated. Following this, workers’ self-organizing during the crisis is examined. The affective landscape during this liminal period is described, with a focus on fear, anxiety, blame, rumours and a (sometimes reasonable) suspicion or paranoia. The trope of “systematic destruction” is discussed in relation to the affective landscape. It is then placed in the context of the importance of personalized relations in the regional political economy, and the implications of this political economy on patterns of blame and responsibility are analysed. Finally, the history of the trope of systematic destruction is discussed and the political power inherent in its ambiguities are explored.

**Keywords:** systematic destruction, Uljanik, shipyards, labour, clientelism, blame, responsibility

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## 1. Introduction: Mayday

A crowd of people are slowly gathering in the public square beneath an imposing Roman arch in the town centre of Pula, known locally as *zlatna vrata* (lit. golden gate). It is 1 May, and red carnations are being handed out to passers-by, while a brass band and choir dressed in red have assembled and are preparing to sing. The mostly elderly gathering crowd are here for the town's official 1 May commemorations, and many have settled into seats on the outside terraces of neighbouring cafes, which offer a good view of the proceedings about to take place. At the back, a group of activists from a radical left party, the Workers' Front (*Radnička fronta*), are holding up a banner with the slogan "The struggle continues" written in Croatian and Italian.<sup>1</sup> A couple of young members of the local football fan association, the Demons, are also wandering around and observing the ceremony. The atmosphere is light and pleasant, and the temperature comfortable. The choir and brass band strike up in song, and a variety of melodies including the *Internationale* are performed, before several local figures of importance move to the stage, poised to engage with the crowd. The vice-mayor of Pula gives a speech mainly focused on the positive aspects of life in Pula. He describes how Istria is the only region in Croatia with net positive immigration, while people in other parts of the country are leaving in large numbers to live in Germany, Ireland and other EU countries, given the high unemployment and frequently relatively poor pay and conditions relative to the cost of living in Croatia at present. He also describes how Pula is home to the largest number of entrepreneurs per capita in Croatia and makes a sympathetic reference to the difficult situation at the Uljanik shipyard. An official from the Italian minority then greets the crowd and gives a speech in Italian. Following this, a representative from the largest of the shipyard's three unions (*Jadranski sindikat*), gives a highly emotive speech about the difficulties Uljanik is currently facing. He mentions the dropping numbers of workers over the decades, and the current difficulties that followed the late payment of wages in January, and highlights worker fears over what the impending announced "restructuring" will entail for them. His tone is more powerful than the vice-mayor's and the crowd responds to his speech with a cheer of agreement. Following this, the officials gather and place a reef comprised of red carnations on a memorial site in the square remembering victims killed by the Italian authorities during the interwar period of Italian fascist rule. More music is played and then the crowd dissipates.

Minutes later, in *Forum* – the city's main square where the town hall is located – a small and eccentric looking grouping arrive with a megaphone, imploring the people there "and tourists who understand Croatian" to listen to their message. Standing in front of the town hall, they

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<sup>1</sup> Italian: "La lotta continua", a phrase also relating to a historical radical left organization in Italy that emerged in the mid-1960s.

display several banners with the slogans “decentralize Pula”, “for a Pula in which everybody decides” and “Capitalism – some live in palaces while others dig through rubbish”<sup>2</sup>. One representative then reads out a long, scripted speech about the damaging effects of the ruling regional party’s clientelism, and the failure of the city authorities to address the many real social problems the city faces. As quickly as they arrived, they whisk off in the direction of the Uljanik shipyard, finishing their morning 1 May activities with another monologue on the crisis in Croatian shipbuilding. The contradictory position of the recently chosen “strategic partner” for the shipyard’s “restructuring”, a national tycoon who owns several luxury hotels in Pula forms the crux of their criticism. They cite his bad record in other Croatian shipyards, his imprisonment for economic crimes during the former Yugoslav period, and his fortune amassed in the South African platinum mining industry, before they leave to prepare for future actions later that day.

These two Mayday gatherings had a strikingly different character, reflecting generational differences and sources of funding among the political Left’s orientation in Croatia. The older, more official commemoration highlighted greater continuity of institutions and experience of the former Yugoslavia, combined with higher levels of official support from trade unions. In the case of Istria, sometimes dubbed the “Red Adriatic”, there was clear support from the city authorities for centre-left political organizations who had a generally positive view of many aspects of the socialist Yugoslav system. In contrast, the second Mayday gathering embodied the spirit of a more radical protest orientation among the (mostly) younger Croatian left that had emerged out of the university protests and struggles of the late 2000s (Stubbs 2012), many of whom had no direct experience of Socialist Yugoslavia, nor of the nineties wars, for the younger among them.

Many of those present at the larger commemoration had a direct stake in, or close connection to, the crisis currently unfolding at the shipyard. The vice mayor is a member of the regional party named the IDS (*Istarski demokratski sabor*), which had been widely accused as being part of a clientelist web seeking to profit from the expansion of tourism in Pula at the expense of the shipyard, seeking to convert part of the bay where the shipyard is located into a luxury marina. Uljanik workers were invited by the trade unions to attend the official commemoration and the trade unionist who spoke had worked at Uljanik for many years. Yet in lieu of the crisis, new political actors were emerging. While the Uljanik speech by the radical left group made an economic argument concerning predatory privatization, a more common, yet related descriptive category many locals used to refer to the Uljanik crisis was that of “systematic destruction”

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<sup>2</sup> “decentralizirajmo Pulu”, “za Pulu u kojoj svi odlucujemo”, “Kapitalizam: jedni zive u dvorcima dok drugi kopaju po smecu”. Translations: “(let’s) decentralize Pula”, “for a Pula in which we all decide”, “Capitalism: some live in castles while others scoop through rubbish”.

(*sustavno uništavanje*) of the firm. This concept referred to a malicious act orchestrated by a political elite seeking to increase their wealth at the expense of everyday people (*narod*). This narrative continually cropped up over the course of fieldwork, from my first conversation with an apartment host picking me up from the bus station, to numerous conversations with a variety of workers and political activists with a stake in Uljanik, political speeches by a “populist” (see (Albertini und Vozab 2017) political party named *Živi zid* (Human Blockade<sup>3</sup>), and when the crisis intensified, it was even mobilized as an accusation levelled at the Croatian government by members of other political parties, including the regional IDS. In this article, I examine the experience of the Uljanik crisis in Pula ethnographically and explore the ambiguities in the trope of “systematic destruction”, relating it to wider discussions and debates concerned with a violent feeling of loss connected with a reduction in manufacturing (Mihaljević 2014) and increased reliance on imports, often referred to as a process of deindustrialization in the former Yugoslav region. The ethnographic observations made are based on fieldwork and interviews conducted in the period (March – July 2018) between two worker protests at the Uljanik shipyard. It also draws on a much longer period of engagements with the Left in Croatia, interlinking with previous fieldwork conducted over the period from 2011–2018 (Hodges 2018). First the context of shipbuilding and worker organizing in Pula is discussed. Second, the various actors are traced and the connections and strategies they mobilized are analysed. Theoretically, the ways in which blame and responsibility were produced are examined, especially within the narrative of systematic destruction. Following the actors and the strategies, claims and expectations made of other actors offers insights into the post-socialist direction taken in Pula, and both continuities and critical ruptures with the past will be examined.

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<sup>3</sup> Sometimes translated as Human Shield, or Living Blockade by other authors

## 2. Historicizing the Uljanik Shipyard

Uljanik is a shipyard widely understood by workers and the management as having a long-standing quality reputation both in Croatia and internationally. Founded in 1856 when Pula was part of Austro-Hungary, several generations of families have worked there. It has endured across a variety of geopolitical configurations during which Pula has been a part of Austro-Hungary, Fascist Italy, Socialist Yugoslavia and the Republic of Croatia respectively. During the Socialist Yugoslavia, it was one of the first enterprises to undergo the switch to social ownership (*društvena svojina*), as part of a test run in 1950. During this period, it had a state-wide reputation as a strong employer. Shipbuilding was gendered as male (Matošević 2019), given the extent of heavy work required and considered by some to be unsuitable for women. The textile factories –another key employer in Istria, and in Pula – were gendered as female and paid lower wages on average than Uljanik (Bonfiglioli, forthcoming).

Uljanik was also known for its wider social role and influence in Pula, including on the music scene and through the organization of sports societies. At its height, Uljanik employed around 8600 workers directly, along with several thousand temporary workers with fewer labour rights (*kooperanti*). However, the numbers had dropped to around 2400 at the time of fieldwork. The shipyard also embodied a strong tradition of worker protest, with strikes having occurred there on occasion. For example, strikes occurred during the socialist period following the move to a more liberalized “market” socialism in the mid-1960s, a move that resulted in a number of layoffs and worker dissatisfaction that resulting in the shipyard manager being famously thrown into the water (Stanić 2017). During the eighties, echoing the wider situation in late-socialist Yugoslavia, Uljanik underwent a series of crises not dissimilar to those currently taking place, wherein it was unable to fulfil its credit obligations to suppliers (Wegenschimmel, forthcoming). When the war following Croatia’s secession from Yugoslavia began in 1991, some of the workforce left to fight and others to work abroad, and a small number of workers’ strikes took place.<sup>4</sup> While the Istrian region was not directly attacked during the war, the generalized war conditions had a negative impact on the shipyard, and several orders for ships were cancelled. Following the war and a wider shift to promoting market reforms, Uljanik continued to receive significant state subsidies in part thanks to the manager Karlo Radolović’s skillful negotiating with the ruling political party, the Croatian Democratic Union (hereon: HDZ). Several interlocutors highlighted the importance of cultivating an understanding and awareness of the specifics of shipbuilding among politicians and state officials making decisions on such matters, such as understanding why shipbuilding even receives large state subsidies in booming regions such as SE Asia. Following Radolović’s retirement in 2012, his

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<sup>4</sup> See <http://arhiv-radnickih-borbi.org/> (accessed on 12.09.18)

successor, Brajković, had to deal with large debts the shipyard owed, and these problems were compounded in the mid-late 2010s, with the extent of the shipyard's liquidity crisis remaining hidden for some time. In 2012 Uljanik was floated on the stock market and workers were invited to purchase shares.<sup>5</sup> Workers' and small shareholders' ownership totalled 47%, but they still had little say in decision-making processes as their membership was fragmented. Two separate entities were floated<sup>6</sup>, the smaller of which did well on the stock market and remained profitable, whilst the larger entity crashed. In 2013 Croatia joined the EU. The extent of the shipyard's requests for state financial support and guarantees conflicted with EU competition law. A "restructuring" process was announced in late 2017<sup>7</sup> and a new "strategic partner" was sought in early 2018. By this point, many workers feared for the future of the shipyard.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.tportal.hr/biznis/clanak/radnici-uljanika-upisali-sve-ponudene-dionice-20120723> (accessed on 12.09.18)  
Some interlocutors suggested workers' were forced to buy shares.

<sup>6</sup> Uljanik d.d. and Uljanik Plovidba d.d.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.glasistre.hr/ca6d2564-2e6b-4a26-824c-9538fab9c912> (accessed on 12.09.18)

### 3. A shipyard in crisis

In this more generalized atmosphere of concerns surrounding the future of the firm, in mid-January 2018, workers did not receive their monthly wage. The shipyard management, who were struggling to pay suppliers and complete orders on time, had asked the Croatian government to secure a state guarantee for a ninety-six million euros loan, necessary to keep the business running in the interim period while “restructuring” plans were being developed. The shipyard workers and trade union representatives threatened strike action, which was narrowly avoided following the loan’s approval by the European Commission.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, the day before the workers received their wages, a group of around two hundred workers gathered in protest in front of the management building located at the entrance to the shipyard. The tense situation and atmosphere of concern led to new workers’ initiatives, including the founding of a self-organized “Headquarters for the Defence of Uljanik” (*Stožer za obranu Uljanika*). Such initiatives have frequently emerged during workers’ conflicts in Croatia over the post-socialist period, from the late nineties onwards. As the effect of a strike on production (namely, stopping it) can be expedient for managers pursuing predatory privatization, who simply wish to close the firm and sell the land and assets, another worker tactic is needed to ensure the survival of the firm, and communicate with media, and the “Headquarters for Defence of a Company” (Grdešić 2007) form offers this. In late March 2018, the management announced their choice of “strategic partner” and impending “restructuring”, although the announced dates for the beginning of this process were continually pushed back. Many workers were furious at the shipyard management’s choice of Danko Končar and his firm Kermas energija d.o.o., as Končar, a Croatian tycoon, also owned a large amount of land in Pula’s bay and several luxury hotels, understood as a conflict of interest with retaining large-scale industry in the centre of Pula. This appointment therefore consolidated circulating rumours about the planned and systematic destruction of the shipyard. In Summer 2018, the interim funds ran out and once again, Uljanik workers did not receive their wages. On this occasion, a full-blown strike took place, both in Pula and at the 3. May shipyard in Rijeka, part of the same company, with striking workers making demands that the Uljanik management resign, and that the regional authorities and ultimately Croatian government take responsibility for, and ensure the survival of, the ailing shipyards. This “in-between” period was a period of heightened fear and anxiety for many workers, exacerbated by constantly shifting goalposts, and deadlines. This was especially manifest in the way that many workers perceived how the shipyard management communicated with them and made decisions, seemingly creating an atmosphere of strong confusion: of smoke & lights, of deliberate uncertainty & fear, and of *muljanje* (*suspicious activities*)<sup>9</sup>, leading to the epithet *Muljanik*.

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<sup>8</sup> [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_IP-18-391\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-18-391_en.htm) (accessed on 05/09/18)

<sup>9</sup> The Croatian dictionary (Anić) translates this as “baviti se sumnjivim poslovima I djelatnostima, izbjegavati zakone I propise, nalaziti rupe u zakonu” (be involved in suspicious work and fields, avoid laws and regulations, find holes in the law).

### 3.1 Worker organizing, “clientelism” and politika

Three trade unions represented workers at the shipyard, this level of fragmentation reflecting more widely the fragmented political opposition in Croatia. Two of the unions were long-established and sat on the supervisory board (*Nadzorni odbor*), alongside the Uljanik management, while the third and largest union, *Jadranski sindikat*, was the most militant. The positioning of two unions on the supervisory board was viewed by some workers as a conflict of interest, characterized by the designation “*žuti sindikati*” (yellow trade unions). This might be interpreted as a continuity with the role of trade unions during late Yugoslav socialism, where unions mediated between workers and the Party hierarchy through firms, and “the trade union was viewed, in the Constitution and laws, as a subject carrying out state policies, not one offering support to workers’ rights and the autonomous organization of workers themselves.” (Reljanović, 2018, 62). Nevertheless, Stanojević (2003, 294) points to the inaccuracies inherent in overly stressing the legacy thesis, i.e. the idea that labour weakness is a “communist” legacy and artefact of the trade union’s close relationship with the Party, and therefore a key cause of trade union weakness in “post-communism” (Crowley and Ost 2001, 7). He argues that Slovenia – with strong trade unions – is a counterexample to this theory, and that explanations for the post-socialist directions taken can rather be largely found in “the systematic and decisive impact of strategic political interventions in these societies at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s” (Stanojević 2003, 284). In this vein, Potkonjak und Škokić (2013), in a study of worker unemployment following the downsizing of the Sisak oil refinery (Croatia) locate blame for the situation, not in a socialist “legacy” e.g. of soft-budget constraints in a market environment, but rather in the particular mode of capitalist restructuring that has taken place in Croatia. Consequently, rather than the causal implication inherent in discussions of “path dependency” (Róna-Tas 1997), this article looks at path (dis)continuities and critical ruptures, in a framework that dynamically incorporates the constantly changing social contexts into shifts in forms of worker organization. Allocating blame was a common worker practice, and this paper will analyse such designations of blame and responsibility as encoding specific orientations and inclinations in the political field, whilst also playing a role as a call for action when the crisis escalated.

Many workers with whom I spoke regarded the trade unions in general as largely ineffective and the representatives as “*uhljebi*” (*spongers*) living off the small percentage contributions workers paid them from their wages, while decrying the tangible benefits of membership, such as the small gifts e.g. the powdered soft drink *cedevita*, which they received at the end of the year from them. This configuration relates to a hegemonic operator often noted in the Balkans (Jansen 2016), which contrasts “the people” (*narod*), with “(elite) politics” (*politika*). On this view, anything associated with elite politics – including political parties and even here trade

unions – was maligned, whilst the subordinated “people” were frequently absolved of moral responsibility (see Greenberg 2010). This sense of despair with *politika* also reflects an exhaustion with the extensive politicization that accompanied the war mobilizations and post-war experience, and more recently, an emerging binary distinction made between the small number of people living well off the current system, compared with the larger number of people “scraping by”, many of whom are in debt and feel disenfranchised and powerless (Horvat and Štiks 2012). The trade union representatives were therefore viewed by many as “political entrepreneurs”, whose political success was at everyone else’s expense, a view that has been characterized in discussions of a supposed “egalitarian syndrome” present in Croatia (Županov 1995), whereby economic and status differences between people are resented – a state of affairs that is understood as a “syndrome” from liberal perspectives understanding such a tendency as holding back Croatia’s ability to develop and grow. (Burić und Štulhofer 2016; critiqued by Dolenc 2015). The shipyard management also sought to manage how the unions were perceived in this vein. One worker I spoke with described how the leader of a union had been “smeared” by the management. He had been living in one location, while being registered at an address outside of Pula which meant that he was eligible for travel costs. Being registered at a different address – and claiming travel expenses, is a very common practice in Croatia and I knew many people who did it. It was easily justified as wages were low. However, when those in positions of power were uncovered for committing such acts – such as, famously, a government minister<sup>10</sup>, charges of corruption were levelled at such individuals. The “politikarnarod” hegemonic operator has also been appropriated by certain “populist” political actors – including the earlier mentioned *Živi zid*, who position themselves as a “voice of the people (*narod*)” – although, as a political party, I found they were also critiqued as “*politika*”. Crucially, this hegemonic operator has been directly critiqued by left-wing activists writing about the Uljanik crisis, who have explicitly emphasized that “politics as such is not to blame for everything, nor for the situation in shipbuilding, but *a particular kind of politics* with its *particular representatives*, who defend *particular interests*” (Birač, 2018).<sup>11</sup>

The shipyard management’s relationship with the regional political party, the IDS, was also widely discussed, as the previous head of the IDS, Ivan Jakovčević, had talked about downsizing the shipyard so as to increase the tourist potential of Pula. The IDS had a platform based on “decentralization, antifascism, liberal democracy, European identity, and cross-border multiculturalism” (Hoffman et al. 2017) and the key ideological tropes I came across in the media

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<sup>10</sup> See <https://www.24sata.hr/news/iselio-iz-barake-mijo-crnoja-se-prijavio-na-adresu-u-zagrebu-459845> – a scandal which led to his abdication as minister.

<sup>11</sup> In Croatian: “Nije politika kao takva kriva za sve, pa i za stanje u brodogradnji, nego *određena vrsta politike* s njenim *određenim predstavnicima* koji brane *određene interese*.”

related to the promotion of local patriotism, “liberal antifascism” and multiculturalism, all of which were visible in the description of the official 1 May commemoration. Whilst declaratively left-wing, the IDS’s modus operandi – and the grip many people told me they hold over the region in domains such as gatekeeping access to paid employment and NGO funding – is commonly viewed as operating in a similar way to the main right-wing nationalist Party in Croatia, the HDZ (see Ashbrook 2008).<sup>12</sup>

### **3.2 Critical rupture and/or self-managing legacy? Workers’ self-organizing**

As earlier mentioned, following the first wave of workers’ protests in January 2018 a group of self-organized Uljanik employees radicalized during the protests founded an initiative called *Stožer za obranu Uljanika* (Headquarters for the Defence of Uljanik, hereon: SZOBU). Drawing on other examples in Croatia (see Grdešić 2007), such as a similar initiative at the Sisak Oil Refinery (see Potkonjak und Škokić 2013), they sought to gain support among workers for taking action over the current situation in the firm, seeking dialogue with whoever would listen to their demands. Grdešić (2007, 63–64) highlights how such initiatives have emerged in Croatia and Serbia, but not in other parts of former Eastern Europe following the fall of socialism, and argues that they are a consequence of the deeper emotional connection that workers have with the company they work for, interpreted as a legacy of the specific self-managing variety of socialism. The founding of SZOBU brought these worker-activists into contact with other workers and also political activists, including members of the earlier mentioned *Radnička fronta*, and *Živi zid*. In consulting rather than aligning themselves with political parties, they could avoid being tarred as “*politika*”. They have contacted a wide variety of institutions with their demands. During the fieldwork period, they were largely ignored by two of Uljanik’s trade unions, with only the more militant union meeting with them. In May 2018 I met with three members of their team of four. Two were crane operators and the third worked in a warehouse. Before the meeting, they had “checked my credentials” by communicating with leftist activists on a labour news portal in Croatia. Throughout the interview, they often used items in front of us (paper, beer mats etc) to make arguments (e.g.

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<sup>12</sup> Empirically, I noticed some slight differences with other regions in Croatia where I had lived: the IDS were arguably more a question of “milieu” and the circles one moved in. As one interlocutor put it, “with the IDS it is enough if one person in your family is a member, rather than you having to be a member.” This difference could be attributed to a combination of the different ideological platform of the IDS and lack of direct experience of war, and the relative abundance of opportunities for small-scale earning via tourism, resulting in a decreased dependence on party political connections for small-scale employment. Whilst they were “softer” in this aspect, due to the small size of Pula, they seemingly had relatively tight control over the media and the NGO scene, facilitated by their allotting spaces to civic organizations in the social centre *Rojc*. In contrast, opposition to the HDZ in Zagreb, for example, had relatively flourished via alternative sources of funding, although some of these had been reduced in recent years.

showing how to move things with a crane, or making a map of Uljanik and the surrounding bay), demonstrating their strong visual and spatial orientation through the work with the cranes. Their stated goal was to save the shipyard from significant downsizing or closure, and their approach might be best described as based on a practice of “radical transparency”, contrasting with the perceived shifting, non-transparent and unclear actions of the management. “Radical transparency” here encompasses their practices of openly, publicly seeking help from all actors willing to enter into dialogue with them, and of opening up political meetings and practices, many of which took place behind closed doors at the shipyard or various government ministries. This included meeting with the vice-mayor, and they sent requests on several occasions to the shipyard management, different trade unions, Croatian government ministries and media organizations, although not all actors perceived them as legitimate, and they recounted to me that some simply saw them as “uličari” (street hustlers) or “huligani” (hooligans) and not a legitimate channel for voicing workers’ critiques. As described on the workers’ rights portal *Radnički.org*:

Perhaps the most important part of this struggle is that Uljanik workers should share all work-related secrets and information with the public because that is the most efficient means of exerting pressure on the politico-management structures. It is wrong to believe that it is in the workers’ interest that various agreements with the management or government are kept within four walls for one reason or another. For this reason, it would be best if, as the Sisak Headquarters did, crucial information is made public via Facebook (any one of the trade unions, or via a new page), communicating with the public and other workers in this way.<sup>13</sup>

This strategy also brought them into conflict with the unions when they leaked the discussions of a meeting onto Facebook, resulting in an angry reaction and pejorative discussion of “Facebook activists” in the regional newspaper, *Glas Istre*, with the headline “Facebook activists lead to a fall out between trade union activists in Uljanik: two trade unions do not want to be the hostage of a third”.<sup>14</sup> Notably, SZOBU did not have a political activist background. Rather they had felt compelled to take action after not having received their monthly wages in January, amidst a growing awareness of the unfolding crisis. Experience of workers’ rights in other countries – e.g. through previous employment in Italy –

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<sup>13</sup> In Croatian: Možda i najvažnija stvar kod ove borbe jest da radnici Uljanika sve poslovne tajne i informacije trebaju dijeliti s javnosti jer je to najefikasniji način pritiska na političko-menadžerske strukture. Pogrešno je vjerovati da je u radničkom interesu razne dogovore s upravom ili Vladom držati unutar četiri zida iz ovog ili onog razloga. Zato bi bilo najbolje da se, kao što radi i sisački stožer, preko fejsbuk kanala (bilo jednog od sindikata ili putem nove stranice) bitne informacije daju u javnost i na taj način komunicira javnosti i drugim radnicima. See <https://www.radnicki.org/stozer-za-obranu-uljanika/> (accessed on 15.10.18)

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.sikd.hr/index.php/iz-medija/869-glasistre-hr-facebook-aktivisti-posvadali-sindikaliste-u-uljaniku-dva-sindikata-ne-zele-bit-taoci-treceg> (accessed on 15.10.18)

was also an important feature of their experience. SZOBU's approach might be compared with Rajković's discussion of car workers in Kragujevec, Serbia with whom he conducted fieldwork. The car workers made claims that Rajković (2017, 41) summarized as follows: "As I am more morally fit to impersonate the key state functions and the very statesmen and bureaucrats are, I am more useful to the state, and deserve a better position in its niches".<sup>15</sup> In contrast to the Kragujevac factory, the logic of shipbuilding and the difficulty of its relocation underscored the usefulness of workers there as given, especially as the shipyard's order book was full. Here, SZOBU went beyond the Kragujevac workers' claims of "moral fitness" by seeking to demonstrate this fitness through their practices, especially through the above focus on radical transparency. In so doing, they sought to embody the kind of logic that they desired of groups who "manage" hierarchies – be they state officials or private business owners. There was no strong socialist nostalgia in their narratives. However, there was a dislike of the new economic inequalities of the past thirty years and a redistributive claim was asserted: they stated that they would be happy if their paycheque were a couple of thousand Croatian Kunas more, and the managers a couple of thousand less. Such claims were also directed at Uljanik, but with some crucial differences compared to the context of Rajković's study. First, workers frequently pointed out how there was no large shipyard anywhere globally that made a profit by itself; namely state intervention was present everywhere including in the highly successful SE Asian market. In shipbuilding, the task was rather to inform and persuade the government that it was worthwhile supporting a "permanently failing" (in the narrow sense) company, by drawing attention to wider positive economic effects across the supply chain, and the widespread argument of the dangers of an overreliance on tourism. This was occurring in a context where there was a neoliberal media offensive, with journalists on news sites such as *index.hr* making the blanket argument that a government supporting a failing company was "socialist", and garnering support from a population defined as "taxpayers" who should not be supporting failing companies for political reasons.<sup>16</sup> In these discussions, the trope of "buying the peace" *kupovina socijalnog mira* (ibid. 39) was also heard from time-to-time, with fears that the government would seek to keep Uljanik solvent so as to prevent social unrest.

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<sup>15</sup> The kind of moral claims Rajković describes were, however, hegemonic in Pula in other sectors, including those outside of the realm of paid employment. For instance, whilst the football club NK Istra 1961 was privatized and put on the market, when the club was on the edge of bankruptcy, organized football fans directed their energies at the city authorities and the IDS as having to save it. In this case, the identity claims of the club as a symbol of the town and region were mobilized as the reasons why.

<sup>16</sup> See for example, Matija Babić's comment, writing from an economically libertarian perspective: <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/uljanik-je-zakljucna-prica-o-cijeloj-hrvatskoj-parazituum-mobile-je-propao/2020220.aspx> (accessed on 08.11.2018).

## **4. The affective landscape of the Uljanik crisis**

I now move to focus on more specific features of the Uljanik crisis, namely its affective landscape: underlying moods, conditions and emotions that emerged across discussion that took place during fieldwork. These relate to the interplay between broader structural conditions underpinning the work regimes, and the specific features of the concrete historical situation that workers found themselves in. In the final part of the essay I draw these two aspects together in analyzing how blame and responsibility were distributed.

### **4.1 Suspicion**

I came across feelings of mistrust and suspicion among the workers and management, albeit in subtly different ways. In ethnography in post-Yugoslav settings, such “suspicion” is commonplace, partly relating to Balkanism (Jansen 2008); the “smallness” and personalization associated with sociality in the region; an experience of a newcomer as threat within the *veze* system amidst an economy of scarcity; and in some contexts, the presence and roles attached to an international “expert” presence during and after the wars. Here however, suspicion also related to the concrete situation the firm was in, which media commentators referred to as having the potential to be the next *Agrokor*, referring to the collapse of an agricultural conglomerate that supplied Croatia’s leading supermarkets, following which the chief executive – who had previously been close to the leading HDZ party, fled the country. Suspicion was first directed towards my presence as a researcher when attempting to negotiate access to the shipyard.

During the first week in Pula, a meeting with a representative from the management was arranged, with the hope of gaining daily access to the shipyard. I attended this meeting with the head of the research institute I was based at, who was also involved in the project. Throughout the meeting, the management representatives were guarded and expressed discomfort when I mentioned I would be in Pula for several months. It quickly became clear that the hoped-for access would not be possible, and that collaborations over informally negotiated access (e.g. to company archives) would have to be discontinued, lest related Uljanik employees get in trouble. When I mentioned the possibility of conducting interviews, they asked for copies of the questions to be sent to them, and they refused to be interviewed themselves, emphasizing that it was a sensitive time for the shipyard as redundancies may occur during the “restructuring” process, and that the new “strategic partner”, who had not been announced at that point, would have to agree to our presence. To a degree, this suspicion was understandable as the current management had come under strong criticism not just from workers, but also from the Croatian government. As the PR officer phrased it, the project was

“too big” to go in under the radar – comprised of a research team that includes the director of a German research institute. At the end of the meeting, the representative sternly instructed us that we should not speak with any trade union representatives, in an explicit attempt to seek to control the flow of information.

His reference to the project being “too big” suggested that some kinds of collaboration would have been possible, so long as it was not at such a level to become noticeable, implicitly pointing to the networks of personalized relations that abounded in the shipyard. It also suggested that his PR role was different to what might be expected in a Western European or American firm, and entailed – as Jovanović (2018, 6) noted in the case of the Bor smeltery – a role in managing patron-client relations within the wider community. This includes relations with the various cultural, sport and pensioner organizations that received funds from Uljanik, and with other significant institutions (the town authorities, university, museums etc.) in the surrounding area. The PR representative’s attempts to control information about the shipyard’s current situation went far beyond his role, and I heard repeated mention of him, with all the various social clubs (football, pensioners club etc) having links to him, or even asking that he gives his seal of approval. Yet other networks were present in the shipyard that did grant me permission to speak with them. Halfway through fieldwork, I went for a coffee with a friend who had lots of Uljanik family connections. She said that those people who ask for official permission are not so interesting anyway, as they will give you the “official account” and have close connections with the Uljanik management past and present. Nevertheless, the guardedness experienced by many employees, with or without links to the management, related to a desire not to endanger the company.

Among workers, I encountered a strong suspicion of tycoons, and rumours surrounding their intentions. One feeling articulated was that a local tycoon was more likely to rob people. For example, prior to fieldwork, when the Canadian-Croatian businessman Tihomir Orešković was appointed prime minister of Croatia in January 2016, a common comment I heard was that “at least he won’t rob us like the Croatian-born politicians do”. The most extreme comment I heard in this vein was that elite politicians are proud of extracting money from the state, and the elite political class was highly skilled at this. Given the sweetheart deals and predatory privatizations that had taken place over the last thirty years, this suspicion was arguably less a socialist legacy than a reasoned response to the direction that capitalist restructuring in Croatia had taken.

## **4.2 Anxiety and fear**

Upon arrival in Pula, I contacted Marko, an acquaintance who worked at Uljanik and explained the project focus to him. “Good luck”, he replied, “as Uljanik will be going into administration (ići u stečaj) on Friday”. I asked him to clarify, as I understood the EU granted bailout would

keep the company solvent until the summer. He explained that there were also issues with the Zagreb stock market, who may not let some of the shares on the market, and there may be complications with some of the shareholders, and the management was moving workers across from one legal entity to another. The fine details of this account are not so important as the fact that I heard these kinds of accounts regularly over the course of fieldwork, with different dates mentioned and then revised back as “day X” for Uljanik. These included dates for deciding on a strategic partner, for revealing the plans for restructuring, for commencing with restructuring and so forth. This technique, described by Čelebičić (2017) in her discussion of Bosnian bureaucracy as “institutionalized unpredictability” is a powerful strategy for disrupting everyday social reproduction often employed by state, or state-like institutions in the Balkans. In this context, it created an atmosphere in which the goalposts were constantly being shifted and many workers did not have a sense of understanding where they stood, and of what the management’s intentions for Uljanik were. The consequence was heightened fear and anxiety, with some leaving or seeking to leave the firm, whilst others fearfully holding on whilst waiting for their pension, or to be fired. In the case of Marko, who was in his mid-thirties, he said he wanted to leave Uljanik and was waiting for the right moment. However, if he chose to terminate his work contract (*sporazumni raskid*), he would have no right to receive any unemployment or welfare benefits. He was therefore waiting for an “extraordinary dismissal” (*izvanredni otkaz*), which he could receive if he fails to be paid for a day’s work, and the employer therein violates the work contract. Marko was relatively young and had successfully developed a side business using artistic and technological skills to engage in tourist activities. Despite his possibilities for working outside of Croatia, and in having diversified the set of skills he had to offer on the market, I received the impression that Uljanik was an important part of his life, more than a job, and that it was painful to consider moving on, but that he didn’t see a future there.

Towards the end of the fieldwork, I went for a coffee with a long-standing Uljanik worker, a machinist, who was also active in the local punk scene and sometimes moonlighted as a bouncer. He described the atmosphere in his workshop. Everyone had to be present every day, but there was no work to be done. Whilst this might have been normal in the past for a few days in a row, on this occasion it had been like this for several months, contributing to this atmosphere of fear and confusion. Some workers, demoralized, had asked to be put on the “tehnološki višak” (redundancy) list. Anxiety was heightened by the existential position the shipyard was in and intensified by the logic of the company bureaucracy and the actions of the management. SZOBU also emphasized in my interview with them that many workers were scared and might agree with them in principle but be unwilling to take action – and indeed, lots of workers took holiday leave during periods when strikes were scheduled.

### **4.3 Rumours, blame and paranoia**

Anxiety and fear, combined with an atmosphere in which attributions of blame circulated resulted in a more generalized sense of suspicion, manifest in its extreme as paranoia. As social psychologists have noted, paranoid social cognition is often a by-product of situations in which anxiety, fear and blame combine with a sense of powerlessness, and “they constitute, in short, attempts by social perceivers to make sense of, and cope with, threatening and disturbing social environments” (Kramer 1998). Rumours are one mode in which they come to life, and their circulation was heightened by the shifting deadlines, deliberate ambiguities, and attempted control of information flows. The most basic rumours concerned the intentions of the Croatian government and especially the regional political party (IDS) regarding the future of shipbuilding in Croatia. An IDS leader had stated several years ago how the city’s tourist potential could be vastly developed further, through projects such as a planned luxury marina, and this was asserted to be at odds with a strong industrial presence in the city centre. The chosen strategic partner, Danko Končar, owned several luxury hotels and had bought the land (Katarina) where the Austro-Hungarian and Yugoslav military barracks were located with the ultimate aim of developing it for tourism, the naming of him as a strategic partner for Uljanik was viewed as a conflict of interest between promoting the continued large-scale presence of an industrial shipyard in the city centre, and the recent tourist boom was frequently commented on as an expedient moment for absorbing redundancies relating to the downsize or closing of the Uljanik shipyard. Crucially, the number and diversity of rumours circulating added to the sense of ambiguity, built on shifting interpretations. For instance, it was not always clear whether Danko Končar, the IDS or the Croatian government had an aligned set of motivations or not, and conflicting messages about the proposed future of the shipyard were repeated in the media. In turn, this made precise attributions of blame difficult, which made collective action less likely, as “a very complicated issue that the public perceives as straightforward and attributable to a single cause can indeed inspire action” (Javeline 2009, 17).

## 5. Post-socialist “de-industrialization” and blaming strategies: Uljanik workers’ narratives

Numerous studies of post-socialist labour transformations (Kojanić 2015; Rajković 2017; Škokić und Potkonjak 2016) have drawn attention to feelings of loss, disorientation and changes in how work is recognized, and the decrease in workers’ rights that has accompanied the “transition”, as inscribed in labour laws (Reljanović 2018). The labour historian Chiara Bonfiglioli noted that “while industrial workers were bestowed with symbolic recognition and social rights during socialist time, post-socialist transition led to an overall devaluation of industrial labour, notably women’s labour, across newly formed post-Yugoslav states” (2018, forthcoming). This structure of feeling can be distinguished from feelings of loss associated with a fall in living standards (especially in Serbia, see Simić 2014), and the dissolution of a Yugoslav “we” (see Spasić 2011). Namely, it relates to the disrupted of routines and normal lives (Greenberg 2011) that accompanied changes in the material position and social valuation of work. A prosaic, yet important point, is the strong *socialist* connotation attached to industrial work in this context, connected with the sweeping industrialization during the early Socialist Yugoslav period. This connotation partly explains its ideological and practical neglect by the post-Yugoslav national elite in Croatia that sought to distance itself from socialist ideology during and following the war. Narratives of workers who have left Croatia for elsewhere highlight less the desire to earn higher wages, and more a feeling of a lack of recognition of their efforts, and a breaking of a link between working hard, and having a feeling of progression and development in the workplace. Both these aspects emerged in interviews and discussions with Uljanik workers.

In late June I was invited for coffee at the Veruda market, a hive of activity on Sunday Mornings, with a pensioner called Ivo who had worked all his life at Uljanik, moving up the ranks to a foreperson (*poslovođa*). There was almost a tear in his eye when he was talking about the firm, and while he repeatedly insisted that he did not have the knowledge to talk about the present-day situation, he kept bringing the topic back to present. Two points stood out that he repeated several times. As regards managerial changes, he insisted that Uljanik ought to have “the right people in the right place” (*pravi ljudi na pravom mjestu*). This entailed that forepersons should come up from below, and therefore have a knowledge of and be able to carry out the tasks they demand those people beneath them conduct. In this way, they will earn the respect of those beneath them. Kojanić (2015), encountered precisely the same narrative in his fieldwork with primarily blue-collar railway workers in Zaječar, Serbia. This shift can be understood as a form of alienation relating to the creation of a separate manager class. Ivo also said that “perhaps the state is guilty too” (*možda je država također kriva*). Echoing his

discussion of managerial changes, he said that Uljanik's relation to the state should be analogous to that of an honest worker. If Uljanik uses its resources well, but still makes a loss, then it deserves to receive necessary state support to survive. But if it behaves like a naughty child, wasting money and misusing resources, as rumours suggested, then it should not count on such support. Ivo also emphasized that the firm was now much smaller now than before and that the relationships within the firm had changed: young people either couldn't survive, or chose not to work for the pay offered, and were leaving in large numbers to work abroad. Another Uljanik worker involved in the football fan organization *Demoni* also made a similar point. Driving in the car on the way to an away football match, he asked me what I thought the biggest problems in the UK were. He said that in Croatia, he was sick of politicians living off the social divides that had been created through dividing the people into "us" and "them", a reference to the ideological rift between "red" and "black" Croatia (Pavlaković 2009) while the salaries people received – frequently without pension contributions, or with minimal pension contributions, were enough to get by, but not to live comfortably, or save money – underscoring the point that there is a crisis of social reproduction.

Ivo was not alone in emphasizing how the old managers had a knowledge of the production process and had worked their way up the ranks, while the new managers often had little or no insight into their tasks and were rather a separate class, a group of people who had "come in". This managerial change has its parallel in changes to the supply chain: whilst previously, many materials were sourced from within Yugoslavia, in recent years, the shipyard relied more heavily on globalized imports and "assembled" ships rather than constructing them "from scratch". This can be interpreted as workers' describing the presence of increased alienation (Marx 1844) emerging in the production process. Second, as observed in other post-Yugoslav studies of work (e.g. Rajković 2017), nepotism was frequently mentioned, whereby those chosen to be forepersons did not always have the necessary experience or skills required to carry out the job. For instance, a foreperson might employ his or her friends and then get away with doing little work. I was told that the people who received workplace bonuses for work were not those who had worked the hardest; on some occasions the supervisor had made a deal with them that if they are nominated, they would split the bonus between them. This created an atmosphere in which hard work alone was not rewarded, but rather those with better connections could get away with doing less and being recompensed more. If the system was perceived as unfair, successfully "playing" the system would be viewed by such persons as an achievement. This was facilitated by neoliberal reforms in recent years via spurious subcontracting. For instance, a week later, I met Ivo's son, who also worked at Uljanik. He described how the price of certain tasks that were subcontracted, such as painting the ship, suddenly jumped up a few years ago to seemingly more than double what it previously cost. When this was questioned – with the aim of saving the

company money – it was criticized or ignored. Despite his critique of such practices, Ivo's son was positive about the shift to capitalism, but he emphasized crony-capitalism and nepotism as the biggest problems facing Croatia.

Third, some workers suggested the shipyard was stagnating. One relatively young worker said the big problem was the lack of big orders and that the yard cannot make a profit, as it needs to complete three to four ships a year to make a profit and it is averaging one. He said that the technology was becoming obsolete and that things that could take a short period of time when done by computer were taking two weeks. Yet when I asked if this was one of the bigger problems, he said that the bigger problem was rather the “lack of interest in new technology” rather than the old technology itself, locating the failing in “worker mentality”, with older members of his team rather waiting for their pension. Their mistakes could become very expensive however – e.g. if a wrong size motor was written down and then ordered, they can't do the work and have a two-week delay. “To će drugi riješiti” (somebody else will sort it out) was the phrase he used to describe their attitude, additionally locating Uljanik's problems in a lack of individual accountability and responsibility for doing one's job correctly.

New technology may have meant that work could be completed more quickly, but there were concerns about the quality of technologically enhanced work decreasing among some workers. At the end of the fieldwork interval, I met up with a welder, Ivan, who had worked for forty years at Uljanik. When arranging the meeting, I spoke with his wife, Jadranka, on the phone, and she sat in on the interview and asked lots of questions. Ivan, who was covered in tiny scars from the sparks of welding, described how they had changed the technology they used. Nowadays they used a CO<sub>2</sub> system, which could be much faster, but according to Ivan, the quality was lower and this was visible in the quality of the ships produced. He said many of these ships now have lots of tiny holes in them, whereas they didn't before. This system was also less labour intensive and so there were fewer welders. Ivan then talked in more general terms about the situation at Uljanik. He was nostalgic for the socialist Uljanik, saying that it was a much better system because “it looked after its workers, while the new system just looks after the managers”, who do not understand hard shipyard labour as there are not “experts” (*stručno*), i.e. they cannot do the tasks that those beneath them do, and therefore they cannot see errors etc. He said the new system had destroyed industry and this was the way Uljanik was going now. Jadranka, however, saw things quite differently. She said that the problem in Croatia was “wild capitalism” (*divlji kapitalizam*), while “real capitalism was just” (*pravi kapitalizam je pravedan*), giving the example of how even the poorest paid legal worker in Germany can afford to live with the wage they receive. Jadranka used to work for *Agrokor*, the earlier mentioned agricultural conglomerate and supplier that went bankrupt. She had finished and received her pension a short while before it went bust, so she wasn't directly affected. Yet when

both talked about the post-socialist period in Croatia, they spoke negatively, using the phrase “systemic destruction of industry” (*sustavno uništavanje industrije*), which unified and elided their differences in perspective.

The “wild capitalism” some referred to in Croatia has unfavourable terms and conditions in comparison with states in the centre of the EU. Several of my interlocutors commented on and drew comparisons with the interest charged on loans and mortgages compared to in Western European countries, such as Austria. But blame for this situation was not solely directed at outside factors – the comprador capitalist class (especially the HDZ) was also heavily blamed. Interestingly, very rarely was blame attributed to everyday workers’ practices – the only instance I came across of a negative horizontal appraisal of a group, was in referring to the members of the radical left group *Radnička fronta* as including a lot of socialist “*neradnici*” or “*narkomani*”, a class of workers, many of whom were drug users or alcoholics, that firms such as *Uljanik* had employed for social reasons during Yugoslavia. Apart from this, worker deficiencies were more frequently individualized and explained in terms of individuals’ character or temperament (e.g. describing a worker as a “difficult” person).

In summary, with the exception of “worker mentality” and “narcos”, blame was always directed upwards within local or state hierarchies. Despite this upwards movement, there was no consensus over the cause of blame: causes ranged from individuals – e.g. the shipyard owner, leader of the IDS or the strategic partner), to processes – e.g. clientelism, nepotism, the formation of a separate management class, the alienation of workers from the work process; to collective actors, e.g. the HDZ, the IDS, the EU; and wider systemic factors – such as Croatian “wild” capitalism, or capitalism in general. The lack of transparency also made it more difficult to pinpoint actors as responsible for the crisis. This confusion made it more difficult for workers to collectively act, for as (Javeline 2009, 26) noted in her study of workers’ payments in arrears in Russia:

Intentional confusion of blame, like repression, is a proactive tool available to the regime and other state and non-state actors to diffuse potential protest. Confusion of blame may also result not from a conscious mechanism to diffuse protest but from blame-avoiding strategies, such as agenda limitation, scapegoating, and passing the buck.

The ambiguity in attributions of blame – whether a conscious mechanism or not – can be contrasted in its demobilizing effects with the simplifying, polarizing, potentially mobilizing effect of the people/elite politics distinction. Crucially, the clear non-normality of the situation precipitated by the late wages in January also led to a growth in worker consciousness. In coming to recognize a set of common grievances through simple acts such as not receiving a paycheque, the worker protests and strikes constituted workers as a class “in itself”, albeit not a class “for itself”, as they largely refrained from acting.

## 5.1 Systematic destruction as a powerful and simplifying trope

One key concept in Javeline's analysis is "intentional confusion". Whilst potential causes of blame were confused and wide-ranging, partly due to the complexity of the situation, a simple idea linking the very act taking place (destruction), with that of a deliberate force behind it (intentional; as implied in systematic) emerged as a powerful trope that was frequently mobilized. It perhaps entered more widely into popular culture through the film by the Yugoslav director Slobodan Šijan *Kako sam sistematski uništen od idiota* (1983) (How I am systematically destroyed by idiots) in which it was used in the context of class war, the film's title referring to a long document a homeless, wandering Marxist had written to describe his difficulties in the liberalizing Yugoslav socialism of the late 1960s, rocked by student protests against the "red bourgeoisie" (see Baćević 2006, 107). The phrase comes from a family of similar claims, ranging from "namerni stečaj" (Rajković 2017, 38), more specifically referring to predatory privatizations. On an economic level, this involves investors assuming control of firms and deliberately ran them into the ground, enriching themselves and selling of the assets in the process. However, the metaphor of "systematic destruction" is powerful and has been used in other contexts in the former Yugoslavia to refer to systematic destruction of an identity or culture, or the real physical and systematic destruction of urban environments during the wars (Coward 2002).

The phrase is therefore powerful in the ambiguous set of connotations it conveys, and this gives it an affective force more readily experienced than in connection with more "economic" concepts such as "deliberate bankruptcy". Its use also connotes the idea that Uljanik is more than a firm, and that what is being destroyed is something bigger. Sometimes the phrase is used resignedly, as a despairing commentary on the perceived bleakness of the situation. However, when a crisis situation is unfolding, it has a strong accusatory tone. It has been mobilized in political speeches, most notably by Živi zid's Ivan Pernar.<sup>17</sup> In both cases however, it operates vertically, with blame and responsibility for negative events being placed on individuals or groups at the top of company and wider political hierarchies, whilst leaving the actors unnamed. For instance, the vice-mayor of Pula used the related trope of *svjesno uništavanje* (conscious destruction), directing his criticism at the Croatian government and their plans for Uljanik.<sup>18</sup> While the vice-mayor of Pula was considered an elite actor by the local population, once again the accusation of blame is primarily mobilized upwards. Furthermore, the trope locates blame consciously within a set of actors, rather than

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.tportal.hr/vijesti/clanak/zivi-zid-uljanik-se-sustavno-unistava-po-nalogu-europske-unije-foto-20180110> (accessed on 10.10.2018).

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.ids-ddi.com/vijesti/aktualno/6118/cvek-vlada-rh-svojim-potezima-svjesno-unistava-brodogradnju-a-time-i-uljanik/> (accessed on 05.09.2018).

structurally – for instance in terms of capitalist conditions, or as being an unintended consequence of bad management. Systematic destruction is an accusation, locating intentionality for industrial decline, leaving “blood” on the hands of those in power. If ruling elites sought to individualize blame by locating it in corrupt individuals, workers held the political class in Croatia partially or fully responsible for the crisis.

## **6. Conclusions**

During this crisis, the key factor motivating workers to protest was an overt attack on their material conditions of existence, in this case through unpaid wages compounded by rumours, and later concrete evidence of crisis at the shipyard. Whilst the lack of action was sometimes explained in terms of national mentality or cultural inertia, this article has focused on attributions of blame as a route into better understanding how and why workers chose (not) to act collectively. The paper argues that a deliberate ambiguity, compounded by a pre-existing complexity and blame avoidance strategies on the part of key actors, was cultivated around possible causes of blame, and that this played a role in paralyzing workers from taking action. Simplifying dichotomies such as the narod/politika distinction worked against this, but ultimately, the intentionality of the act rather than the specific causal agent was the rallying factor which condensed into a popular folk discourse.

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