

Minutes of Workshop III

Migrant labour, migrant strike

The discussion during the workshop, in which unions and various autonomous organization of internal and external migrants from Greece (Diktio), Italy (Precarious Disconnections, Esc, Exploit Pisa), Germany (Gas-15M, Europe4all, IL, Welcome to Europe) and Sweden (Alt at Alla, SAC) took part, dealt with the problem of how to organize labour and political struggles in front of the increasing mobility of labour. How to organize a labour force where seasonal work and black labour is all the more diffuse and where migrants and locals are put one against the other by institutional racism? How to transform a generic plea for civil rights and against racism into a continuous organization against institutional racism and precarization, that will be able to hit on a transnational level the production of profits on the shoulders of migrants?

The discussion dealt with the necessity of re-thinking the European space starting from the mobility of labour. The supposedly «free labor market» and «freedom of movement» inside the EU turns out to be just one side of the story: the movement of people throughout Europe is free only when it is for the sake of profits. Migrants from outside the EU and from inside are put in specific positions in the labour market, through laws on visa and welfare benefits, and are considered as «resources» to be exploited. Even though it is true that there are countries of emigrations, countries of immigrations and countries of transit, common trends could be recognized throughout Europe in relation to how certain kinds of laws reinforce the precarization and exploitation of migrant labour. One of the problems that emerged in relation to the organization of labor struggles are the differences that separate by means of legislative measures not only migrants from locals but also different kinds of migrants. The distinction between migrants and refugees, for instance, has not only to do with «civil rights» but affects directly the labour conditions and the potentiality of organizing struggles in the workplaces. The case of detentions centers in Italy used as reservoir of labor force, that could be hired in case of strikes, shows very clearly how the differences could play at the detriment of every worker's struggle and cannot be treated separately. Also the fact that refugees in many countries of Europe are not allowed to work increases the amount of highly exploited and low-paid black labour that affects all the workers producing more precarization. At an increasing rate from the beginning of the crisis, moreover, internal migrants from EU countries, both workers and students, are experiencing a differential treatment that forces them into precarious working and living conditions and low wages. The idea of «welfare tourism» is telling of the fact that migrants from inside and outside the EU are considered either a resource to be exploited or a burden to get rid of.

The differences between the migrant labour force that cross the European internal borders have been discussed in relation to the relevance of migrant struggles for the problem of a «social» and «transnational» strike, as a process of organization both against the precarization in the workplaces and the political measures, like visa and welfare restrictions, that reinforce this precarization on a European level. In this respect, we shared some methods and strategies used in the past years and started a discussion on how to avoid the risk of «sectorializing» migrant struggles, considering them as separated from those of locals. The work disputes of Spanish migrants working in Germany is one of the most successful experiences discussed, because it was able to denounce the recruitment agencies that turn to Spain to find lesser paid workers in the sanitary or logistical sector, as well as the worst labour conditions that Spanish migrants experience in Germany and the Hartz IV system of management of unemployment insurances for

governing the mobility of labour. The risk connected with this kind of initiative is that of severing the migrants struggles from those of others, considering also that the commonality of language and provenience can simplify the process of organization. The open question is how to build connections and to widen the political demands in order to overcome the specificity of such disputes. This problem was faced also by the experience of the migrant strike in Italy, a political strike that involved migrants and Italians against institutional racism and that was able to bring to the fore the need for locals to take a clear side with migrants as a necessary step for their own struggle against precarization. Also the big wave of strikes in the logistic sector, that involved mainly migrant workers, encountered difficulties in the process of generalization to other sectors and portions of society. In Sweden the method of the blockade was used as a form of strike in a factory where mostly migrants without documents were hired, a method that, with the solidarity from outside the workplace in order to «fill the blanks» of the organization inside, leaves us with the open question of how to organize not occasionally in conditions where black labour is massively involved. The problem of overcoming the «sectorialization» of migrant struggles has to do also with the relation between the unions and social movements. In Greece, for example, even though some union supported the demands for civil rights, it is still difficult to connect the struggles of migrants with those of locals on labour conditions. Migrants are considered either as generic workers, overlooking the political conditions that reinforce their precarization, or as a juridical category. In this respect, it emerged the need to see unions as «tools» to contribute to build political struggles able to denounce at the same time labour conditions and their political reinforcement.

The current fragmentation of the political initiatives on migrant labour and mobility needs the discussion to continue and to face the problem of bridging the differences and finding common claims. The outcome of the discussion was therefore the need of further meetings to think at how to connect transnationally the existing struggles and build new ones, by means of common focuses and campaigns, such as that about a European residence permit of two years, independent from labor and income.