

Minutes of workshop I - Acting and striking along and against the global exploitation chain

Participants from Germany, France, Italy, Poland and UK, from different organizations and working places including Amazon Germany, Amazon Poland, Verd.di, TIE, American Apparel, Precarious (Dis)Connection, Coordinamento Migranti, Plan-C, ADL Cobas, Global Project, IP, Union Syndicale Solidaire – SUD commerce.

Issues and questions from the experiences in Amazon:

- Amazon came to Bad Hersfeld in the 1990s, later they added others sites;
- Amazon uses the laws to hold wages down, for instance in the US and in Italy it appears as a transport company, in Germany it appears as a logistics company;
- The union situation in different nations is very different which is a problem (fragmented union structures);
- Work is being intensified;
- There is a core group of trade unionists in Bad Hersfeld which is limited and there are many workers who just stay away when there is a strike – even when they are union members;
- How can we get more people which are willing to become active?
- It's not enough to struggle against Amazon – how can we organize along the chain of production (i.e. DHL, Deutsche Post ...);
- Limits of legal strike activity – and ways to circumvent the limits;
- What kind of contracts do workers at Amazon have? à Contracts are limited (for instance only at Christmas time);
- What are common interests between an Amazon worker and an DHL driver?
- It's not possible to win the struggle in one country alone – if German workers go on strike or become stronger, more work is sent to Poland for instance;
- Bad Hersfeld is located at the former German border which means: people from the eastern part of Germany are happy when they have a job for 8 euro per hour; at least it is better than Hartz IV;
- To organize a legal strike in Poland takes more than one month – so many strikes are in fact illegal;
- In France it is difficult to organize workers at Amazon, SUD does not have connection to all the Amazon sites, so it's difficult to organize a nation-wide strike;
- Amazon sites in France are Orleans, Chalons-sur-Saone, near Calais;
- In the UK Amazon busted the unions successfully;
- By understanding Amazon, we can understand how capital works today;
- How can we hit Amazon from the outside?
- Amazon opened a warehouse in Piacenza at the highest point of the crisis when all the local authorities and the local workers were happy about new jobs, on whatever condition;
- Relation between technical and political composition of work;
- Workers know very well how a global company works but they fear to struggle because they fear to lose the job and because they need the money;
- We have to be aware of the everyday struggles which are taking place and which we often don't realize. We must understand these struggles and connect with them

Experiences and questions from the struggle at Granarolo (Bologna, Italy):

- Most of the workers in the warehousing sector in Italy are migrants (more than 90%);
We were exploited, we didn't know anything about working conditions in other companies and places, we didn't know the law. We feared to be fired if we approached a union. We didn't often even know the Italian language. At some point we started to complain about the working conditions and the heavy shifts. With the help of grassroots unions we started to organize and understood the context of our work;
Today, the easiest way to start a company and to pay low taxes is to start a cooperative;
- Membership in a cooperative is also the easiest way for migrant workers to renew their visa. It was done a lot in the logistics sector in order to circumvent industry standards;
- A part of wage and labor conditions, the first problem of migrant workers is the fear to lose the visa, due to the link between permit to stay and working contract included in the Italian immigration law in compliance with European immigration policies;
- All workers learned to know what it means to become a unionist, to go on strike. We organized the first strike ever in this plant. However, then all the organizers of the strike were fired. The boss of Granarolo was also the regional head of the liga of cooperatives;
- We lost our jobs, our visa, our flats. We realized that we were fired for political reasons. So we developed a new mentality, we realized that we had to organize 100%. So we blocked Granarolo for 16 months with the help of Si Cobas, of the social centers and other political groups;
- Labour struggle was deeply connected to a wider political struggle, which included many problems: from wage cut to housing and the immigration law. We organized in different ways, including through the Coordinamento Migranti for the defense of our documents and against the immigration law.

Discussion, main topics and outcomes:

- In France the most urgent problems are the fear to lose the job, health and safety problems;
- In Poland we could refuse overhours when German Amazon workers go on strike;
- In the case of Granarolo we also used the tool of a boycott successfully;
- Brands are quite important today, so it can be a tactics to hit the brand of a company;
- Struggles in Italy started in warehouses and referred not only to wage demands but to a whole scale of problems like a work intensity which was too high, health problems etc;
- We started the struggle from the single working place and when it became clear that there are common problems we organized along the supply chain, single firm and in networks (i.e. demand for the application of industry collective bargaining agreements);
- One of the main problems was the relation between migrants and Italians, following the separation produced by institutional racism and the overwhelming presence of migrants workers inside the warehouses;
- In Italy it has recently been constructed a national platform which connected local unions in the logistics sector;

- Strikes included solidarity among workers employed in different warehouses and also different firms, with the organization of buses to support the struggle, strike and blockades there where it was needed to help;
- Different way to understand logistics: as an industrial sector (logistics firms: warehousing, shipment and delivery); as the complex organization of supply chains (same firm or cross firms); as the global and transnational interconnections in the production and economic process, which exploit the different conditions of workers and countries to enhance control and profits. Logistics shed lights to the need to develop transnational understanding and tools for labor struggles, also at the European level,
- There are similar problems transnationally, we have to discover: wages, speed of work, productivity;
- Need to link political level (i.e. laws on strikes, specific condition of migrants) with the struggle over working conditions (i.e. wage, shifts, loads, type of contract, etc);
- Need to link specific struggle or controversy with the overall production process (in the same firm, cross-firms, cross-borders).

Next relevant steps:

- Strategic discussion of Amazon Workers in Bad Hersfeld, 25.-26. April 2015. In those two days, amazon workers from several sites meet to learn from each other and discuss common strategies to put amazon under pressure;
- How should we proceed with this discussion? Can we establish a cooperation Network in the Logistics sector? There is a need to deepen the discussion and the understanding of logistics for the complex of labor struggles. For this we support the organization of a next round of discussion on logistics connected with the general discourse on transnational strike.