

Transnational Social Strike meeting

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Material



CONTENT

On Social Strikes and Directional Demands. Plan C	3
Contribution to debate on „social strikes“ and „directional demands“. Angry Workers of the World.....	8
Factory without society. Around some problems concerning the transnational so- cial strike. Precarious disconnections.....	13
Social strike: a challenge and an opportunity for the class struggle. Vanessa Bilancetti and Alioscia Castronovo.....	16
Dancing in the Dark: social strikes and directional demands, some comments on a debate. Australian Left.....	19
Ditching the Fear! - Warehouse workers struggles in Italy and their wider sig- nificance. AngryWorkersWorld	25
Challenge of the Councils of Freelance and Precarious Workers in Rome.....	39
Transformations of the Unions and movements of the strike in Germany. Precarious disconnections.....	41
Transnational Europe. Precarity and workers' organization in Poland. Precarious disconnections	43
Working meeting in Frankfurt, 18 March 2015. Notices and minutes from the plenaries and the four workshops.....	46

On Social Strikes and Directional Demands

Plan C

This article by Keir Milburn began life as a contribution to an ongoing discussion aimed at developing a shared strategic orientation for Plan C. We have decided to publish a version at this stage in order to do our thinking in public and hopefully draw others into the discussion.

At the present moment it feels like all sections of the UK Radical Left are trapped in a state of impasse. There is a desperate need for strategic rethinking. Yet although the situation is urgent we seem to have some breathing space in which to address the task. We are currently in the "year of elections"; with the UK general election in May but perhaps more importantly the recent Greek general election and a series of elections in Spain this year. Any viable Radical Left strategy will have to include the exercise of extra-parliamentary forms of power but this will have little chance of taking hold until the electoral strategies of parties such as Syriza and Podemos have reached their limit points and clarified the field for us.

We need a strategic orientation (and indeed a culture of thinking strategically) because politics without one can fall into either Comfort Politics or Fire Brigade politics. Comfort politics is when you do things because they are familiar or seem tactically (or affectively) easy. One example of this is the Climate Camp veterans who, once they had dissolved their organisation got involved in helping to defend Gypsy homes at Dale farm. While this was a worthy endeavor when I talked to participants it was obviously not the result of a strategic decision but more because their usual tactics could be fitted into the situation. Have tactics will travel. Fire Brigade politics is when people swing wildly from one campaign to another, rushing from one outrage to the next, trying to put out the fires that someone else is starting. While there are plenty of "fires" that really do need attention, acting in this manner subordinates you to a timing and framing determined by someone else's strategy (often the Government's).

A strategic orientation is not a step by step plan but a more general vision of how change might currently be achieved. Broad agreement on this can help orient our varied activities. We can in this way make a distinction between a strategic orientation and specific initiatives (such as campaigns or projects) acting in line with this orientation.

The Electoral Turn

2015 is going to be dominated by electoral politics and their limits. There are a whole series of important national elections across Europe this year. The consequences of the one that's already taken place, Syriza's election in January, is going to play out through the rest of the year. The UK general election and those in Spain and Portugal will also be significant for us. As a consequence the frame of electoral politics is going to be hard to escape over next 12 months. Closest to home we can see the effects of election fever in the Green Surge. The dramatic increase in the size of the Green Party can be explained partly as the effect of the Scottish independence vote, which galvanised politics there, partly by the examples of Syriza and Podemos and partly by the viral logic of social media; e.g. people are joining the Greens because people are joining the Greens, etc.

What's interesting is that lots of movement people; activists, autonomists and anarchists are also joining, including some of our own members. Many people are doing so for valid reasons but after talking to quite a few "surgers" it seems that for most the Green Surge doesn't constitute a strategy, it's the kind of thing that happens in the absence of a strategy.[1] But it also points to lessons that might be painful for us to face up to. The electoral turn was partly caused by the failure of the movements of 2011 to bring about the necessary level of change. An impasse was reached in both the pure horizontalist rejection of representative politics and the initial attempts to address the crisis of social reproduction autonomously from the State and capital.[2]

Podemos is perhaps the clearest example of this, one of their early slogans was: Turn the Social Majority into a Political Majority. It's said that around 70% of the Spanish population supported the 15M camps and protests yet the remaining 30% still managed to elect the conservative Partido Popular in 2011. The Partido Popular has since tried to ban protest and hamstring future movements. The Greek experience is less clear but pretty similar. The right-wing New Democracy party, hand in hand with Golden Dawn and the Police, instigated a massive crackdown on the movements, which along with the devastation of austerity, seemed to demoralise the movements and make an electoral turn seem necessary. As the year goes on we'll probably see the limits of this electoral turn made stark. We need to develop the strategy that follows this and takes the double impasse into account.

One does not simply vote out neoliberalism

Syriza has already run into serious problems trying to enact their programme. In fact they hit heavy weather in the first couple of weeks. That shouldn't surprise us. The EU constitution is specifically designed to lock in neoliberal policy regardless of the manifesto of any individual government that gets elected. Neoliberalism is inherently anti-democratic. It seeks to either replace points of democratic decision with pseudo-markets mechanisms or, where this isn't possible, insulate points of political decision from pressure and influence from below. Almost all neoliberal mechanisms fit into this schema; from anti-trade union laws to the lifting of capital controls, to the indebting of countries and individuals. All these changes work to break up old forms of working class power, route around points of working class leverage and prevent any return to social democracy through the simple act of electing a social democratic government. It's true that the economic crisis has broken the neoliberal deal (where living standards were maintained because stagnating wages were offset by cheaper manufactured goods and access to cheap credit). It's also true that the bailouts of the financial sector have moved the Nation State back to political centre stage. But the rest of neoliberalism remains in place. If you want either a turn towards Social Democracy or a turn towards Communism the neoliberal mechanisms need to be revealed and either evaded or overcome. Electoral politics will highly likely play a role in that but it won't be sufficient on its own.[3] How could it be when the system has been designed to prevent such an outcome?

So what's a Plan C approach in relation to this? I don't think it can be the adoption of the ultra-Leftist pose of all knowing disinterest. We can't just declare Plan B's failure in advance and then abstain from involvement in events. We simply don't know what the possibilities of the present are and can't know how much a Plan B electoral strategy can achieve. Particularly as Syriza and Podemos are trying to pioneer Plan B+ strategies, by acting in relation to movements and so increasing their space for maneuver. What we do know is that the way it plays out will significantly affect the field upon which we have to act. We therefore need to act now to make that field as favourable as possible. Yet the other mistake would be to simply ask: "What can we do to make Plan B possible?"

Instead the premise of a Plan C is to change Left politics so it fits the potential of the times. Plan B+ politics can be useful in this task beyond the resources and protection it can provide for populations and movements. Even at their point of failure Plan B electoral politics can be useful if they can clarify the anti-democratic effects of neoliberalism that work against all forms of collective action. The Plan C approach is to make those effects and mechanisms visible as key political problems while framing them in ways that can exceed Plan B solutions. So rather than ask how can we make plan B possible we need to keep in mind the two more general questions from which you can draw up a strategy: how do we shift things in our direction? And: what direction is that anyway?

I want to suggest we explore the social strike to help answer our first question and explore directional demands to help us answer our second.

Beyond the electoral turn: The Social Strike

I've already suggested that we see the electoral turn as, in part, a response to the impasse that horizontalist movements found themselves. But this impasse might look a little different once the Plan B+ electoral projects have collided with neoliberal governance and run into an impasse of their own. I think the focus will then swing back to extra-parliamentary action around the problem of leverage.[4] I am suggesting we use the social strike as the way to frame this problem. Translating and adapting the idea of a social strike into the contemporary UK environment and working out what it would actually look like in practice is going to take lots of collective thinking and practical experimentation. As a stand in for that I've pulled together some ideas to suggest why it might be an appropriate angle. In particular the social strike brings out three functions that will be required from any set of practices able to play a role equivalent to the twentieth century strike. These are making the new conditions visible, disrupting the circulation of capital and directly socialising, collectivising and communising our social relations, reproduction and struggles.

At it's most crude the social strike seems like an attempt to answer the question of how we can strike effectively under present conditions or perhaps more broadly, how can we exercise leverage? Behind this is an understanding that the strike, the withdrawal of labour, has been the principal form of material leverage for the working class since the late-nineteenth century. It was this ability to exercise force that has underlain most expressions of working class power in the twentieth century.[5]

But strikes have stopped working so well, at least in the developed world.[6] The number of days lost to strikes in the UK is at a historic low and much contemporary industrial action is more gestural than forceful. The Plan B response to this is to demand the reversal of anti-trade union laws, to which the orthodox Left would add electing a more combative union leadership. Those would both be good things but as with other Plan B strategies they are totally insuf-

ficient. Strikes, as traditionally conceived, have been primarily inhibited by changes in class composition, in particular changes in the experience of work and changes in the organisation of production.[7]

The idea of a social strike, as it was originally developed, obviously relates to the concept of the social factory, the idea that the sphere of production has escaped the factory and seeped into the rest of society. The era of the strike is associated with the era of the Mass Worker, with very large workplaces, clear lines of antagonism between workers and managers, and with collective break times and visible factory gates giving opportunities for communication and agitation. Now those kinds of mass workplaces have been broken up through outsourcing, work has become more precarious, the kinds of work we tend to do has changed, etc. These all make it much harder to establish the common interests that an effective strike requires.

Making Visible

Some social strikes have tried to address this problem by finding ways to express the new common conditions politically. A pioneer of this approach can be found in the EuroMayday movement that started in Milan using festival type marches, along with the icon San Precario, the patron Saint of Precarious workers, to make the common condition of precarity both visible and a political problem that demands to be addressed.[8] This "making visible" function of the social strike can also be the point where it moves beyond Plan B politics. Look at the example of the recent Vaga de Totes women's strike in Barcelona, which aimed to reveal the usually invisible, devalued and feminised work of social reproduction. This work only becomes visible when it stops happening, when the dishes remain dirty. Of course the neglect of women's experiences in Left strategies was the spur to the feminist discourse on social reproduction and demands such as "Wages for Housework" in the 1970s. This "making visible" function can also be seen in the movements of 2011, e.g. 15M and Occupy. The demand for "Real Democracy Now!" can be seen as an attempt to bring neoliberalism's anti-democratic mechanisms of governance into focus. These mechanisms have also played a key role in class composition by training people to adopt a more neoliberal outlook and making collective political change appear impossible.[9]

Disrupting Circulation

Perhaps the changes that have done most to undermine the traditional strike have been transformations in the organisation of production and, in particular, production's underlying infrastructure. Once again this can be understood through the problem of leverage. Traditionally the most powerful unions were located amongst the workers who occupied key sectors in the infrastructure of the time; Dockers and rail workers occupied key pinch points in transport infrastructure while miners did the same in the energy infrastructure. Their ability to stop that infrastructure functioning could choke off production as a whole.

The 1980s and 1990s saw a "logistics revolution" aiming to route around those points of working class leverage. The introduction of shipping containers and the 1990s road-building program (partly defeated in the UK by the anti-roads movement) aimed to break the dock and railway unions[10]. While a new gas-based energy infrastructure finished off the National Union of Mineworkers. New world wide supply chains coordinated "just in time" by bar codes and networked computers also allowed the break up of mass workplaces in developed countries and the relocation of production to the global South. Yet while old forms of working class power were destroyed, the process of automation and geographical relocation produced new weak points.[11] "Just in Time" or LEAN production, relies on keeping very low stock levels in shops and factories with bar codes allowing new stock to be ordered just-in-time for it to arrive where its needed. The Fuel blockades by farmers and truckers in 2000 showed just how vulnerable modern capitalism is to disruption of transport infrastructure. A weakness amplified by the strong tendencies towards monopolies and oligopolies in the modern economy. As a result there are small numbers of very large logistics centers in the UK that have vital infrastructural roles.

Workers at those sites would seem to occupy key points of material leverage however they tend to be un-unionised and employed under precarious conditions. Yet others too have twigged the potential here, just look at Occupy Oakland's port shutdown. Working un-officially with the unionised dockworkers they have led the way in the move from symbolic occupations of city parks to tactics that disrupted the circulation of capital. It's a lesson that seems to have somewhat generalised in the USA with the Black Lives Matter demonstrations also beginning to occupy highways, etc. Of course there are other examples of those without a shared workplace gaining leverage by blocking circulation. The Argentinean unemployed workers movement, the Piqueteros, are a case in point.

It's not hard to imagine how effective a logistics strike could be if supplemented by social movements deploying tactics such as "Reclaim the Streets" style street occupations in the most disruptive areas. In this vein the Italians have started to think the Social Strike alongside a Metropolitan Strike, with the idea that as production takes place throughout the whole of metropolis then we should bring the whole city to a halt.

Socialise, Collectivise, Communise

Before we get too excited there are several problems with this strategy of disruption. The most obvious is that for highly disruptive strikes to work and not be isolated and crushed through militarised policing it would need high levels of legitimacy in wider society. Such support is of course possible. A 2013 poll by Spanish newspaper El País showed 89% support for the Platform for People Affected by Mortgages campaign of direct action, eviction-blocking and escraches (protests outside politicians' houses). Amazingly even among voters of the governing rightwing Partido Popular the approval figure remained at 87%.

The second problem with a strategy of disruption returns us to the problem of visibility. Simply put those sectors with the most leverage, the ability to cause the most disruption, tend to become the most visible and so those whose needs are most attended to. This obviously risks reinstating the invisibilities of the 1970s. The increasing amount of caring work in the economy and the waged labour market makes such an outcome even more likely. As social reproduction has a dual character, reproducing us as both workers for capital but also as human beings, then a strategy of disruption becomes problematic. How can care workers, for example, go on strike without causing suffering to those they care for and about?

To address these problems we need to develop the third character of the social strike, which sees it try and directly socialize (or communize) relations. Most obviously this involves striking (or otherwise acting) in ways that maximise feelings of collectivity and enhance general levels of sociability.

To understand this we can go back to the very birth of the social strike idea. In 1995 there was a transport strike in Paris. Toni Negri and the other Italian Autonomists who were living there in exile at the time got very excited about it. This was in part because the disruption of transport revealed a key point of leverage but also because the strike seemed to have made Paris more sociable in some ways. In order to deal with the strike people had to cooperate more, perhaps by car pooling or walking together and therefore getting a different perspective on the city. It was this increased sociability that provoked the title "social" strike but this dimension seems to have been lost a bit in recent discussions.

For a more recent example of a tactic that tried to socialise a strike we could look at Bradford IWW's organisation of a collective crèche during the recent teachers strikes (perhaps the crèche Plan C organised during the TUC march is another example). More generally though this approach to the social strike might provide a way to link up the two extra-parliamentary forms of exercising power: the power of disruption (strikes, blockades, occupations, etc.) and the power of self-reproduction (solidarity networks, socialist clothing banks, Pay as You Feel cafes, etc).

Perhaps we can see the latter, projects and campaigns to directly address the crisis of social reproduction, as a means of socialising society and therefore moving things in the direction we want it to go. But we can also see them as reclaiming some of the resources needed to make more directly antagonistic tactics, tactics of disruption, more winnable. After all, the response to any unlimited strike is to starve out the strikers and their families. When we go on all out strike we are trying to cause a crisis in the reproduction of capital while the bosses try to provoke a crisis of social reproduction amongst the workers. The winner is the side that holds out longest. The reason the UK Miners could strike for so long in 1984-5 was because they had strong communities (as well as networks of political support) that could help them address the problem of social reproduction. It was the communities that organised the collective kitchens, and the political supporters who organised collections. These sorts of homogenous communities with a strong history of struggle have largely been destroyed but perhaps projects of self-reproduction can establish new networks of support. We might call this either building counter-power or seizing the means of social reproduction.

These ongoing projects also help to establish legitimacy for more disruptive tactics, especially when they are tied to politicising a specific problem and exposing the inability of "established channels" to address them. Perhaps the natural accompaniment to this tactic is a reinvention of the "good work strike". Traditionally this targets the needs of bosses in the work process rather than the needs of other workers. The classic example is the refusal of transport workers to stamp tickets. But a side effect of this tactic is to reveal how the demands of capital and management gets in the way of actually addressing people's needs. The modern version might well take aim at the bureaucracy of neo-liberal managerialism, refusing to participate in, or acting to otherwise reveal, the endless audits and performance management that does so much to prevent people doing the actually useful part of their jobs.

Directional Demands

If the section above is about directly moving society in the direction we want, and therefore creating the conditions for struggle on a greater scale, then the same principles should be applied to determining more precisely what direction we need to move in. I think the idea of Directional Demands fits the bill for this.

In short directional demands aim to provide a direction of travel rather than simply describe the wish for "full

communism." They need to make sense within existing conditions while pointing beyond them. Indeed they need to make better sense of the current situation and the potential it holds than conventional politics does. They need to play a compositional role, I.E. link different sectors or interests together or indeed produce a new subject of their own. And their fulfillment, or indeed movement towards their fulfillment needs to leave us, the working class, the multitude or whatever, in a stronger position, able to better articulate what we want and better able to exercise the power to get there. The Universal Basic Income (if framed correctly) could provide one example, a Debt Jubilee or Universal Expropriation (a residency restriction on housing), could provide others. Developing a program of Directional Demands is a way of addressing the electoral turn while leaving room to go beyond it.

In fact it seems to me that directional demands and something like a social strike would have to work in tandem to be effective. Demands only make sense once the social problem they are associated with have been made into a political problem that demands to be addressed (think of how UK Uncut made tax avoidance a political problem that everyone was discussing and which every political party thought they had to address somehow). However demands are only granted if there is the leverage, or threat of leverage, to make that demand seem the least worst option for capital's managers. The demand for a basic income, for example, still doesn't quite make sense to the person on the street despite it fitting with a whole series of technological and social trends. That's because those trends haven't been made into a key political problems yet. Social strikes in Italy and Spain have been aiming to do just that and therefore make the Basic Income the obvious solution. In turn a disruptive social strike can only gain legitimacy if it's tied to an attractive story about the kinds of change we want to bring about. Disruption for disruption's sake will always be rejected but disruption as a necessary moment in necessary transformation is easier to accept.

Onwards

Accepting this doesn't mean we should just set the date for the great social strike? It is more a matter of asking what tactics we can adopt to socialise existing strikes and how we might help turn social movements and social reproduction struggles away from merely symbolic action and towards the exercise of material leverage? I think Plan C have already been acting to try and socialise strikes. Just look at the J30 assemblies and website aiming to generalise that strike day in 2011, or indeed the #StrikeUp hashtags in last year's public sector strikes. And I think that social movements are already moving towards the exercise of material leverage. The Social Strike tries to name an existing tendency in contemporary struggles or at least provides room for existing repertoires to fit in.

2015 will continue to be the year of the electoral turn. There's probably no escaping this even if we want to. What this means is that whilst we participate in its unfolding testing its limits and remaining vigilant to the new spaces it creates we can also use it as a year of experimentation. Treat this as an open call. How might a Social Strike framework be put into practice? What are 21st century capitalism's new weak points? How can we make use of the new electoral entities and the openings they create? Most importantly, with the traditional strike tactic (and with it the old Left) increasingly disarmed, what do we need to create in order to build leverage?

[1] We could probably put Left Unity in that tendency as well. Although we could also read Left Unity more sympathetically as the (post) Trotskyist Left trying to rid itself of the horrendous, sectarian political culture that built up over the Neoliberal years. As so often happens the name reveals, whether fully consciously or not, the foundational problem that the organisation came together to address. Left Unity tries to do what it says on the tin. In this sense it can be seen as a positive move - although at times I worry that Left Unity is the best parts of the "old Left" huddling together around an electoral strategy that allows them to put off the more radical, and indeed more difficult, task of rethinking that the present situation requires. Remember 15M in Spain was, in part, a revolution against the old Left (both the neoliberal Left but also the old "revolutionary" Left). Podemos represents an adaptation by segments of the old Left to the new political common sense created by 15M.

[2] The later was one of our opening bets for what a Plan C approach would look like but events have shown they need to be part of a wider strategy of exercising power.

[3] One of the positive effects of the electoral turn is the wider acceptance that an electoral expression of the movements will most probably play a part in an effective contemporary Left politics. While this seems a much more realistic perspective it also carries a lot of risks.

[4] By leverage I mean the ability to exert force or bring pressure to shift things in a particular direction. Leverage often implies the application of force in the manner and at the point of maximum effect. So force exercised at key points can have effects disproportionate to the amount of force applied. But my use here also aims at distinguishing this "material leverage" from the more symbolic types of action that have dominated movements over the last twenty years.

[5] To be fair insurrection and various forms of armed struggle were also central forms of leverage in the nineteenth and twentieth century. But these were often tied up with the idea of the general strike or theorised as appropriate to peasant societies because they had less access to the leverage of the strike. Similarly riots have primarily been seen as the tactic used by those sectors or those places that the strike tactic couldn't reach.

[6] There have been plenty of successful strikes in China recently, for example, and incomes there have been rising dramatically as a result.

[7] The concept of class composition was central to the Italian Operaist tradition (which in the UK has fed into what's called auton-

mism). It sees the composition of the working class as changing historically through cycles of struggle. Capital restructures through technological innovation and reorganizations of the work process. These often seek to undo established forms of working-class power. These changes produce a new "technical" composition of the working class with particular political affordances, perhaps, for example, the reorganized work process allows good communication between certain sectors of workers but blocks it between others. The second aspect is the political composition of the working class, this is determined by the effectiveness of the forms of organisation and action through which these affordances are exploited or overcome and the interests of the class asserted against the interest of capital.

[8] For more on EuroMayday see: <http://five.fibrejournal.org/fcj-023-on-the-life-and-deeds-of-san-precario-patron-saint-of-precarious-workers-and-lives/>

[9] The tactics of the 2011 movements, the camps, occupations and general assemblies can be seen as attempts to route around the anti-democratic mechanisms of neoliberalism through more directly democratic means. In hindsight, however, they probably functioned more effectively as tools to overcome the individualizing, self-blaming culture of neoliberalism by rediscovering collectivity. It is this that has produced the conditions for further struggle, helping the post-Ferguson movement to emerge in the US but also making the electoral turn possible elsewhere.

[10] The common interests that led to an alliance between "Reclaim the Streets" and the Liverpool Dockers in 1996-7 can be understood in this light.

[11] This talk about infrastructure by Nick Srnicek is good on this: <http://vimeo.com/117434029>

Contribution to debate on "social strikes" and "directional demands"

Angry Workers of the World

Dear comrades,

We want to contribute to the discussion on "social strikes", based on a text written by comrades from Plan C. We hope that our thoughts are also relevant for the wider debate within the Blockupy / Transnational Strike network. Please read the following rather as a spontaneous reply.

What we liked

We agree with the article's emphasis on the necessity for a debate about "political strategy" and the criticism of comfort and fire-fighting politics. We also share your questions regarding the "social strike": how can limitations of single disputes be overcome and their social isolation (from other spheres of working class life) be broken down. It is good that the article emphasises that a strategical look at changing working class conditions - in the search for potential power - has to be combined with various forms of material support.

What we criticise

We feel that the article is kinda stuck in a "post-anti-glob"-movement type of perspective according to which:

- a) the „political movement“ is the main subject and the arena between public protest and governmental politics is the main Field of political engagement, e.g. through directional demands;
- b) „neoliberalism“ is mainly seen as a policy, less than a contradictory phase of capitalist development and class struggle;
- c) working class struggles are mainly seen as a Leverage, and not as a political process themselves, which have to overcome the material and political divisions within the class, in order to change ourselves and the world

Due to this perspective we think that the text fails to provide concrete strategies, assuming that our political goal is to support the development of working class struggles which can fundamentally challenge the existing mode of social (re-)production. The suggestion of „social strikes“ and „directional demands“ remains too abstract and does not relate to the actual problems and potentials of ongoing struggles, visible and invisible ones. Being stuck in the „political field“ leaves the article being either arbitrary or opportunistic towards proposing engagement with parliamentary politics, e.g. regarding the Green Party. Below we will address some of the more concrete points of the article, whose weaknesses we see as an expression of the problematic political starting point described above.

Syriza and Podemos being a result of an impasse of the anti-austerity struggles

I've already suggested that we see the electoral turn as, in part, a response to the impasse that horizontalist movements found themselves. But this impasse might look a little different once the Plan B+ electoral projects have

collided with neoliberal governance and run into an impasse of their own. I think the focus will then swing back to extra-parliamentary action around the problem of leverage.

If we look at the mobilisations in Greece, Spain, but also Egypt, we can see that they were a cross-class alliance, composed as much of aspiring precarious professionals as of impoverished proletarians. The mobilisations were focused on the state and political demands („real democracy“). The working class issues, as collective problems of poverty, unemployment, weak positions towards the various bosses, were addressed only marginally. In this sense Syriza and Podemos don't mainly express an impasse of the movement, because a) certain aspirational segments of the movement arrived where they wanted to arrive, which is in power; and b) the movements imploded in the vacuum of the political field, because there is only so much proletarians can do as poor citizens facing the state. To suggest that the movement just needs more leverage to face the political powers again sounds instrumentalist. In contrast we think that to a certain extent the movements themselves were impasses for proletarians to discover their collective (re-)productive power to change things. Also in this regard we find the text's assumption that left governments automatically open spaces for working class movements rather un-historic and ignores the fact that e.g. the struggle against austerity in Greece has turned much more into a national/nation state affaire since Syriza took over. [2]

Social strikes as strategy

In particular the social strike brings out three functions that will be required from any set of practices able to play a role equivalent to the twentieth century strike. These are making the new conditions visible, disrupting the circulation of capital and directly socialising, collectivising and communising our social relations, reproduction and struggles.

As we said before, we disagree with the perspective on workers' struggles as leverage for the political movements, but we agree with the quote above. Unfortunately this part of the text remains too abstract and borrows too much from ideological hypes e.g.:

The idea of a social strike, as it was originally developed, obviously relates to the concept of the social factory, the idea that the sphere of production has escaped the factory and seeped into the rest of society.

Yes, the big manufacturing centres shrank in Western Europe and North America and relocated elsewhere. But to assume that society turned into one big factory largely ignores the re-concentration (and therefore segmentation!) process affecting many other jobs, e.g. the concentration of care work in mega-hospitals and care centres, of food production in ready-meal factories, of bank branch work in call centres, of retail shop work in distribution centres ☒ not to speak of central sorting offices, mega-stores, mega-prisons, mass campuses and so on. The concentration goes hand in hand with a separation from the rest of society and therefore with becoming invisible. We see big box type of entities spread out in suburbs and countryside, but we know fuck all about what people are doing in them. We click an online button and someone brings us our Sainsbury's ready-meal. In this sense we think that the text's dichotomy of visible production work and invisible reproduction work is incorrect also historically, when he says:

The second problem with a strategy of disruption returns us to the problem of visibility. Simply put those sectors with the most leverage, the ability to cause the most disruption, tend to become the most visible and so those whose needs are most attended to. This obviously risks reinstating the invisibilities of the 1970s.

The relationship between male and female workers' struggles in bigger workplaces and struggles in the reproductive sphere was dynamic and mutually influencing - if not without conflicts. For us, the main aim is not to look for new workers concentration mechanically, but try to understand how these potential places of collective power relate to the more individualised spheres of proletarian existence. This requires strategy and to lay the blanket social factory on top of it won't help us too much to develop it.

The paragraph about the social strike should be developed with a deeper analysis of ongoing strikes in the UK and beyond, of their limitations and potentials, of the role of the trade unions etc. The examples given by Plan C comrades seem a bit random (an organised creche during a TUC march or socialist clothing banks). If we don't analyse in concrete how ongoing disputes can develop power on their own terrain and beyond, how we can honestly call for a „social strike“? Facing a vast sea of often rather isolated and divided working class conditions, we run the danger of freaking out and proposing abstract short-cuts back into the political field through the proposed directional demands.

Directional Demands

In short directional demands aim to provide a direction of travel rather than simply describe the wish for full communism. They need to make sense within existing conditions while pointing beyond them. Indeed they need to make better sense of the current situation and the potential it holds than conventional politics does. They need to play a

compositional role, I.E. link different sectors or interests together or indeed produce a new subject of their own. And their fulfillment, or indeed movement towards their fulfillment needs to leave us, the working class, the multitude or whatever, in a stronger position, able to better articulate what we want and better able to exercise the power to get there. The Universal Basic Income (if framed correctly) could provide one example, a Debt Jubilee or Universal Expropriation (a residency restriction on housing), could provide others. Developing a program of Directional Demands is a way of addressing the electoral turn while leaving room to go beyond it.

The idea of directional or how they used to be called transitional demands as a vehicle to unify the working class and give direction to struggles is as old as the political left. We largely think it is idealistic to assume that struggles, which are isolated by the material division of labour (intellectual/manual, regional, gendered etc.) and state repression, can be united under the largely discursive umbrella of a common demand. If the working class is not able to break down the material barriers and hierarchies during actual struggles, it will not develop the power to impose any type of well-meant demands. BUT once workers actually discover their existence as social collective producers, then such a demand will only serve to reign things in and to focus the attention away from the possible fundamental change of how we live together.

This does not mean demanding full communism in a vacuum. It means focusing our attention on how certain segments of the working class and certain new forms of struggle will be successful enough to attract other workers and galvanise struggles. The actual demand these workers raise is only a small part of what might lead to a generalisation. We can imagine a wave of struggles against zero-hours contracts or against minimum wages. People are pissed off everywhere, we feel it every day. What people don't lack are some lefties who are demanding £10 per hour. It needs workers with some basic and initial objective power vis-a-vis their company, who make the big leap to go beyond their company or sectorial boundary and address other workers directly. This leap might need support of the lefties bashed above, if they know their shit if they know about the already existing lines of social (re-)production and experiences which can help to expand the dispute

Wages for Housework is always the common example of the power of such revolutionary demands: it was not realistically expected as professed by the creators themselves afterwards - but was more of a provocation stunt to make visible the wider social system's reliance upon women's unpaid work. We do not underestimate the power of this: the Wages for Housework campaign highlighted the immense importance of this work within capitalist value production and squarely situated the basis of women's relegated status and continuing oppression, as well as forming a sort of nucleus for organizational political efforts. But the limits were clear: it cemented women's position in the home rather than somehow challenging it and did not question the wage relation itself as the main basis of our exploitation. A more general criticism could also be the limitations of a demand that is largely discursive i.e. about making something visible or political as the starting point for uniting a mass of people, rather than concrete conditions and divisions.

Having said this about the question of demands in general, we want to say a few words about the demand for a universal basic income in concrete:

However demands are only granted if there is the leverage, or threat of leverage, to make that demand seem the least worst option for capital's managers. The demand for a basic income, for example, still doesn't quite make sense to the person on the street despite it fitting with a whole series of technological and social trends. That's because those trends haven't been made into a key political problems yet.

The debate about this demand is not new either and there has been valid criticism [3], which we will only summarise:

a) the starting point of the demand, the individual income, does not question the main contradictions of working class existence and therefore the power of capital: we consume individually (the person on the street), but produce collectively; the individual income is a fetish behind which the social existence and inter-dependence is hidden; the income seems like a fair share, but hides our social exploitation; there lies the difference between a wage demand by striking workers and an income demand as political strategy

b) contrary to what the article claims, the issue of a universal income has already been made into a key political problem: the Universal Credit is discussed widely; the Green Party's proposal and its potentially negative impact on working class income, too. In this way a lefty proposal for a basic income degenerates to a mere quantitative haggling with the political class about the amount workers are supposed to live on.

Developing working class strategy - Some suggestions for further debate

We fear that up to this point our criticism sounds just like a re-iteration of the stale debate between „programmatically communists“ and social movement activists or between „melancholic workerists“ and „populist post-autonomists“ - feel free to add further pigeon holes to it. We would like to break out of this impasse by suggesting that we focus the strategic debate on interesting ongoing struggles and/or developments within the working class:

a) The situation in the US

We think that we can learn loads from the current developments and the experiences of comrades in the US - mainly about the difficulties of re-composition of a segmented working class.

The 2006 (hispanic) migrant workers movement and nation-wide strike revealed the productive under-belly of the US-regime; the state managed to respond to the movement by offering regulation for some workers and further illegalised many others

„Occupy“ put the question of a „common“ interest and horizontal organisation back on the agenda, but at the same time revealed that the „99%“ assumed by the mainly white and middle-class activists does not reflect the problem of social power and divisions; [nevertheless] a lot of debate and organisational efforts within the radical left came out of it, e.g. about the question of „race and class“ or „syndicalism and political organisation“

The revolts after the Ferguson murder practically attacked state power and revealed the structurally racist character of the US state and labour market, while at the same time refused to be represented by the black bourgeoisie and political class. The riots were less „race riots“, but riots of urban poverty

The mobilisations by fast-food, warehouse and minimum wage workers emerged from a similar proletarian background and brought the invisible low-wage sector out in the open - they could give clout to the class at a time when the riots are repressed. At the same time we see the involvement of traditional unions like the SEIU and representatives of the political class (Seattle \$15 now), which are in close dialogue with the very state that is under attack

The simultaneous wide-spread hunger-strikes and revolts in US prisons since 2013 have put into question the racial divisions amongst inmates and the social isolation imposed by the jail system.

The recent strikes in the ports and by oil workers demonstrated that the industrial working class has changed, but still possesses the power to halt the country's economy. There have been interesting minoritarian efforts to build links between the revolt against state violence and these strikes.

We can see that within a span of less than a decade or so the basic elements of a re-composition have emerged - the question of new forms of organisation, the question of proletarian violence, of class internal hierarchies and of economic collective power. We have to think about „strategy“ in this framework and together with local comrades. [4]

b) The logistics workers' struggles in Italy and the strikes at Amazon

The article engages with the emergence of the logistics sector, but we think largely in an external way, seeing the sector as „potential point to disrupt circulation“. While that is true, in order to develop strategies we have to engage closer with what is happening inside.

We saw workers in a very precarious condition (migrants whose right to reside is attached to shit jobs) using their structural power as warehouse workers, backed by activists from social centres and migrant support networks. Here the social reproduction aspect played a big role, e.g. through occupying living space for laid off workers. Their main form of struggle are blockades, their main framework the rank-and-file union SI COBAS. While the first waves of struggles were successful, we can see that the tactic of blockading might run into the impasse of police and legal repression. While the COBAS claim to be based on workers' self-organisation, the union work heavily depends on full-time activists/delegates. We think we can learn a lot from the situation: about the potentials and difficulties of workers' struggles depending on a political scene, about the problems of formal union structures as legal entities, even if they are „rank-and-file“.

The strikes and organising efforts of Amazon workers are similarly interesting: the strikes in Germany are the focus of public attention through well-funded campaigning, but materially weak, because only a minority of (permanent) workers take part. The union Ver.di is a big player and definitely not a rank-and-file structure. Left activists have started organising support networks, but their relationship with workers largely depends on Ver.di officials. There have been rank-and-file meetings with worker activists from Germany and Poland, but it seems difficult to come to a common strategy, last but not least because the distribution centres in Poland are set up in competition to the „striking ones“ in Germany.

c) The situation in the UK

We think pre- or post-election times are probably the worst times to debate working class strategies. What we would need is a process of open debate and analysis within the milieu about the weaknesses of the regime and the problems of the struggles of our class. Instead of proclaiming victories of this or that struggle or to merely present the organising activities behind the sign-boards of our individual organisations we need a self-critical look at things.

We've tried in the near past to gather some material and preliminary strategical thoughts about the situation in the UK. [5] We can understand that people are put off by the amount of empirical material and we see that our political thoughts might get lost in them. The following are rather random examples of current tendencies within the class composition which we find important to debate:

We need a list of current struggles for higher pay in the low-wage sector. We have to debate each particularity, e.g. to which extend is the individual struggle dependent on funded campaigns. Which kind of struggles have been successful on their own accord, and what are their potentials to engage other workers.

Behind the backs of many, the changes in the benefit system have clearly created a two-tier situation regarding EU-migrants, which has immediate impacts on working class reproduction (e.g. many young Polish workers with kids either leave them with their family in their home country or bring older relatives over for childcare) and on the shop-floor (if you are factually excluded from housing benefit, you will be way more careful to rock the boat)

While proposing alliances between public sector workers and public service „users“ seems like an important step, we can also see the problems with an inter-class approach when it comes to „users“. For example, the attempts by the RMT to appeal to the „users“ of London Underground in order to make their strikes more popular have largely failed. The particular conditions of „proletarian users“ of public services have to be more clearly addressed, mainly through proposing practical forms of solidarity (the tube workers being able to use their particular position to support other proletarian struggles).

Behind the outsourcing scandals (Atos, Capita, G4S) we can see the objective limits of the regime's strategy. But how does that play out in the day-to-day cooperation between public sector workers and their privatised fellow-workers? The left got stuck in a largely defensive positions to stop public sector job cuts, but may be new impulses come from the opposite site, the more precarious privatised fringes.

Another major challenge is an analysis of the relation between crisis, state policies and changes of communities. During antifascist, anti-EDL actions the left tends to address proletarians from other backgrounds as community members, at the same time we can see how these communities a) become more important for day to day survival/reproduction but b) due to their class character they increasingly become patriarchal structures of isolation and extra-exploitation. In the face of stark state-induced islamophobia and racism, how can we attack our various prisons of communities?

In terms of our own practice, we would need an open-debate about strategies which have been developed over the last years: the concept of individual case direct action/solidarity networks; the concept of workplace organising etc. While we understand the focus on practical work also as a healthy response to abstract Politics, we nevertheless encounter a strange separation between material support and political analysis. We need an organisational form which allows us to reflect on the experiences of the class, mainly through organised practical engagement. In this sense we endorse the effort the article makes to address the question of this separation.

Last, but not least, although we are fairly busy with our workers' newspaper in West-London - which was somehow a political strategic decision - we would like to engage in a debate about these wider conditions, e.g. at a national meeting. We are also happy to question our own strategical move to start a political workers' paper in a small area of this country. Be in touch. [6]

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[1] <http://www.weareplanc.org/on-social-strikes-and-directional-demands/#.VUs7BGRViko>

[2] So what's a Plan C approach in relation to this? I don't think it can be the adoption of the ultra-Leftist pose of all knowing disinterest. We can't just declare Plan B's failure in advance and then abstain from involvement in events. We simply don't know what the possibilities of the present are and can't know how much a Plan B electoral strategy can achieve. Particularly as Syriza and Podemos are trying to pioneer Plan B+ strategies, by acting in relation to movements and so increasing their space for maneuver. What we do know is that the way it plays out will significantly affect the field upon which we have to act. We therefore need to act now to make that field as favourable as possible.

2015 will continue to be the year of the electoral turn. There's probably no escaping this even if we want to. What this means is that whilst we participate in its unfolding - testing its limits and remaining vigilant to the new spaces it creates - we can also use it

as a year of experimentation. Treat this as an open call. How might a Social Strike framework be put into practice? What are 21st century capitalism's new weak points? How can we make use of the new electoral entities and the openings they create? Most importantly, with the traditional strike tactic (and with it the old Left) increasingly disarmed, what do we need to create in order to build leverage?

[3] http://www.wildcat-www.de/en/zirkular/48/z48e_wel.htm

[4] For example: <http://www.unityandstruggle.org>

[5] <https://angryworkersworld.wordpress.com/2014/10/22/discussion-paper-and-minutes-meeting-on-crisis-and-class-struggle-in-the-uk-liverpool-september-2014/>

<https://angryworkersworld.wordpress.com/2014/05/18/never-mind-the-bankers-some-thoughts-on-the-uk-crisis/>

[6] <http://www.workerswildwest.wordpress.com>

Factory without society. Around some problems concerning the transnational social strike

Precarious disconnections

We would like to contribute to the debate started by Plan C and Angry Workers because we believe it is particularly important for the meeting towards a transnational social strike that will take place in Poznan next October. Of this debate, including the latest comment of Australian Left, we wholly share the necessity of a political analysis which could put on the table the concrete problems emerging from the struggles and their organization, and therefore the urgency of a discourse that could be up to these challenges. Therefore, we will not articulate our contribution around all the questions developed until now, but rather we will focus on some points that we consider particularly relevant: what is the problem of the social strike? How to think the relation between the struggles within single work-places and the transnational organization of the movements? How to face the problem of the enlargement of struggles and of the relation between the contemporary conditions of labor and its social dimension?

When the adjective «social» accompanies the word «strike», it aims to answer the questions of organization and of the accumulation of power, in an age marked by radical transformations of labor relations. In the last decades, these transformations have been described as the end of the factory regime and of the industrial labor - often regarded as the relic of a forgotten Fordist past - or rather as the extension of the factory to the whole society. While it tries to grasp concrete and long-lasting changes, this reading runs parallel to the capitalistic attempt to hide industrial labor by confining it to the places in Europe, Asia or in the Americas that have been regarded as the «peripheries» of the globe, so as to declare the numerical and political irrelevance of this kind of labor. To say that the whole life is put to labor, to argue that this condition is so general that it becomes universal, therefore, runs the risk of trapping within this metropolitan capitalistic enchantment also those parts of the movements that, in Europe, resolved to put labor and strike at the core of their political initiative. However, in order to avoid this risk, and the consequent risk of supporting the neo-liberal imperative of individualization and self-entrepreneurship, it is not enough to reduce our initiative to the reversal of the one of the capital. It is not enough to declare the numerical relevance and the unquestionable importance of industrial labor in many areas of the world. Nor is it enough to make precarious labor visible, as if it was only a part of labor to which representation should be granted through a political/unionist identity, since this kind of identity already showed its limits. Rather, it would be necessary to acknowledge that, more or less far from the factories, hundreds of places that are not immediately concerned with material production - even though they support it and replicate the modalities and the intensity of its exploitation - have been built. Thus, instead of discussing the disappearance of the factory regime, we believe it is necessary to think how that regime was transformed, what its underlying social logic is, in which way the factory is connected with other working places.

To understand how the overall command over labor-force changed is crucial in order to understand who is the subject of the transnational social strike. Our question, therefore, could be formulated in the following way: what is the relationship between the factory and the social cooperation? If the factory is no longer the exclusive form of capitalistic command, what kind of exchange and clashes occur between the norms of the factory and the norms of social cooperation? This question is particularly important now that society does not compensate anymore the workers condition because the social dimension of the State was definitively erased. Between the social cooperation and labor there is a latent conflict, a rift which is not immediately the space of the political action of the movements, even if the task of the movements is that of pointing out that rift and turning it into the possibility of a political action.

We start therefore from an assumption: there is no identity between the factory and the social cooperation that could solve the problem of organization within and against the global chains of exploitation. With a simplified formulation, we may say that it is not that the factory was extended throughout society, but rather society entered the factory and thus wiped out the myth of its internal homogeneity. Even at the peak of the «Fordist past», the cooperation that is necessary for the valorization of capital was neither simply granted by the absolute and autonomous command of the factory, nor was it confined to the working place. It was rather supported by a universal mediation, namely by the guarantee of a «social» compensation of exploitation through the concession of rights connected to labor. Far from being the homogeneous place of labor cooperation and organization, today the factory is transformed by the disappearance of society conceived of as a process of recomposition and mediation of power relations. Now the capital imposes its command through the individualization and segmentation of social relations within and outside work-places.

The «social» dimension of labor turns into a deprivation of social rights and benefits, and into a production of hierarchies among the individuals at work on a transnational scale. To say that the society enters the factory means therefore that social bonds are disarticulated into segments that are one beside the other and directly subdued to the domination of capital, which is not even partially neutralized or compensated any longer, as it was before. To say that the society enters the factory means that the social condition of the individual is not limited to his or her being a worker, both because the individuals are less and less linked to a single work-place, and because the position of everyone in front of the blackmail of the wage is no longer measured on a set of formally equal rights and duties, but on a differential scale of performances, benefits and sacrifices. From the point of view of organization, to say that the society enters the factory means that inside and outside the factory there are not already given processes of communication that could be turned into insubordination. The «social» is no longer a field of connection between the individuals at work, both because cooperation is the effect of a segmentation which enters the factory in the way of domination, and because the lack of a welfare State, together with the political conditions of exploitations, make it very difficult to point out common claims and field of struggles. This is even truer, as every social benefit is still provided on a national level, whereas the organization of production develops on a transnational one.

We must therefore ask ourselves what it is meant by «global chain of exploitation». The point is not simply to acknowledge the transformation caused by outsourcing, and that a single commodity is now produced along a line which moves from Europe to near and far-East and return. The global connections of exploitation requires us to think how to create likewise constant connections among work-places that are the links of the same chain, but do not communicate and do not have already the power of breaking it. In order to be up to this challenge, it is important to understand the function of what we call «the new European logistics», which does not coincide with the infrastructure that support the distribution of raw materials and commodities on a continental scale, but rather with a specific way of organizing command and cooperation starting from segmentation and division. Consequently, the point is not only to find out some strategic nodes where the strike as a block of distribution should be turned into an effective block of more or less wide segments of production, but also to understand how the global connections of exploitation could be turned into a constant and systematic communication among those segments. And it is likewise important to think the relationship between social production and reproduction, most of all when the latter reconfigures the traditional sexual division of labor according to the new regime of mobility, thus creating new global chains of exploitation.

Thinking the relationship between the factory and the social cooperation, therefore, allows to highlight the hidden factory and to politically show what the factory hides. The adjective «social» should refer to the political organization of the strike. The point is to create a political communication between the working places and the places of social cooperation starting from the assumption that the capitalistic command exercised through wage acts on a transnational scale, and that its effects deploy inside and outside the working places, making the inside and the outside functional to one another. If the capitalistic command is imposed through a disarticulation of the social bond, the fact that the workers are concentrated within the same working place is not sufficient to allow industrial labor to recognize itself as the core of the working class.

In this frame, the problem of the transnational social strike cannot be solved through a division of labor according to which movements become the social support of traditional forms of strike organized by the unions. This would replicate a separation between the factory and the social cooperation which gives for granted both the capacity of the unions to organize labor, and the capacity of the movement to take the social cooperation away from capitalistic command, so as to connect what is otherwise disconnected. On the side of unionist initiative, instead, it is increasingly clear that also the most radical and successful industrial actions — like the ones of the logistic sector in Italy — run the risk of ending into limited and partial results, just because they are confined within a single productive sector, within a single category of workers, within a single enterprise, within a single national context. The global character of exploitation constantly neutralizes the effects of local industrial action, dramatically highlighting their limits. The problem is not simply the political idleness of those who regard as relevant only the struggles that occur in their backyard. The prob-

lem is that, even when they are successful, local industrial actions do not assume an exemplary character and hardly obtain a recognized symbolical meaning, thus gaining an expansive capacity. At the same time, the solidarity provided by the movements to the labor struggles does not solve the problem of their politicization, because it is confronted with the limits of enlargement and must be rethought under the light of the relationship between the working places and the space outside. The local initiative, mutualistic and communitarian, should be confronted with a society which is globally reconfigured as the lack of bonds. Beyond the function of support that the mutualistic structure could have for successful strikes, to speak of «socializing society» means to underestimate the fact that the idea of society as a possible place of recomposition of different interests supports the illusion of a social cooperation already freed from the capitalistic domination and the blackmail of wage which links it to production. The risk is that of pointing towards a recomposition that, instead of facing the existing contradictions, excludes them in order to establish its own homogeneity and hardly goes out of the borders of the already existing activism.

A «class recomposition» that images the working class as a unitary and homogeneous subject is not a feasible project today. The working class is a multitude crisscrossed by differences that are strategically relevant in order to attack the crucial links of the global chains of exploitation. The transnational social strike should therefore move simultaneously in two directions, so as to politically affirm both the general features of contemporary labor and the differences that crisscross it both inside and outside the factory and working places. Mobility and precarity seem to us the general features starting from which organization can be thought on a transnational scale. Mobility and precarity are at one and the same time the effect of the policies of Europe and its States, and what these policies are unable to completely govern, so much that they must impose their command over the movements of labor through violence. However, in order to materially create a shared space where the limits of capitalistic command could be unveiled, and where isolation could be broken by a communication able to trigger a continuous and expansive mobilization, it is necessary to politically affirm the differences that mark contemporary labor.

Towards this direction we believe it is strategically relevant to find out some common claims. These claims are neither a solution in themselves, nor solve the problem of the relation with institutions, even if they can unveil their limits. The possibility of finding out common claims has to be regarded as the possibility of producing political communication and organization across the borders, of creating a connection among segments that are otherwise separated by the capitalistic domination. To speak of a European minimum wage means to establish a relation among the struggles within the work places able to tackle the capitalistic command along the global chains of exploitation in each of their links. It means to look for a systematic political connection between industrial labor and the manifold figures of precarious labor that are aligned along the same production chain. It means to overcome the limits that national collective bargaining is facing everywhere, raising on a higher level. To speak of a European basic income and welfare means to acknowledge the way in which society entered the factory, to take back a share of social power against the segmentation and impoverishment of labor, starting from the unbreakable link between the precarity of labor - that is, wage - and the contemporary transformations of welfare systems. To speak of a European minimum residence permit for all migrants means to assume the movements of living labor as a point of power, rather than of weakness, thus reclaiming the practical possibility of escaping the global regimes of exploitation and the government of mobility.

These claims cannot be separated one from the other and cannot be conceived of as an exclusive of this or that segment of labor. Rather, it is their relation what would allow us to trigger an effective political communication across the borders of labor-categories, of work-places, of States. These claims can provide the field for a real connection between precarious, industrial and migrant workers and the mean for a politicization of the social strike on a continental scale. To affirm the European character of these claims means to attack the political conditions of exploitation at the level of European institutions, thus avoiding the confinement of struggles on a national level that, as the Greek situation shows, always runs the risk of being smashed by the financial command of the Union.

For all of these reasons we believe it is crucial that the meeting towards a transnational social strike will take place in Poznan: this choice acknowledges the centrality of a place that the capitalistic command conceives of as politically peripheral. Our bet is instead that of overturning this presumption, by pointing at places along the global chains of exploitation that are strategic insofar as the effects of the entrance of society into factory are there much more striking. Places where, in other words, the interlacement between the regime of wage, the government of mobility and the segmentation of the social bonds clearly reveal the global stake of our initiative.

Social strike: a challenge and an opportunity for the class struggle

Vanessa Bilancetti and Alioscia Castronovo

This article, published on Rosa Luxemburg Foundation magazine, aims to explore the issue of the social strike [...] as a practice, a challenge and a perspective starting from the Italian experience towards the following transnational perspectives of the struggles against austerity in Europe.

Genealogies

The demonstration and the strike of the last 14th November 2014 was, in first instance, against the Renzi's labour reform that generalizes the condition of precariousness to all the labour force. This is a process that started in the 90s when neoliberal labour reforms were implemented everywhere in Europe, but throughout the crisis it has been violently radicalized. For a brief genealogy of the social strike process we have to keep in mind two processes: the „Euro Mayday“ and the student struggles against Bologna Process. Mayday has represented one of the most important space of organization and self-representation for precarious workers: a new precarious subjectivity appeared in the public scene, claiming universal basic income, new welfare and social rights. On one side, the material conditions of precariousness finally appeared as a common condition of the labour force in the post-fordism, no longer an exception but a new paradigm that could be extended to the whole of society. On the other side, the common condition of precariousness has created processes of subjectivization and new strategies and forms of organization.

At the same time, during the last decade when educational reforms based on the Bologna Process were implemented around Europe strong resistances spread out in all the universities. The Bologna Process started to establish a new educational regime, based on new hierarchies, differential inclusion and later new violent forms of exclusion from the educational system, strictly connected to the labour market conditions. The deskilling and the corporatization of schools and universities, the privatization and commodification of knowledge, the cuts in public budget are common aspects of these neoliberal reforms. All over Europe the relationship between this neoliberal educational reform and the precarization of the labour market has emerged in the struggles against the Bologna process. New practices of resistance became common tools for the student movements, such as blockades, manif sauvage, occupation of schools and universities, protests against curricular internships and the Book Block - used in Italy during the student protests, they have spread all over Europe and beyond. One of the unsolved problems has remained the connections between the different sectors of the fragmented labour force, as well as the relation with the Unions, still an open question during the struggles against austerity measures that exploded after 2011, when a radical shift in the management of the crisis has been made..

A neoliberal offensive against the labour force

The crisis in the European Union has been managed following two directions. The austerity measures and the imposition of a budgetary discipline that has been the first line of opposition for social movements, targeting the reduction of the public expenditure for health, education and social services. The other direction has been what we have called „a neoliberal offensive against the labour force“, quiet differentiate around Europe, but with some similarities looking at the welfare and labour reforms.

These reforms made in the name of „competitiveness“ had the objective to redesign completely the industrial relations and the welfare systems established after the second world war. This trend started in the early 90s, and had a turning point with the German labour reform Hartz IV and nowadays is having a new shift, especially in the outskirts of Europe. The Italian Jobs Act completely revises the worker's chart (Statuto dei Lavoratori) of 1970: liberalization of firing, of transfers, of job-tasks, possibility to control workers at distance, associated to an even more drastic precarization of contracts (e.g. a company no longer has to give a cause for using temporary contracts instead of permanent contracts). The reform is accompanied by a rhetoric on redistribution, innovation and growth, but also by some real fiscal decree with some redistributive aim (e.g. permanent workers will gain 80 euros [more?, HB] per month due to a discount on taxes).

This new narrative on redistribution and investments is present at a European level (e.g. the Juncker's investment plan), intertwining with the national level (e.g. the reform on minimum wage in Germany). This new „expansive and permanent austerity“ gives the possibility for a limited and controlled raise of salaries and for some redistributive policies, differentiated in time and space around Europe, opening new lines of segmentation and hierarchyization of the labour force in the European space. For this it is important to read the labour and welfare reform with a European

perspective, trying to analyse what kind of reconfiguration for the labour regime is being imagined and deployed at a global level. The crisis has been a favourable moment for the global capital to take advantage in the reconfiguration of the European space, using local, regional and national differences to construct new lines of exploitation and accumulation. In this sense the fluxes of internal migration in Europe - its new regime of control, with the first expulsions and the first line of resistances - is a paradigmatic example of this new reconfiguration. As well as the figure of the internal migrant - at one time included and excluded could be a crucial subject for a new resistance against this new regime of exploitation.

From welfare to workfare: a new management of unemployment

Unemployment is being narrated as the first problem to face in Europe. In EU we count 25 million unemployed, the majority of them are young people, described as NEET (not in employment, education or training). This inactivity is one of the first enemies of the European neoliberal governance, that's why the European Youth Guarantee - the programme to tackle youth unemployment - is a good example to show how the European governance is working in the crisis regime. The core is designed in Brussels, while the programme is implemented at a regional level and it has been requested by the majorities of the European youth NGOs, as well as by the ETUC (European Trade Union Confederation). The YG is based on the „best practices“ of the north-central countries, that have been successful in tackling youth unemployment. The Italian government's implementation plan shows clearly who are the real beneficiaries of the Youth Guarantee: temporary work agencies, private training schools, governmental agencies, private companies. A young person is forced to work underpaid, meanwhile companies and training agencies are profiting of his\her work and gaining public bonus: a real new business on unemployment! The aim of this programme is not to create new jobs (as in a Keynesian perspective), but to enhance the individual employability, the supposed possibility of being employed in the labour market.

This kind of programme is completely inherent to the transformation of the welfare regime in workfare regime. Formally the aim is still redistribution of income, but actually the workfare regime is a technique of government and control of the new labour force (precarious workers, self-employed, unemployed). Following the same path, the role of the trade union and of collective bargaining has changed. The increasing transfer of a large components of welfare at corporate level has made the unions managers and providers of services, implying their identification with the company's mission. The indirect wage has lost any remaining idea of mutuality and solidarity, becoming meritocratic and individualistic. Its administration is a source of profit for the unions, becoming much more similar to training agencies than organizations for collective bargaining.

What is a social strike?

During the crisis we have faced a general lowering in life standard, that has started to homogenize the social condition between different sectors of the labour forces: somehow becoming all working poor. Confronting this situation we are witnessing an extremely large diffusion of new [?, HB] forms of organizations and resistances: house occupations, conflicts to defend and reform the institutions of the welfare system, new practices of mutualism, fights for the commons and against privatization, but still these experiences are highly fragmented and divided. How can we overcome the divisions of the different sectors of labour market and society, connecting the struggles for salary with the struggles against privatization, for welfare and social rights? How to combine, extend and intensify struggles? How can the precarious workers organize themselves? What does „to strike“ mean today? How can we unite the permanent workers, the precarious workers, the unemployed and the students in one strike? How can a strike be able to stop the accumulation of profit, to impose new negotiations, in one word, be effective?

These questions are the main challenges from which the social strike process started, connecting collectives of students from schools and universities, teachers and researchers, radical trade unions, precarious collectives, self-employed and autonomous workers, migrants, industrial and public sector workers. These different subjectivities, social and political organizations, opened a public space for common action discussion and struggle, with the aim to build up a large and horizontal social coalition, for recomposing the social fragmentation and fight back against the Jobs Act and the neoliberal attack. The process started in June 2014 and in the following months local laboratories - open public assemblies, spaces of discussion and organization - appeared in tens of cities, concrete experimentation to create new devices of organization for the multiplicity of the labour market conditions.

The 14th of November thousands of workers of the public administration, industrial and logistic sectors, were taking the streets with students, precarious workers, self-employed and migrant workers. Several demonstrations took place

in more than forty cities, with blockades, pickets, viral communication and anti-Jobs Act propaganda actions during 24 hours. New creative forms were experimented to be part of the strike for those who do not have the right to strike, such as the net strike, practices of sabotage as well as simple communication action. Although the numbers of the strike were not massive in the public sector and among the permanent workers, and the major participation was made by students, 14th November was a successful experiment able to break the neoliberal narration on the crisis and revitalize the struggles against austerity. Around the issue of the organization of precarious workers much still has to be done, as well as on the connection between different sectors of the segmented contemporary labour force. The Jobs Act was voted and approved by the Renzi's government during the first week of December 2014. But the social strike process didn't stop and went on calling for another national meeting, launching campaign against specific topics linked to the Jobs Act reform and decided also to mobilize together towards Blockupy, with the common slogan „Strike ECB“, recognizing that we still face the urgency of opening new spaces of debate and struggles not only at the national level. Towards a transnational social strike?

Even if the experience of the strike laboratories started as a response to a national reform - the Jobs Act - the European dimension of this attack has always been clear in the process of mobilization. Since the material and immaterial production and their value chain are globalised, the governance of the labour force acts on a global and regional scale, using a new spatialisation to differentiate and govern the labour force, where the control on mobility assumes a central role.

A discussion to build a possible platform of common claims around three general issues has started: a European minimum wage, a European basic income, a European welfare system that should be general and equal for all, adding the request for a minimum 2 years visa for migrants independent from labour and income. This is a first general platform that should be thought more as a base of discussion, rather than an established program. These issues are part of the heritage of the last struggles against precariousness, commons and migration, but at the same time they find a new effective significance within the crisis. The Basic income, for example, could be a possible way out to the new condition of poverty that is becoming a reality for more and more people in Europe, a possibility to escape from the blackmail of the precariousness and of the black labour market, a new way of reopening the discussion on the welfare system at a European level, to stop the social dumping that has become inherent to the European internal market.

What can be the common key-words understandable all around the continent, that can unite the different local struggles? During the XIX century and the beginning of the XX century the struggle for the 8 working hours per day has been a common battlefield all around the world, nowadays what are the new struggles that can unite us, in the era of the fragmented labour? This is the discussion we have started to open up thinking at the organization of a transnational social strike. A space of discussion, communication and organization around the theme of labour market and welfare system at the time of the permanent crisis of the financial capitalism. The fight against austerity and for a real democracy is at the same time a fight for equal and fair condition of life and work. The implementation of austerity measures it means cutting on public expenditure, privatization of the public sector and commodification of the commons. So our question should be how to relate the general fight against austerity with daily struggles against unemployment, precariousness and for the commons. For this is necessary to overcome the traditional division between economic and political, production and reproduction, or even more the new limit that is imposed on us between technical and political.

Nowadays any strike with the aim to stop the production needs to be thought beyond the national borders and labour conditions, and new space for struggles is needed to reshape the possibility for new and original social alliances where social, economical and political claims should not be divided, but reorganized in the form of a social coalition. We need to think our organisation beyond the differences between local, regional or European space, thinking a new scale for political action, able to face the violent attack of capitalism and rebuild new effective strategies for class struggle today.

For a deep analysis on the role of trade union: Alberto de Nicola and Biagio Quattrocchi, *La torsione neoliberale del sindacato tradizionale e l'immaginazione del „sindacalismo sociale“*: appunti per una discussione. As well as all the discussion open on the website towards the Social Strike.

Dancing in the Dark: social strikes and directional demands, some comments on a debate.

Australian Left

...what is our strategy and what are we meant to be supporting? (Southall 2015)

Meaningful action, for revolutionaries, is whatever increases the confidence, the autonomy, the initiative, the participation, the solidarity, the equalitarian tendencies and the self-activity of the masses and whatever assists in their demystification. Sterile and harmful action is whatever reinforces the passivity of the masses, their apathy, their cynicism, their differentiation through hierarchy, their alienation, their reliance on others to do things for them and the degree to which they can therefore be manipulated by others – even by those allegedly acting on their behalf. (Solidarity)[i]

What can we do? How can we collectively struggle to both improve our lives in the present and open up paths to a radically different society? Whilst there are varying kinds of ‘activism’ that are happening it is not always clear what their relationships to actually achieving anything are – so too the various models of social transformation that make up the ideological foundations of various groups, parties, scenes, sects and milieus are often very far removed from the world we live in now. Just because it seems more imperative than ever to do something doesn’t mean we know what to do. More fool us.

Most often activism (whatever that is!?) in a town like Brisbane is made up of fairly ineffective cycles of rallies organised at dull meetings under the fluorescent lights of the TLC Building, campaigning for various political parties and NGOs and GetUp! style clicktivism that has taken on an increasingly slick and professionalised appearance. All often carried out by hard working comrades with good and sincere motivations. The historic defeat of the antiwar movement that proved that rallies that stay within the boundaries set by the state have no power and everybody knows it has not provoked a consequent rethinking of strategy or tactics. So too whilst we can take comfort that perhaps strikes, at least in certain industries, have the ability to directly hit the accumulation of capital, it is now almost twenty years since there has been an industrial dispute that has had a national impact. Strikes and unionisation are at historic lows. In the context of ecological meltdown, permanent war, the end of the mining boom and an increasingly authoritarian state and public culture it is not obvious that we have a clear strategy to address our concerns on a large or small scale. Also the strange composition of the Senate where populist outsiders have thwarted much of the government’s agenda means that we have been spared the need, on some issues, to confront this impasse.

It is with this in mind that a debate that is taking place in anticapitalist circles in the UK is of interest. Now we should avoid that habit of Australian radicalism to attempt to simply copy and apply approaches from overseas in a way that fails to be sensitive to the contexts they developed in and their differences from the contexts we live in. Yet there might be something to be gained from looking at On Social Strikes and Directional Demands by Keir Milburn from Plan C and the response to it written by Angry Workers of the World.

Milburn’s (2015) article is a short suggestion for a form of strategic thinking built around two intertwined planks – the social strike and the directional demand. The argument starts by diagnosing multiple levels of paralysis and failure in the current activity of the ‘Radical Left’; paralysis and failure that arises out of both internal subjective flaws and the structural nature of the context.

‘At the present moment it feels like all sections of the UK Radical Left are trapped in a state of impasse.’ What are the problems that have created this impasse? Firstly the absence of a strategic orientation creates a tendency for comrades to be trapped in either ‘Comfort Politics or Fire Brigade politics’: ‘Comfort politics is when you do things because they are familiar or seem tactically (or affectively) easy...Fire Brigade politics is when people swing wildly from one campaign to another, rushing from one outrage to the next, trying to put out the fires that someone else is starting.’ Added to this is the ‘electoral turn’: the successes of Syriza and Podemos are creating an orientation that tries to mimic these projects in the UK – specifically the Green Surge. Milburn argues that the Syriza and Podemos will not be able to deliver on their promises, and thus when this electoral turn is exhausted it would behoove comrades to have another approach ready to argue for and implement. But all this sits on a deeper problem: the failure of what passes for radical politics to meet the needs of the current lived class composition and the challenge to develop one that does.

Such an approach doesn’t involve the standard ultraleft, communist and anarchist ‘pose of all knowing disinterest’ towards these electoral efforts. Rather these electoral efforts, which Milburn calls Plan B+ (in the lexicon of Plan C Plan A means austerity, Plan B means an attempts to reinvigorate social democracy/Keynesianism and finally Plan C refers

to commons and/or communism), are caught by the structures of 'neoliberalism' and prevented from achieving their goals. Such electoral projects are not entirely pointless rather 'Plan B+ politics can be useful in this task beyond the resources and protection it can provide for populations and movements. Even at their point of failure Plan B electoral politics can be useful if they can clarify the anti-democratic effects of neoliberal (sic) that work against all forms of collective action.' Milburn is arguing that what is needed 'is to make those effects and mechanisms visible as key political problems while framing them in ways that can exceed Plan B solutions'. This involves 'two more general questions from which you can draw up a strategy: 'how do we shift things in our direction?' And: 'what direction is that anyway?'" The answer he provided to the first is the social strike and the second is the directional demand.

What on earth is a 'social strike' and how is it different from the older industrial strike? I assume the direct inspirations are the social strike in Italy in 2014 and Blockupy. It seems that the social strike means at least two different but related things: firstly industrial disputes that spread outside the workplace and generalise into a broader form of class struggle; and struggles that emerge outside of the workplace proper and that attempt to block the circulation of capital. (Question: is this similar to the strategy being pursued by Indigenous activists in opposition to the forced closure of communities in WA?)

Milburn cites the experience of a 1995 Metro strike in Paris and the understanding of this strikes that was developed by participants of *autonomia* who were in exile in France at the time – specifically Antonio Negri. Negri's(2003) argument is that these struggles marked a particular turning point, the emergence of a new form of struggle linked to a new class composition. The strikes of railway workers were accompanied by increased social cooperation of public transport users. For Negri this showed that public services were increasingly 'productive' in that they created the 'global form which structures production itself'(232-233) and that users of these services were also active participants in the creation of these productive capacities. Thus the wave of strikes created a community in struggle that wasn't simply defending outmoded social democratic forms but rather was posing communism in the shape of a radically democratic reappropriation of the management of this collective productivity and doing so in ways opposed to the state. For Negri this was the birth of the 'metropolitan strike' where 'the whole of social life' became the terrain of struggle (234). Negri's latter work continues on this theme arguing that in contemporary capitalism the metropolis is effectively analogous to the role the factory played in previous types of capitalism: the site of productivity, exploitation and struggle (Hardt and Negri 2009).

Milburn has no clear and concrete suggestions for a 'social strike' rather stating that there are three elements to it: 'These are making the new conditions visible, disrupting the circulation of capital and directly socialising, collectivising and communising our social relations, reproduction and struggles.'

Milburn identifies two problems that the social strike is an attempt to overcome. Firstly strikes aren't working. The strike has been previously the core weapon of the class, the tool we use to apply 'leverage' but now 'strikes have stopped working so well, at least in the developed world.' The evidence for this failure Milburn posits is that the numbers of strikes and their duration are at historically low levels; and the cause of this is not, as the Left normally claims, bad leadership but rather 'changes in class composition, in particular changes in the experience of work and changes in the organisation of production.' The social strike is thus an attempt to develop the strike in a way that fits with our current composition:

The idea of a social strike, as it was originally developed, obviously relates to the concept of the social factory, the idea that the sphere of production has escaped the factory and seeped into the rest of society. The era of the strike is associated with the era of the Mass Worker, with very large workplaces, clear lines of antagonism between workers and managers, and with collective break times and visible factory gates giving opportunities for communication and agitation. Now those kinds of mass workplaces have been broken up through outsourcing, work has become more precarious, the kinds of work we tend to do has changed, etc. These all make it much harder to establish the common interests that an effective strike requires.

The social strike tries to make visible these new conditions. Arguably part of the problem of our age is that our experiences of work don't fit with the inherited images and languages of work. For example most workers in Australia understand themselves to be 'middle class' (and just as importantly our experiences as workers are incredibly heterogeneous). Also there is no excuse to exclude the experiences of unwaged labour – most often performed by women – from our understandings of work and our images of the worker. The social strike then is an attempt to 'express the new common conditions politically' by focusing on the collective problems that beset our lives.

The social strike tries to manifest power not by stopping a single workplace – for as Milburn argues such struggles would be pre-emptively outmanoeuvred by the new organisation of capitalism and conditions of work – but by jamming the circulation of capital and commodities. If the massive changes in logistics were part of the counter-revolution against the power of the Fordist working class it has simultaneously produced new points of contestation. The

struggles by workers in logistics together with broader social movements have the possibility to prevent large amounts of capital from being valorised. Here Milburn draws on the experiences of Occupy Oakland, #BlackLivesMatter and the Piqueteros.

A strategy based on such a level of disruption immediately faces two problems. It would need large-scale public support to prevent it being easily and violently repressed; and such a struggle would also put extreme pressures on our abilities to survive. What am I going to have for breakfast if the truck that delivers the milk to the supermarkets is blockaded? The answer to both is to 'Socialise, Collectivise, Communise': that is directly create common forms of reproducing our lives both as part of a struggle and also as a response to the general crisis of social reproduction. The questions of alternative forms of social organisation can't be put off to the day after the revolution because without them struggle is impossible in the here-and-now. Commons create the material possibilities of a struggle to take place (How will we eat? Who will look after the kids?) and they work as a pole of attraction to win people to the struggle by developing already existing better way of livings.

The social strike needs to be accompanied by the 'directional demand'. This is a way of framing demands in a radically different way from how they are used in Australia. Demands are either made by (post?)social democratic forces on the premise they are currently achievable and thus a form of decent society is possible without abolishing capitalist social relations[iii] or by various inheritors of Trotskyism who believe that demands play a pedagogical role: supposedly their role is to mobilise people in struggles that expose the limits of what is possible within capitalism and thus raise consciousness. The directional demand is something else. Directional demands are demands that attempt to address current lived material needs and to do so in a way that increases our collectivity and power as we move inside-against-and-beyond capitalism:

In short directional demands aim to provide a direction of travel rather than simply describe the wish for 'full communism.' They need to make sense within existing conditions while pointing beyond them. Indeed they need to make better sense of the current situation and the potential it holds than conventional politics does. They need to play a compositional role, I.E. link different sectors or interests together or indeed produce a new subject of their own. And their fulfillment, or indeed movement towards their fulfillment needs to leave us, the working class, the multitude or whatever, in a stronger position, able to better articulate what we want and better able to exercise the power to get there. The Universal Basic Income (if framed correctly) could provide one example, a Debt Jubilee or Universal Expropriation (a residency restriction on housing), could provide others. Developing a program of Directional Demands is a way of addressing the electoral turn while leaving room to go beyond it.

Milburn admits that this strategy is a general orientation rather than a concrete plan. 'Accepting this doesn't mean we should just set the date for the great social strike? It is more a matter of asking what tactics we can adopt to socialise existing strikes and how we might help turn social movements and social reproduction struggles away from merely symbolic action and towards the exercise of material leverage?' Thus in specific struggles we could try to move out of their limitations by experimenting with making the above real. Milburn is suggesting that we can escape from our current limitations by applying this approach to our concrete conditions.

The response to this strategy by Angry Workers of the World is interesting[iii]. Angry Workers of the World share the objective of wanting to go beyond the current impasse and also address 'how can limitations of single disputes be overcome and their social isolation (from other spheres of working class life) be broken down.' Yet they argue that Milburn's approach fails to offer a correct way forward to do this.

They argue that Milburn attempts to address the problems from the level of the political rather than within the concrete specifics of lived working class experience and as such his suggestions contain a number of flaws: 'politics' i.e. the state is framed as the major field of contestation, neoliberalism is reduce to a set of policies rather than being understood as 'a contradictory phase of capitalist development and class struggle' and working class struggles are reduced to leverage to achieve policy objectives. As such Millburn's argument remains at a level of generality unable to actually give concrete suggestions on the way forward.

Angry Workers of the World give a very different reading of Syriza and Podemos. Rather than understanding them as honest attempts to transform society that will inevitably run up against failure they understand them as successful projects radically and fundamentally different from, even hostile to, actual proletarian struggles for emancipation. The shift of people's hopes towards electoral projects was because the previous struggles in the squares remained too enamoured of the political – a sphere where we lack any real power – and thus 'imploded'. Added to this is an understand of the Left as an expression of a middle class and professionalised existence: 'The Trotskyite left as individuals and organisation materially depends largely on their positions within the 'guaranteed' public sector and the trade union apparatus, which pushes them into defensive politics'(angryworkers 2014a).

The crux of the debate is how do we overcome the segmentations that define the current composition of the working class. Milburn's approach is essentially that we can add something to certain struggles – as a political choice –

that will allow for the struggle to spread across the society. We can bring to light our conditions, block the circulation of commodities and capital, start to communise the means of social reproduction and provide a political framework that will allow the different fragments of the class to start to understand themselves as part of something bigger and a different society as possible and desirable.

Against this Angry Workers of the World depict the defining lines of our material conditions as being much more concrete. The reorganisation of the class after the struggles of the 1960s and 1970s has led to a proliferation of segmentations in the processes of production that are also enforced politically. This is the hard reality of our lives. The possibility of communism only exists as much as struggles of specific workers within a specific segment of the class start to explode out from these boundaries thus connect with other workers and are therefore compelled to remake society and do the work of emancipation. 'Workers' have to find forms of organisations which materially undermines the segmentation imposed by the production process – they cannot just step out and 'generalise externally':

The class movement will have to develop its organisation along the lines of global productive connections and materially change these connections: in its intensive stage class struggle will simultaneously have to create the (pre-)conditions for 'the production of communism'. Workers' struggles will not only 'attack capital and the state' by withdrawing social labour – strikes will interrupt social reproduction to an existential degree and thereby force the class movement to re-organise production and circulation while fighting. In this stage of class struggle we will be able to discover not only how social labour is globally integrated, but also that most social labour in capitalism is superfluous – no one will complain about the lack of market research calls or supply of electric tin-openers. A huge mass of human energy and creativity will be set free. At the same time the class movement will face the question of how to re-organise production in a form which not only guarantees effective subsistence, but also extends the 'self-organisation of struggle' into a self-organisation of social production: abolishment of hierarchical division of labour and uneven development. The revolution is not only an act of 'smashing/taking power', but of revolutionising social relationships, of getting rid of the contradiction between individual and social by materially transforming how we (re-)produce our social existence. (angryworkers 2014b)

This means the useful activity of communists is far smaller than that described by Milburn. Communists as workers can of course participate in the workplace as workers attempting to cooperate with others in that workplace in struggle. But beyond this the most useful activity is to try to circulate experiences of struggles in an attempt to help, but only help, to allow struggles to move beyond their segmentations. Added to this communists as communists can help the theoretical self-education of the class and perhaps even develop a strategic understanding of the current period of capitalism and thus choose to work in certain industries which might have particular strategic power. This strategic power relates to both the role a specific workplace may play in capitalism and also the organisational power of the workers there. 'Workers' organisations in that sense are not the 'organisations through which the working class struggles', they are rather organisations which support the tendencies towards self-organisation and emancipation in the struggles and movements as they happen.' (2014b). Thus Angry Workers of the World have made a political choice to start a worker's newspaper in a specific region of the UK and work together in the warehouse industry.

This also leads to a clear position on the usefulness or harmfulness of revolutionary organisations – they are critical of both the return of syndicalism (the IWW) and the rise of 'neo-Leninism' (by which I think they mean efforts like Plan C). Rather they encourage comrades in these groups to:

a) abolish the facade of their particular organisation and reflect critically whether their activities contribute practically and theoretically to what we can still term as 'workers autonomy' and b) engage in a collective inquiry of the weak spots of capital, workers' conditions and already existing collective steps below the surface

This process would not require the break from exiting organisations (IWW, Solfed, Plan C) but forums of debate and militant research beyond 'activist networking' and beyond the parasitic form of academia.

A wider mass publication, which reflects critically on current struggles 'from the inside' and analyses their material context would be the first priority.

This process should lead to a collective proletarian intervention in future 'Occupies', turning likely re-emergences of occupations of universities or other 'public spaces' into proletarian spheres. (angryworkers 2014a)

Both Milburn and Angry Workers of the World base their politics on an understanding of the importance of class composition. In short this is an understanding that sees the shape of working class experience changing as capital changes. Simultaneously the struggle against capitalism is the motor-force that drives these changes. As such different organisational and strategic forms of struggle will arise from different compositions. There is no ahistorical answer to working class rebellion. Milburn writes:

The concept of class composition was central to the Italian Operaist tradition (which in the UK has fed into what's called autonomism). It sees the composition of the working class as changing historically through cycles of struggle. Capital restructures through technological innovation and reorganizations of the work process. These often seek to undo established forms of working-class power. These changes produce a new 'technical' composition of the working class with particular political affordances, perhaps, for example, the reorganized work process allows good communication between certain sectors of workers but blocks it between others. The second aspect is the political composition of the working class, this is determined by the effectiveness of the forms of organisation and action through which these affordances are exploited or overcome and the interests of the class asserted against the interest of capital.(2015)

Angry Workers of the World:

By 'technical composition' we mean the actual historical form of how workers cooperate within a process of division of labour mediated by machinery and shaped by different levels of development; how the immediate production process relates to the wider social process of (re-)production and forms and levels of consumption; how formal individual skills relate to wider social skills of workers necessary to perform labour; how different categories and sections of workers are brought together and are segmented; how the class conflict is mediated institutionally and culturally.

By 'political composition' we mean the process of how 'working class' and 'workers unity' actually forms out of material conditions and experiences of struggles: the concrete form of organisation of struggle workers develop based on the collective nature of the capitalist production process, overcoming its segmenting nature; the concrete demands and wider social critique which springs up from concrete conditions and 'aspirations of productivity' – a historically specific relation between living and dead labour; the form of how particular struggles relate to each other and turn into a generalised movement due to the social dimension of production and general conditions within a capitalist cycle; how this generalisation tends to happen through struggles within central industries which can express an advanced stage of conflict between capital and workers; based on this relation between central sectors and wider society, specific forms of 'economical and political' organisations (councils, assemblies) of the class movement are formed and can express a specific 'social alternative', a historically specific communism.(2014b)

I think here we can see differences between the two positions. Class composition is a dynamic process involving how we work both, paid and unpaid, in a specific site and also how it is organized across society, but also involves what we are thinking and talking about and what if any kinds of organizations we have and how they operate and function. 'For each historical phase of class struggle, we identify a compositional type of working class, which is at its core not only its location in the overall process of production, but also the series of experiments with struggle, compartments, and the way determinate and life needs come to be renewed and newly defined'(Negri 2014, 11). Each of these elements interrelates with and determines the others. It is often easiest to understand that the technical determinations of work are the strongest influence – but this ignores the role that the subjective struggle of workers plays in constantly compelling changes and modifications in the operation of capitalism. It also can ignore the key radical kernel of Operaismo: we exceed capital. Capital wants us as workers, consumers and citizens and requires, in fact depends, on us. Capital is ultimately nothing more than the estranged product of our own creativity. Yet we are always more than this. Thus capitalism as a society is constantly attempting to react on a macro and micro level to our excessive self-activity in whatever forms that may take.

Class struggle is how we recompose ourselves as the makers of the conditions of our own lives, how we move from a class in itself to a class for itself. What role do self-declared revolutionaries have in the dynamic? For Milburn we can do much: as we engage in struggles we can put forward politics that aim to advance the level of class struggle on a whole. We can intervene. For Angry Workers of the World the recomposition of the class can only emerge out of specific struggles and spread due to the complex interrelationship of the dynamics of those sites. The best strategy is to attempt practices that support struggles and their circulation and develop our deeper collective understanding of our condition. We can spread the good news but we are not the Messiah.

So what does this mean for those of us in Brisbane? We can't and shouldn't seek to simply copy the approaches of those in different contexts but we can certainly learn from them. The initial difficulty is that strategy needs a subject; if we are going to ask what can we do then we need a we to do it. Now there is a danger here: this 'we' only makes sense if it refers to a group of us that have the necessary coherence to come to a decision and act on it. Conversations aimed at 'what the Left needs to do' are often pointless. Both Milburn and Angry Workers of the World are in conversation with clear groups of comrades that have the ability to decide and to act together. However forming the original knot of comradeship can be incredibly difficult. It is hard to generate the level of political commonality, human solidarity and commitment necessary. Last year Andrew, Richard and myself produced a survey to comrades as part of the process of trying to generate a new political organization – but this has stalled as we just don't have the time to do

it. The irony being that for me at least personally the desire to form a political organization is due to the lack of time I have and thus I want the small efforts I can make to be part of something more – to not feel that I need to be at every meeting in the inner city to be able to do something...

Milburn's argument for a social strike is both exciting and seemingly impossible. It gives a vivid point of orientation. Faced with the failures of our current strategy it gives us at least the possibility of imagining what might and could be done. Yet the idea of blocking ports and highways seems way beyond our capacities – especially if we want to avoid being smashed by the state whilst the viewers at home cheer on. It's also a strategy that could be taken up for struggles removed from the workplace proper – over ecological issues or the border régime for example. But it is clear that there are no short cuts. We would need a strategy to get us to this strategy. Given the authoritarian climate attempts at mass illegality that don't have sufficient capacity to generate a large level of participation and substantial support will just lead to some heads being cracked, comrades arrested and in the courts and/or behind bars. Importantly the social strike relies on the creation of directional demands – but such demands can't be generated from the minds of radicals in isolation. Rather they need to arise from ongoing processes of militant research (aka workers' inquiry) that identify and generalize the already existing antagonisms and desires of the present.

Thus if we were to take the notion of the social strike seriously we would have to start by popularizing the notion and work on creating the possibility of its possibility: doing the kinds of investigations that can give it material shape, create demands and start the practice of organizing. Even by starting to add to our collective radical imagination the concept of social strikes we may reveal a polar star that can help light the way.

The perspective of Angry Workers of the World seems far more realistic and possible. It understands, crucially, that the processes of the class in movement belong to the class as a whole and that there is only a marginal contribution that self-identified revolutionaries can make. It gives us a way out of the swings and roundabouts of activism and rather points towards the importance of focusing on the workplaces we are already in and the people around us, whatever their formal political persuasion, as the people we want to struggle together with. The most obvious limitation is that by focusing on the workplace proper and trying to select strategic industries to work in and support it may end up reproducing the very segmentations it wishes to overcome. What happens to the people and parts of our lives that are outside of wage-labour? Can the experience of life, exploitation and struggle in capitalism be reduced to what happens in the walls of formalized wage-labour? This was always a problematic, and fundamentally sexist, distinction but it is more and more difficult to make in a situation of 'biocapitalism' (Marazzi 2011, 49) where more and more of life is subsumed by capitalism. (The AWW do explicitly reject the notion of the 'social factory'...). Of course the approach of the AWW could be shifted to the campus, the street corner, the queue in Centrelink or the playgroup and so on. This is further complicated by their hard determinism – that such an approach is premised on workers in struggle being propelled in a certain direction and thus neglecting the importance of specific debates, emotional and affect states like hope and the ability to create a vivid and popular image of an alternative form of life.

Ultimately (and perhaps disappointingly for the reader who has come this far) it is impossible to get a verdict on this debate just on paper. Rather we need to see how such strategies unfold in practice and if they realize their stated potentials and can overcome what seem at this stage to be theoretical weaknesses. For those of us in Brisbane the value of them is conceptual: it can help us reinvent what we are doing. The shared emphasis on class composition shows us the necessity of starting from life as it is lived not some ossified ideological figment. They share a desire to start talking and thinking about power, about what our collective strength actually is rather than appealing to formal authorities or prioritizing moral purity.

At the very least the lesson that come from this discussion are let us start at the knotting together of the 'we', try to grasp the actual conditions and antagonisms that we are immersed in and begin talking about strategy. How are we going to find a way out of this mess?

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[i] Yes, I know this quote has become something of a cliché. But it is so great how can I not use it?

[ii] A more mystified version of this is the belief of radical social democrats like the Cloudland Collective who mistake a form of social democracy as the overcoming of capitalism – state ownership plus workers councils.

[iii] For the train spotters amongst us there are some interesting points of convergence and divergence between Plan C and Angry Workers of the World – and both formations seem to be very, and healthily, internally dynamic.

Ditching the Fear! - Warehouse workers struggles in Italy and their wider significance

Angry Workers of the World

In May 2015, a few of us from AngryWorkers went to Bologna to meet some of the warehouse workers involved in the recent series of hard-won struggles in the logistics sector. There had been some important struggles against giants like TNT, DHL and Ikea and in many cases (although not all) they’ve won substantial improvements, such as higher wages, guaranteed shifts, sick pay and more dignity at work. So we wanted to get an idea of how they were organising, the dynamics of the struggles and what the general social atmosphere was like. We’ve been trying to organise with our co-workers in the warehouses in West London so our interest is immediate and practical in the sense that we want to learn from other experiences – but we also wanted to see if the form of struggle and organisation opens new political avenues towards workers’ self-emancipation.

Even though we mainly relied on translation and were there for just 6 days, we had some critical questions, which we thought we’d write down. We also outline the wider context in which these struggles are happening and their relevance to workers in the UK. If anyone has a better knowledge of Italian and the situation in Italy, we’d love to hear your thoughts so get in touch – our ropey Italian means we might have misunderstood some things! We will summarise this text for an article in the September issue of our local workers’ paper WorkersWildWest [1], so it is even more important to get the facts and perspective right. Please comment!

‘Ditching the Fear’ is a new film about these struggles in Italy [2]. If you missed the film during our ‘tour’ earlier in this summer, stay tuned for more screenings to be announced in the autumn – or get in touch if you want to organise a screening in your town. There is also an interview with SI Cobas organisers online [3]. The quotes we’ve used in the article below are taken from these. We’ve also used Anna Curcio’s article on the ‘Revolution of Logistics’ as a reference.

[4]

1. Political Significance

So why do we think these struggles merit attention?

a) In a largely defensive arena of class struggle in Europe against cuts and ‘austerity’, warehouse workers in Italy have managed to turn the tables on the bosses and engage in more offensive struggles – in a new sector (logistics) whose emergence itself was closely connected to capital’s attack on the old workers’ strongholds through dispersion of production. In a situation where “for the rest of the workers in Italy, a pay increase of 7 Euro per month in the usual collective bargain contract is a great success”, some groups of workers have seen increases of 400 Euro a month. Not to be sniffed at!

b) The workers involved are mostly (male) migrant workers, largely from North, East and sub-saharan Africa and India. Migrant workers are usually blamed for the downward trend in wages and as such, are easily scapegoated for the ills of capitalist crisis. But here, they are the main protagonists against bad and worsening pay and conditions – which they are trying to impose on all of us. The division between ‘Italian’ workers and migrants was put into question from below.

c) Workers are attacking two important elements of the current capitalist regime: a multinational network (e.g. IKEA, DHL, TNT) that makes as much use of modern technology (GPS logistic chains) and localisation strategies (‘Walmart-isation’) as of personal, coercive, semi-legal structures like labour pool cooperatives and informal day-labour markets. Currently many people experience this combination of ‘electronic smart technology’ and over-exploitation: behind customer-friendly Apps and online shopping there lies the world of casualised Uber cab drivers, Amazon pickers and call centre agents. Proletarian struggles can make this contradiction between technological potentials and miserable reality explode.

d) To some extent, these struggles have recomposed the left in Italy (along with some others such as No TAV, anti- eviction struggles etc.). The usual sectarianism of left groups that happens everywhere had to be overcome when they related to an actual struggle that was taking place. Groups involved in different social centres, different cities and political backgrounds realised the importance of supporting these workers and brought different experiences and strategies to the picket line and general political debate. A ‘community of struggle’ was formed, which helped to overcome barriers between the different ‘communities of origin’.

e) The role of the SI Cobas rank-and-file union – as the main organisational vehicle through which these struggles have happened – is one which deserves closer attention. With larger trade union support in most European countries dwindling, there has been much talk of the rise of these smaller, rank-and-file (or base) unions better serving the interests of workers, as well as being worker-led themselves. The recent growth spurt in membership of the IWW in the UK is one example of a renewed appetite in finding forms of organisation that are more grassroots and worker-led. Over the last eight years, SI Cobas has managed to grow from about 0-10,000 members despite considerable state repression and intense pressure on workers to ‘put up and shut up’. Many new union offices opened in the last months – in Modena, Ferrara, Pavia and others.

How, and in what ways can we relate to these organisational structures as part of our own organising strategies and political perspectives?

We will expand on these issues below but first, some context:

2. General Situation in Italy

The logistics workers struggles of the past few years are located around Milan, Piacenza and Bologna, and Verona and Padua in the northeast of the country. These centres of goods circulation are also directly connected with the port of Genoa (on the west side of the country) and Venice (on the east). Many goods from the Middle East and North Africa are distributed through these ports e.g. fruits, vegetables, garments. IKEA, Amazon and other big companies have set up warehouses in this Po Valley region. During the 1990s, working in warehouses was paid the equivalent of 2,000 Euro on average, today the wage has come down to 800 Euro.

Working conditions

Working conditions in the warehouses in this region were/are bad: people would have to wait for up to 5 hours at the gates to be told whether or not they were needed; some workers had to take a four hour (unpaid) break inside the warehouse before being called to work again; overtime was compulsory and shifts cancelled openly as a punishment if you didn’t want to work weekends; large, cooperative-owned companies slashed pay by 35% ‘because of the crisis’; some people worked 12 hours and got paid for 4; the work was heavy and back injuries commonplace; sexual harassment (for women workers); work discipline/bullying was rife; payslips were calculated wrongly.

„Everyone was pushed to work faster. There was a supervisor who, day and night, shouted: ‘come on, come on, come on’, like a broken record! 200 people did the work of 500, so they saved the costs of 300 people. For five years, TNT enjoyed the best productivity levels in Italy but no one went to see under what conditions. The bosses reaped great profits and the workers were badly treated and becoming ill. It’s a mode of slavery. When I suggested to people that we should say no, they would say they couldn’t for fear of losing their job.”

(Mohamed, TNT worker) [5]

One of the supervisors, an old guy, made passes at the young women who are my age...twenty, twenty-one year old women. And he told them, in particular to the Moroccan women: “I like Moroccan women. You are all so slutty.” If you didn’t manage to meet the targets he said: “Either you meet the target or I shove it up your arse!” He told a workmate:

“You are the next one to suck my dick.” (Yoox worker)

Co-operatives

A quarter of the total logistics workforce in Italy work through ‘co-operatives’, many of which have similar functions to temp agencies over here. They were originally formed in the late nineteenth century in Italy by workers as a form of self-defence to avoid both the worst forms of exploitation and emigration from Italy. Devi Sacchetto writes that by the early 1920s, the cooperative system was so firmly established, particularly in Northern and Central Italy, that even the fascist regime didn’t dare destroy it. However, in recent decades cooperatives have proliferated, and their participation in new activities have expanded as they began to serve as sub-contractors to large firms, national and multinational enterprises. With this shift, working conditions within cooperatives – for both partner-workers and non-partner-workers – have worsened. [6]

3. SI Cobas

SI Cobas, which is a rank-and-file union, made a strategic decision to make contacts with workers in this sector. They’re a union that stands for self-organisation beyond professions or sectors.

“The history of the Cobas goes back to the struggles in the 1970s. We got experience of struggles in the big factories in Milan, some of the biggest in Italy. We have experiences of mass-worker struggles.” (Aldo, SI Cobas organiser)

“Our Cobas union was formed in the 1990s at the Alfa Romeo plant. Then it was called SLAI Cobas. The SLAI Cobas mainly grew within the metal sector. But it didn’t have a clear perspective of class struggle. No perspective of a broader way to organise, not just a sectorial way to organise. The union did not grow outside Alfa Romeo. Now we’re starting to spread this idea amongst workers. The concept of class struggle, of class solidarity and of the most widespread organisation of dispute as possible.” (Daniele, bus driver and SI Cobas activist)

Workers in the logistics sector were attracted to this union because:

- a) they actively supported the minority of workers who self-organised strikes (primarily by getting external supporters outside to blockade the gate as a way to build support inside the factory);
- b) they offered legal advice which is something that migrant workers are particularly interested in;
- c) their combative attitude was markedly different from the abysmal track record of the other unions already present in this sector.

Two workers in the film say:

“I was a member of the CGIL for ten years. They only care about membership fees and they take bribe money.” (Sole Montagna worker)

“I went twice to the CGIL in Bologna and they said to me: “You’re better off switching jobs”. The problem is too big, we can’t do anything there.” Until we found a union which said: ‘We can sort this out.’”

When approached by a worker or a group of workers who want to do something against their conditions, SI Cobas tells them to organise a strike amongst themselves, which the union will then support by bringing supporters to the gates and linking them up with other warehouse workers. They also take care of legal strike procedures.

“The people from the big warehouses went to those in the small warehouses and told them they had won in the struggle for their rights, and that they are not alone. If they needed support from the other warehouses they would all come and help. That’s how it happened in Piacenza, at IKEA. There were only few people who protested and took part in the strike, just 10 out of 300 workers there! Only 10 went on strike. But people from other warehouses came to support the struggle!” (Karim)

When the strike/blockade begins, SI Cobas sends their delegates, who, as far as we saw, have a role in coordinating it, making speeches to boost morale and spread a more ‘political’ message, as well as negotiating with the bosses etc.

Management try and circumvent their tactics of blockading but so far, SI Cobas have done quite a good job in adapting their strategies accordingly – though we can already see that when they need to extend to an associated warehouse further away it becomes more important that workers ‘inside’ are involved and that ‘blockades’ by external militants would over-stretch themselves:

“Take the example of DHL in Italy: When this struggles began we had some problems. When workers blocked a DHL warehouse in Milano, DHL closed it and took the commodities to other warehouses, in Bologna, Naples, or elsewhere. They close the warehouse in Milano temporarily until the workers get bored and go home. But these workers did not wait until the gates were reopened but drove to the warehouses in other cities and distributed flyers there. They persuaded the DHL-workers in other cities to join the struggle. And immediately, in less than one month, there were

banners everywhere and the whole camp was in struggle.” (Karim)

At the moment there are around 50 workers who have been dismissed because they are members of SI Cobas. They are partly sustained by the ‘cassa di resistenza’, which is a struggle fund that members pay into. The main struggles are about improving pay and conditions – particularly in terms of getting the national contract, which the main unions have signed with employers for the logistics sector, implemented. The recognition of SI Cobas is also very much part of the disputes, because employers do not recognise the union in terms of signing contracts with them until they are forced to do so (through blockades).

4. UK and Italy: similarities and differences

So why are these struggles and the context in which they are happening relevant to us in the UK? Some people might say, “But this is Italy and not the UK, over there the situation is different. These things might be possible there, but not here.” By ‘these things’ people are probably referring to the militancy of the struggles, the use of external supporters and ‘illegal’ blockades which stop trucks going in and out of the warehouses, the huge wage increases that have been won etc. At the current moment, these seem a long way off going by the state of struggle here.

Obviously there are differences between the situation in Italy and over here. But we think there are commonalities that we could use as a basis for thinking about what we could learn from their experiences – organisationally and strategically. Because we’ve been trying to organise in the warehouses in West London, we’ll use our experiences there as the basis for comparison, although they can largely be extrapolated more widely across the logistics sector in the UK. So let’s start with the similarities.

Same same...

Migrant workers

Firstly, warehouse workers in Italy and in the UK are largely migrants, who, to a significant extent, have not been in the country long enough to learn the language adequately to feel confident. In Italy they come mainly from North African countries such as Egypt, Morocco, or Tunisia. The others are from Eastern Europe, South Asia, and Sub-Saharan and East Africa. In west-London they mainly come from Poland, other Eastern European countries like Romania, Hungary, Latvia, and South Asia. They all face problems in overcoming language barriers and racism (between each other and from the outside). This obviously has implications for self-organising across a workplace with many different language groups, as well as in terms of how workers relate to the external environment, meaning supporters, the left, the union organisational framework e.g. all the bigger union meetings are held in Italian. In the film we see that is dealt with in various ways: someone is translating one of the union leader’s speeches at a picket line into Arabic on a megaphone and the union delegates are Moroccan/Indian etc. so speak to workers in their first languages. Similarly, in west-London many people (especially Polish) cannot speak any, or only a little, English. This is why our workers newspaper is bilingual.

“The first problem was how to unite all the workers of the company and fight fear together, fight the blackmail of a low income and the threats of losing the job, a constant pressure that has made many of us ill. To rule, they pit us against one another, Italians against foreigners (who are 90% of us), Egyptians against Moroccans. At GLS there were lots of Indians, most of whom speak hardly any Italian and the employer just took advantage of that to exploit us even more. We organised assemblies with the Indian and Chinese workers, we sensed the difference between them and the Arab workers but I said: “Forget where we come from, we are all workers here and we are all being exploited. We just need to concentrate on that.” (Mohamed, TNT worker) [5]

Reproduction

Secondly, the living situation and general work/life pressure is comparably bad. In Italy, laws like Bossi Fini mean many workers automatically lose their right to stay in Italy if they lose their jobs, so the pressure on them to accept low pay and bad conditions is high. The lack of benefits and social safety net for EU and non-EU migrants in the UK gives a similar pressure: changes that came in in April 2014 implementing stricter rules around benefits for EU migrants has meant many people find it insanely difficult to access housing benefit, working tax credits and even job seekers allowance after 3 months; and the government’s new rules set to come in in April 2016 will send all non-EU migrants earning under £35,000 back to their country of origin. We can see that the trend in increasing pressure on proletarians across Europe is converging even further.

Sub-contractual arrangements

Thirdly, while many warehouse workers in the UK work for temp agencies (often on zero-hour contracts), these work in a similar way to the so-called ‘cooperatives’ in Italy that employ most warehouse workers there. Most workers in

these warehouses are employed as 'share-holders' in these 'cooperatives', and over 90 per cent of them are migrants. There is a national collective contract for the logistics sector in Italy, guaranteeing a minimum wage, guaranteed hours (168 per month), Christmas bonus, sick pay – but as 'shareholders' the cooperative workers are excluded from this. The 'foremen' or supervisors have a particular role: they allocate working hours to the cooperative workers. If they don't like your face or if you don't suck up to them and work your arse off, you get less hours. This is a similar story with the agencies over here. Both sets of workers don't get guaranteed shifts. Cooperatives don't have to pay national insurance contributions for their workers and agencies here often get around their obligations to pay for national insurance by signing their employees onto some sort of travel scheme loophole. The decisions about who gets shifts is often arbitrary and depends on how compliant you are to their rules.

Fear

Lastly, we can say that fear amongst workers was and is a common feeling. When we see the footage of militant struggles in Italy, it is easy to forget how these same workers, up until recently, were overridden by fear: of being deported; of making trouble lest they lose their jobs; of jeopardising their meagre incomes with a family to support... In the film, many workers talk about this palpable sense of fear to try and change their situation collectively for the better. Many of our workmates in the warehouses in west-London talk similarly, especially the women (who seem to be able to admit it more). With poor English and limited reference points of large-scale, local victories, this fear is used as a reason to not embark on collective action. In Italy, this was overcome because of a number of reasons, which cannot be discounted from happening elsewhere: news of victories in other warehouses spread amongst workers and gave people a sense that something could be won; external supporters showed that even as a minority, it was possible for some action to be taken; conversations inside warehouses that had been happening for a year or two became the basis for 'spontaneous' action.

...but different

External support

The main difference between the situation over there and over here is that warehouse workers in Italy got a lot of support from the outside, first of all from the SI Cobas union. When only a few workers joined SI Cobas and took the first steps to organise at work, bosses tried to victimise them and kicked some of them out. At this point, the union was able to get 150 to 200 external supporters outside the gate with them and to blockade the warehouses. After some time the bosses had to give in and take the workers back. More people joined the union after these successes and having seen the external support – and started themselves to support workers in other warehouses. This was the way in which SI Cobas got around the fact that many workplace struggles start out from a minoritarian position and from there, they actually grew and managed to spread struggles to different warehouses. These external supporters were mainly from political activists from the squat and social centre scene, which does not exist on the same scope and scale in the UK. Replicating this was somehow our hope when we distributed a leaflet directed towards permanent workers in the warehouse we were working in as temps trying to organise for guaranteed shifts and higher wages. We did a wider call out for support from the left to come and help us distribute this leaflet [7], thinking that if we had a sizeable number of people on the outside it would show temps inside (and management) that there would be external support if people took more collective steps inside the warehouse. But because we were quite far from 'the left' in central London and because of the early start, we only managed to get about 15 people to turn up throughout the day.

Squats and social centres

Many of the struggles lasted a long time: anywhere from 2 months to a year-and-a-half in the case of the strike at milk and dairy manufacturer, Granarolo. They weren't won overnight. Obviously, in a situation like London, reproducing oneself throughout this time on no pay is no mean feat. We think it's fair to say that in most cases and most places, workers themselves would not be able to lead a struggle in that way, if it takes six months to win it. In places like Bologna, they were able to do this partly because of squats that local groups organise on a large scale. Not having to pay rent and bills definitely takes off the pressure and can open up the space for more militant action. When we were in Bologna, we visited two bigger squats in the town centre. The squats were occupied by activists of Social Log, with and for migrant workers' families, mainly from Morocco. An old Telecom building now houses more than 300 people, many of whom are unemployed and some of whom work in warehouses. Just the fact that there are squats makes it possible for workers to take part in forms of struggles which might result in losing several weeks of wages. This link between organisation at work and meeting housing/reproduction needs has been done on an impressive scale there – but seems unlikely to be possible in a place like London town. Groups like Plan C and others who are discussing ideas around the 'social strike' realise the importance of building these links in order to strengthen and support strike activity.

"So we started to build a militant movement, not only in the logistics sector. The logistics workers often go to demonstrations for housing rights and also support other sectors. They don't just focus on the logistics sector. Now

they help the metal workers, too. They have already helped the hotel workers.” (Karim)

Labour/trade union laws

There are also differences in terms of labour/trade union laws so for example, in Italy the SI Cobas managed to grow in size because they used the fact that official union delegates have 8 hours a month facility time. Delegates were able to use this to go to other warehouses and agitate/speak to workers there. The idea being to spread the disruption beyond individual workplaces and have a wider perspective of struggle. Similarly, solidarity strikes are legal in Italy, which they were also able to use in their organisational strategy. (Needless to say, some of these laws are now under review!) In the UK there is no obligation for employers to pay for facility time, and even if there is, there are strict rules about what this time can be used for – going ‘off-site’ to agitate other workers in other workplaces is not on the list! Widening disputes is pretty much impossible under formal trade union regulations, especially when bigger workplaces often have a few unions present representing different groups of workers e.g in a school, the teachers, headteachers, cleaners, canteen staff and caretakers are all probably represented by different unions, making it almost impossible to come together as workers in one workplace within the union structures.

Setting up an alternative union in a workplace where one already exists is also difficult in terms of getting recognition by the management. There are rules around how much of the workplace you have to represent etc. and warehouses in West London for example are, to a large extent, not un-unionised, at least for permanent workers. For us it was a bit disheartening to see that many of the (mainly older) labour activists we met during our tour in England mainly focused on this legal arena when judging problems and potentials of similar struggle in the UK.

This ‘legalistic’ view on what the unions can and can’t do reflects the fact that their material basis has been eroded and their legal recognition as institutions has become the main reason why they still exist. Their national, sectorial formal framework and their orientation on ‘permanent membership’ was not able to cope with the following challenges: A high supply of labour, threats to move production, segmented workforces, mobile capital secured through sub-contracting and temp contract arrangements. These have all worked to put unions on the back foot.

This is the background upon which unions make decisions against sections of their membership e.g. in 1998, all workers at the airline caterers, Alpha LSG, in Southall were T&G union members. There was a merger planned and management wanted to change workers’ existing contracts. Management bought in some temps to provoke the workers, a one-day ‘strike’ resulted in a lock-out for over a year. If T&G had used their 20,000 strong membership throughout Heathrow Airport to even threaten even an hour’s strike, the workers at Alpha LSG would have won. A similar situation repeated itself in the Gate Gourmet dispute in 2005. [9]

National wage agreement

In Italy, they also have a national wage agreement for the logistics sector, which, while it is mainly just a piece of paper, with enough actual pressure and a balance of power in workers’ favour, has been accepted by some bosses -mainly at the bigger multinational companies. This has given a sense of ‘struggling for legality’ to the strikes in terms of providing a justification for workers’ demands that the bosses are not following the existing laws with regards to pay. In the UK, there is no legislation or system of legally binding collective agreements which could give powers to local union organisations to represent all employees. And the crap minimum wage is legal and so low that any pay demand would automatically be going beyond what was merely the bare ‘legal’ requirement. The question then becomes more about what we, as workers need to reproduce ourselves – independently of what the law says we need. But while workers’ more offensive actions in the UK – by which we mean anything that demands ‘more’ rather than defending what already exists, particularly struggles for more than the minimum wage – have this potential to go beyond the discourse of ‘the law’ and the ‘logic’ of austerity politics, more often than not, it results in resorting to appeals to ‘ethical’ pay and treatment, which is obviously problematic. So for example, the temp workers, organised through GMB at an M&S warehouse in Swindon, are highlighting the loophole in the Agency Workers Directive by using slogans such as ‘ethical trading starts at home’ and appealing to the company’s supposedly ‘ethical’ credentials – because what M&S is doing is actually totally ‘legal’. [8]

Framework of ‘illegality’

Although the way workers ‘publicly’ explain the motives of their struggles only scratches the surface of the actual content and potentials of struggles, we nevertheless think it is important to make a note of it. In general, we could say that warehouse workers in Italy publicly explain their struggles by framing their treatment as ‘illegal’. By this we mean there is often talk of mafia involvement, bribe-taking to win contracts, national wage agreements not being adhered to etc. which provides a framework of ‘just (legal) cause’ to their struggles. While workers themselves may sometimes use ‘illegal’ tactics, the demands are mostly set within claiming what already exists for other sections of workers. In the UK though, it is already legal for agencies to not pay sick-pay or to not pay their agency staff the same as permanent workers through state-sanctioned loopholes. This is why we think struggles that fight for more than the minimum wage

in the UK automatically have to use a different discourse of 'justification' – one that goes beyond the minimum legal stipulations. In the UK, we should try to understand and support these kinds of struggles where we can.

Blockades

"A one-day blockade at the IKEA store in Piacenza 'means that goods are not loaded onto trucks. These do not arrive on time for the ships, producing a delay in deliveries at destinations in Eastern Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. A one-day blockade blows up the organisation of the entire process, and in order to restart it companies must wait at least ten days, meaning a big economical damage, as well as an incalculable damage to their image...In a warehouse where fresh food is stored, a four-hour blockade means 2-300.000 Euros lost. At any rate, to get an idea of the large damage caused by workers picket-lines and blockades we only need to look at the ritual brutal attacks by police against the workers in struggle." (Aldo, SI Cobas organiser)

Blockades are illegal in both countries, but, as with everything, that is not so important as the balance of power which determines whether or not we can get away with them. In Italy, it is however, normally the individuals blockading that get slapped with fines, rather than the union. This means the union potentially can show more 'fighting power' that they can also then use to attract more workers. In the negotiations in Italy, dropping the fines for individuals is sometimes part of the deal. In the UK, it is the unions that get fined, which, while not meaning that they won't 'unofficially' sanction blockades, does mean their visibility in terms of showing strength to other workers is curtailed, as well making them more averse to supporting and organising such actions more fully.

Workplace divisions

In terms of how the workplace is organised, there may be more sophisticated ways by which management divides workers in warehouses in the UK, maybe because these types of logistics warehouses have been established longer over here. In Italy, a job done through a cooperative is only ever that – there is never really any chance to get a permanent contract and be integrated more securely into the value-producing machine. This may be a reason why workers in Italy rebelled: there was no longer-term escape route. In the UK though, our experiences have been that agencies actively dangle the carrot of the permanent contract to keep workers loyal and working fast. "Just work hard and you'll be made permanent." Some people work a good 3 or 4 years before they accept that it won't happen for them. The difference in pay between permanent and temp workers (which was almost £3 an hour – nearly 40 per cent more – for permanents in our warehouse), is also a good way to get workers to keep their head down, trying to get a permanent contract. Some warehouses have numerous contracts, all with different pay and conditions, which also makes it hard to come together e.g. at the Alpha LSG warehouse near Manchester Airport (that do aeroplane catering) that we visited recently, a worker told us that there were 37 different contracts inside! To a certain degree these more sophisticated divisions inside the warehouses also reflect the more segmented nature of the labour market in the UK e.g. the division between EU and non-EU migrants, non-EU migrants with papers and without.

At our warehouse, the shop-floor hierarchy was such that managers were often the same nationality as the workers (who were majority Polish). This gave credence to the illusion that working hard would mean it was possible to climb the ladder. It also meant that workers whose English was poor, spoke more and had a better relationship with their managers, who they could speak in their native language to, than with their, for example, Somalian or Romanian workmate, who they would have to speak in English to. In Italy, the workforce was split more along the lines of managers being 'Italian' and all workers occupying the 'migrant' roles (although obviously there would have been variations in terms of being able to speak Italian). This situation we can imagine adds to the 'us' and 'them' feeling that contributed to kick-starting the struggles.

Turnover

Another major difference is turnover, although this is probably more relevant a point for London than elsewhere in the UK where people tend to stay in the jobs for longer. In London, turnover is high and similar warehouse jobs are relatively easy to find. While this hasn't worked in our favour so far ('what's the point in organising to improve things here when I can get a better job around the corner?'), it could: ('there is little risk in trying to improve things, I can just get a job somewhere else.') In Italy, higher levels of unemployment have meant people tend to stay in their jobs for longer, so building up relationships of trust would be easier. Perhaps also they get more frustrated: at the lack of an alternative 'better' job and knowing that it won't get much better than this.

This has a knock-on effect in terms of whether workers find joining unions appealing. Membership fees are unlikely to be paid by minimum-waged workers, especially if the union has no programme to offer them. Doing things formally takes time, by which time people would have come and gone (in our previous warehouse, men stayed on average for 4 months, women for a bit longer). It's no coincidence that workers at the distribution centre in Swindon who were picking for M&S organised through GMB: they had all worked in the same place for years and GMB made a strategic effort to recruit them i.e. said they would get them higher wages.

Larger social movement

With a large arabic-speaking workplace in the warehouses in Italy, the Arab Spring coincided with, and was an impetus for a more offensive struggle. In one of the most moving parts of the film, workers shout anti-Mubarak slogans amidst their chants against their boss. This linking up of sympathies and feeling part of a bigger struggle 'back home' is something that was quite specific to the dynamic of struggle in Italy at the time.

"After thirty years in Egypt Mubarak was thrown out, it was something that nobody could have imagined before. Similarly, no-one was expecting our struggle at TNT. For this reason we talk about revolution. For us this was like in Egypt: the revolution of TNT."

Migration

Polish migration in London is constantly in flux. Flights are cheap enough and EU membership means its is easier to go back and forth. Lots of people go back to Poland for a month or two, leave, come back, leave again. This is a safety net of sorts. As of yet, it hasn't provided the security needed to embark on a struggle where you might not get paid for a few months. We've found that it has actually been a more restraining force because many young people, many of whom hate London, intend to go back to Poland after an allotted time. The one or two or three years in London then is the time in which to gain some experience and make some money. This mental 'deadline' can dull the imperative to struggle and makes people continue to work hard, knowing that it won't be forever. This was obviously different for migration in the 60s and 70s to the UK from the subcontinent for example, which was more of a permanent move. There was more of an incentive to settle in and make demands.

In Italy, many migrants have a permanent move in mind, especially if they are coming from north/east/sub-saharan Africa. Or they don't have the resources to return, even if they wanted to:

"I was a university student in Morocco. I studied in my last year. Suddenly my father came and said: "Look, I have found a work contract in Italy. If you want to go..." The contract said: 1.200 euros basic wage plus two monthly wages extra per year. I calculated and thought, if I go to Italy I need a few things, the rent, the first few days...Therefore, I sold what I had in order to have at least 5,000 to 6,000 euros with me so I could stay afloat at the beginning when I do not speak the language and don't know a lot of things. So I sold everything I had and came here...Then I started calculating and realised that I was getting cheated. The wage was wrong, and at the end of the year I did not get the two extra monthly wages no paid holidays, nothing! So I am being cheated, and I cannot go back either since I sold everything I owned. So I am trapped." (Karim)

Maybe this is why many of the demands made by the warehouse workers in Italy, as well as other migrant groups, have been motivated by "dignity". Workers use this word many times in the film and it has also cropped up frequently in other struggles of late e.g. the fast food workers Fight for \$15 campaign in the USA, Tres Cosas in London etc.

So how can we understand it's recurrence, particularly within struggles of minority communities? Perhaps within a context of racism, xenophobia, many divisions between different sections of the working class and recent migration within a time of cuts and 'austerity', the impetus to 'make demands' on the 'host' country can be daunting. Framing one's demands by using the notion of workers' 'dignity' could perhaps be understood as a way to bypass these barriers to struggle and reach out across such lines of division. The same rhetoric was used by Jayaben Desai, when she was convincing her co-workers to strike at Grunwicks in 1976, which was the first strike of female migrant workers in UK after WWII [10]. When they were worried about rocking the boat as newly arrived migrants, she said, "The strike is not so much about pay, it is a strike about human dignity." Reclaiming dignity within capitalism could be read as expressing a desire to reclaim our lives over a system of profit – or a non-threatening appeal to a 'benevolent public opinion'.

So, we would still encourage struggles to spell out exactly what they mean by dignity: it could (just) mean that we want the same legal treatment as everyone else and not be second class citizens. Or it could also open up the debate about whether it is dignified to have to work under the industrial/logistics-regime in general: it's no kind of life to pick boxes all day, to become a puppet of productivity targets etc.

"...we regained some dignity, which is even more important than money. Before then, we used to go to work as in a prison, every day was worse than the one before; now we have won over the fear that the master used to repress all struggles. Now we know that if we don't fight to change our life, nobody will do it for us: we are the makers of our future."

5. Critical questions

We're not saying that we can just copy things that are happening elsewhere, under slightly different conditions. But we can try and learn from their experiences. Apart from the positive sides of their struggles, we can also see some problems further down the line e.g. support from outside is good and might get things off the ground, especially in terms of giving workers some confidence to undertake collective steps themselves, but after a while, visible and physically

confrontational type of actions like blockades will run into insurmountable pressure from the police. We also have to build a structure inside the workplace – if necessary, underground – which can keep up the pressure in ways which the bosses have difficulties in repressing: working slow, without people having to show their faces etc. We can't wholly rely on full-time supporters.

We tried to talk with four or five SI Cobas militants, all still working in warehouses, about SI Cobas strategies and our own situation in west London. We asked the militants what they think the reasons are that some struggles are successful and others not – whether they see objective reasons for it. It is obviously difficult to have an open discussion if you have just met, but largely the response was that only 5% of the struggles have ended in 'defeat' so far (which surely is a question of interpretation!) and that the main reason is that either workers were not combative enough or the repression was too strong (e.g. in the case of IKEA – see below). Everyone basically said that 'unity' is the key to a successful struggle and that the will to sacrifice is a necessary part of it. This might be the right responses when we are trying to recruit members for our organisation – but leaves little scope for other workers to understand and learn from the difficulties of past struggles. As far as we are aware there is no public text published by SI Cobas that reflects critically on the struggles of the last seven years.

"Now everyone knows that we can achieve better working conditions through struggle, it is an essential weapon: if we are united, we can overcome the fear and win every fight."

Here are some points in more detail:

State repression

Over time, as SI Cobas grew and workers were taking more collective action, the police and carabinieri (military police) started showing up more regularly and in larger numbers. They recognised the potential dangers of such a mass and growing militancy as saw it, rightly, as a political movement. There are loads of you tube videos showing the stand-offs and brutality used against the blockaders. The warehouses began to send compensation claims to SI Cobas for money lost due to disruption as well as trespassing. Soon after, for the first time in Italy's history, a trade unionist was sentenced to prison for calling a strike. Many activists have been banned from whole towns and cities. This state response on top on the usual deployment of mafia gangs to harass and threaten key figures in the struggles e.g. by burning cars and beating people up.

It was good to see that the blockades actually seemed to mainly be organised by workers themselves, by workers from other warehouses, and with the involvement of other migrant workers in the squats. But whilst this tactic of blockading and having external support to build confidence of workers inside the factory has up until now, been largely successful, it reaches an inevitable limit. We will never be able to out-weapon those with a monopoly on weapons. The question then we put to our comrades in Bologna, was what things they had tried to apply pressure INSIDE the warehouses, on a day-to-day, more invisible level? While we understand that flag and banner-waving militant actions serve a purpose, and especially for the unions who want to show strength and attract more workers, the downsides are that workers showing their faces get victimised and both workers and supporters end up being thrown out of the job and/or into jail/ put under house arrest.

Delegates

There is 1 delegate for 80 workers. The militant workers are 'delegates' for SI Cobas, which means that they can leave work for their union activities without facing the immediate threat of being sacked. We are not sure as to what extent this relies on a 'legal protection' or the acceptance of management that a dismissal might create more trouble than necessary (or the hope that if the delegate mainly agitates outside, then at least they won't stir up more trouble 'at home'). At any rate, these delegates are impressive. They go to all the pickets, speak to everyone, make speeches, do the organisational work, motivate people, entertain international visitors. Everyone knows them and they know everyone. Their commitment in these regards cannot be overstated. And yet, there is the obvious danger of burn out or victimisation, and it is not a coincidence that they are all young men, without children to support. In this situation, it is easier for them to talk about 'sacrifice' as the driving force of struggles.

We could also see the potential for the gap between the delegates and workers to grow wider, as they spend less and less time at work, take on more union responsibilities and are treated like heroes everywhere they go. At one SI Cobas meeting we attended, someone complained that delegates don't hold their monthly meetings, which implies that workers rely on delegates to call for a meeting. When you have 'naturally gifted public speakers' and friendly, personable people taking leading roles e.g. in negotiations, you can see how power might get centralised. This comes out in ways e.g. official delegates speak and workers listen; workers in the film and in conversations often refer to SI Cobas as something like an 'external helper', rather than their own coordination. We think there is an awareness within SI Cobas that 'militant' duties need to be distributed more widely, but in what forms, we do not know.

Dependence on the left

Following on from the point about long-term over-reliance on external supporters, we would say that the 'left' is an unstable partner. While different political groups came together during these struggles, fractures and splits are inevitable, especially when questions of strategy arise – without wanting to mention details, even after six days in town we became aware of growing tension between different groups. One way to take this into account is to build more cross-worker support. To some extent, SI Cobas seem to have managed to achieve this – many pickets and demonstrations are made up of workers from that particular as well as other warehouses. This requires continual coordination.

Problem of formal union structure

Although we try and see the new developments within these struggles, we also see some of the problems as expressions of general problems, which occur once we struggle in a 'recognised union framework'. Even though SI Cobas is a 'worker-led' union, it still has the problems of fulfilling its role as a registered union whilst not having full-time, paid staff. The workload is huge and getting bigger. They have to deal not only with the coordination of struggles, but media work, looking after individual workers, compensation claims, legal battles and disciplinary complaints.

In addition:

a) as formal and legal the union can be victimised, e.g. by withdrawing legal recognition; if we don't prepare workers for this, the impact can be devastating;

b) the union favours certain actions over others, which, while might be good for them to grow, might also be against the interests of workers i.e. they deploy more visible and combative struggles through blockading that attract attention, but which could lead to more workers being singled out and victimised. This also shows that 'blockades' are not just a tactical question (how to do something as a minority), but also intrinsically tied to the organisational form of being mainly a 'membership organisation';

c) the need to attract more workers also means there is a temptation to only talk about victories, which hampers open, critical reflection about what workers can achieve under various conditions;

d) organisational competition is aggravated by managements' strategy to make deals with other unions e.g. during the struggle at SDA, management signed a contract with the CGIL, CISL and UIL NAZIONALE unions, which was a similar contract as the national contract agreed with SI Cobas, though with disadvantages regarding sick pay and other extra payments. In this way, management was able to use the different interests of the various unions to split workers; 'turf wars' between organisations – and finally between groups of workers – are likely outcomes, see e.g. the recent attacks on SI Cobas members at SDA in Rome;

e) management tries to use restructuring to undermine SI Cobas' power-base (see report below on SDA); when we discussed whether 'automatisation' in the postal distribution centres was an actual threat or just a bluff by the bosses, we got many different answers; while some delegates said that it was just a bluff – may be to keep up the morale of workers – this could backfire by leading workers into a struggle which they cannot win easily. Similarly, outsourcing from Poste Italiane to SDA or the take-over from TNT by FEDEX were mainly seen in terms of whether it will formally undermine the basis of SI Cobas, and less about what difficulties or new connections this might create amongst workers within and beyond these companies.

6. Conclusions

In a sea of fear and mindset that nothing can be done, these struggles in Italy are a glimmer of hope that situations can turn around and become a reference point for other workers. They also show that workers don't need (legal) professionals or a big apparatus to ditch the fear and get organised.

But when nothing comparable is happening in the UK, the first question is how can something get going? Having a worker-led or grassroots union can be a good way to get things off the ground. Workers might feel more secure in the knowledge of having 'union support' even though from a standpoint of legal protection, this is largely illusory. In Italy, because of the differences in how the union can function, SI Cobas has, so far, been a useful vehicle to build wider working class collectivity – across a range of workplaces, at the same time as encompassing a larger field than the 'workplace' through its connections to the wider left and social centre scene.

But there are limits to this form. State repression and the delegate structure indicate that other (more invisible) ways should be found to put pressure on the bosses and generalise the struggle. If joining a grassroots union would mean 150 supporters turn up at the gate to support workers on the inside, great. But if not, we need to think of other

things. In the meantime, we try and share experiences of what people do on a daily level to resist management pressures and struggle for more than just the crumbs. And while we are trying to build international coordinations of practical support, in particular around international companies like Amazon, we also want to encourage an open debate and reflection: which struggles were actually successful and why, how self-organised are our structures etc.

This debate also has to find out which of the current problems are specific to the particular struggle and which ones are more generally connected with the organisational form e.g. rank-and-file unions. One thing we could do is to re-examine the development of unions like SUD in France, which is a union that started out like SI Cobas and became 'institutionalised' in a relatively short space of time. [11]

7. Chronology of struggles

This summaries are taken from information from various sources although we have to admit, the material we found was sometimes contradictory and generally a bit too thin to really understand the strong and weak points of each dispute or conclusions by those involved. If anyone has information or amendments to add, please do!

Company name: Bennet (hypermarket)
When? 2008
Where? Origgio, north of Milan
Main issues: Low pay and falsified payslips

What happened? Some workers got in touch with activists in the small base union, SLAI Cobas, and through their network to the political scene in Milan, they organised the first picket outside the warehouse gates. They were surprised that the normally fractious and heterogenous radical left in Milan got 150 people outside the gates of the warehouse to support the picket. There were 5 strikes in 5 months.

Outcome: The result was 40 cents more per hour, a 500 euro one-off payment, the reinstatement of a sacked colleague, the transfer of two racist managers, union and delegate recognition. There were about 28 court cases against supporters, three of whom got a two-month prison sentence on probation.

After the dispute at Bennet had ended, more workers began to organise with SLAI Cobas, leaving their own workplaces to go and support other workers in the other 'cooperatives' who were picketing.

Company name: GLS (subsidiary of Royal Mail)
When? 2009
Where? Cerro, Milan

Main issues: Unpaid overtime, irregular pay, bullying, exhausting workload and pace of work

What happened? The state had seen the danger of these struggles and an arrangement was probably reached behind the scenes between the company and the government minister: a massive police presence was mobilised against the striking workers. About 50 police officers stood guard by the gate for 43 days, 24 hours a day. It became a no-go zone.

Outcome: The strike was defeated with 16-18 workers sacked (although they were reinstated a year later with compensated). But the massive efforts to stop the blockades pushed the conflict into the public spotlight and made more workers and activists aware of what was going on. From that point, different strikes proliferated and workers and activists who were involved founded the rank-and-file union SI Cobas out of SLAI Cobas.

Company name: TNT (courier and parcel delivery) [12]
When? 2011
Where? Piacenza

Main issues: The cooperative tried to massively increase the workload and work-speed at the same time as falsifying payslips and not guaranteeing any hours. Basic pay was 6 euros per hour.

What happened? Around 20 out of the 380 began to organise by going door-to-door in the area where they lived to talk with their workmates about the work contracts and payslips. When there were more of them and they'd agreed to go on strike they tried to get some union support because they knew they'd need help with the bargaining process. They first got in touch with the big unions (CGIL, CISL and UIL) and soon realised that they weren't going to stand on their side.

Outcome: The struggle ended with a wholesale victory. The workers got the introduction of the national contract and a fixed number of hours (168 hours a month), the customary minimum wage, Christmas and holiday pay, sick pay and in addition, food vouchers. All in all, a massive pay increase. The news of this breakthrough result spread like wildfire

across the region of Piacenza and Bologna. Now, 80% of the TNT workforce is a member of SI Cobas, with the equivalent organisational power that goes along with it.

After winning the fight against TNT, mobilisations supported by SI Cobas quickly moved to other warehouses: Gesco North: GLS, the Antonio Ferrari group, Bartolini. Then struggles spread to the rest of northern and south-central Italy e.g. SDA in Rome.

Company name: Ikea (furniture company) [13]

When? June 2012

Where? Piacenza

Main issues: They wanted the introduction of the national wage contract. Ikea had also increased the daily unloading target of 12 to 13 'warehouse rows' to 35.

What happened? A SI Cobas delegate and two Moroccan workers from TNT went to Ikea to convince workers one-by-one to start organising. After the first strike, an agreement was signed introducing the national collective agreement, the dignity of employees and union recognition. But this was never put into practice. A few months later, the cooperative tried to go back to the conditions before the strike: they cut most of the employees' hours so that they were forced to stay at home two days a week and only earned 400 euros a month. When productivity fell, everyone had to work overtime. They tripled the hourly average of pallets and then in October they fired 12 workers and suspended 90 that resisted the new pace of work. Every day, from October 2012 to January 2013, workers and supporters blockaded the warehouse demanding the reinstatement of the suspended workers. Three were taken back. On November 2nd police intervened with extreme violence, leaving 20 people wounded and 30 people getting charged.

Meetings were had throughout this period, but Ikea wouldn't budge. On December 18th in Bologna, students, precarious workers, political collectives and social centres alongside workers from Piacenza and Bologna and delegates from SI Cobras, organised a picket line at the IKEA store just outside the city. Although the police attacked the demonstrators, many IKEA clients expressed solidarity with the workers, acknowledging a common condition of precarity. Then, blockades and picket lines at the IKEA warehouse in Piacenza were repeated during Christmas and until early January, when IKEA accepted to reinstate the 9 outstanding suspended workers.

Outcome: In June 2014, 24 workers were sacked again. Both gates at both warehouses in Piacenza were blockaded but they still weren't reinstated. By March 2015, all but one had taken a redundancy payout of 15,000 Euro. The remaining 125 SI Cobas members inside the warehouse didn't find a way to put enough heat on the bosses during the dispute, while the largely symbolic international 'solidarity campaign' lacked teeth.

National strike of logistics workers

When? March 2013

Where? Milan (the country's economic powerhouse) and Bologna, Padua, Verona, and Treviso (all in Italy's industrial north)

Main issues: The strike was to demand a new national contract for logistics workers to include: the right to have jobs preserved after contract changes; to recognise employee status (in cooperatives workers are often forced to become associates, with consequent expenses and lack of protection); increase in wages and more protection from injuries and illness.

Antonio Forlano, a UPS employee and a shop steward in Milan said: "Bargaining on the new contract is expected to wrap up by April, "but, so far, the least I can say is that workers were not appropriately informed about the bosses' demands." Those demands include increasing the work week from 39 hours to 40 without increasing pay, reducing vacation and paid leaves, making Sunday a normal workday, and, for newly hired people, scrapping the usual bonus. The employers also want to extend from three to four hours the off-time contained within the warehouse workers' shift. ""Now, these workers can be scheduled for a morning shift from, say, 6 a.m. to 10 a.m...After that, they may resume their job at 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. This is already disrupting their lives, but extending the off-time would be even worse, as it would mean the possibility of a 12-hour working day."

What happened? Thousands of workers for logistics and parcel delivery companies such as TNT, UPS, DHL, Polo Logistico, and others went on a 24-hour 'general strike'. In the small town of Anzola, scuffles with the police broke out while workers were picketing a warehouse of the supermarket chain COOP to keep scabs out and prevent goods from leaving. This strike was the first attempt to coordinate on a national level, in a single day of action, the logistics workers' struggles that have erupted over the last few years.

Company name: Granarolo (international milk and dairy-producer who operate in China, Europe and Africa)

When? 2013

Where? Bologna

Sub-contractual arrangements: In a complicated sub-contracting arrangement, the workers there worked through co-operatives that are members of an association of cooperatives called Service Group Bologna (SGB). In turn, these co-operatives work for a logistics firm called CTL that is part of the contractor to Granarolo. Granarolo is a company itself owned by a cooperative, Consorzio Granlatte, which is a member of Legacoop, an association bringing together some 15,000 cooperatives, which protects the interests of the big groups like Granarolo and is also the economic arm of the Democratic Party.

Main issues: Legacoop decided to cut workers' wages by 35 percent – with a wage that was already wrongly calculated. They had earned about 1,000 to 1,200 euros per month, including overtime, which went down to 600-700 euros per month. Legacoop blamed the cut on the global financial crisis even though workers were working overtime!

What happened? Granarolo workers decided to do something with Cogefrin workers (plastic imports and exports), who were in the same cooperative and suffered the same pay cut. The bigger, more established trade union associations told them nothing could be done as the agreement had already been signed and that they should count themselves lucky they even had a job. They approached SI Cobas, who told them to self-organise, and go on strike, which they did in May. The day after the strike, 51 workers who had taken part were all sacked. They went to the labour inspectorate, to the carabinieri (military police), and the police and complained about their dismissal. After the inevitable lack of reaction, they blockaded the warehouse together with workers from other warehouses. At this point the state intervened immediately with violence and intimidation. The next day the workers came back to blockade. And the next day, for one month, two, three months...

The LegaCoop intervened. The warehouse which had sacked the people, the trade union associations, and the head of the police all signed an agreement stating that some workers would be reinstated, and further negotiations would be held to reinstated others if the blockade would end. Workers agreed. During this period, workers sustained themselves on a struggle fund that warehouse workers and supporters were paying into.

But by the end of October nobody had been reinstated. The day the agreement expired workers returned for what was dubbed a "week of passion" [14]. The warehouse was blockaded for a whole day by workers and supporters, including from all the local social centres and squats. There was a serious attack in the night, after 9 hours of blockade but the next day, twice as many people arrived and SI Cobas called for a regional strike. There was another serious police attack, and a national strike was called.

In January 2014, a new strategy of wildcat blockades were deployed after Granarolo tried to adapt its logistics' schedule to cope with the early-morning blockades. More severe police repression ensued. Two workers were hospitalised, five others ended up in police custody, with two of them getting arrested without any evidence. Meanwhile more than a hundred of workers returned to the gates, as working activities were stopped in other companies' warehouses in the province of Bologna. A solidarity demo marched in Milan. Anonymous joined the fray by putting the Granarolo website out of action in the evening and organising a fax bombing to clog up the company and the police forces hot-lines.

1000 people from Granarolo and other warehouses across the region marched in Bologna on February 1st, 2014.

Outcome: The workers at Granarolo won better conditions, but there are no SI Cobas members inside anymore.

Company name: Yoox (online fashion)

When? 2014

Where? Bologna

Main issues: Sexual harassment from the male managers, work target pressures, low wages and the their general treatment (e.g. they weren't allowed to talk to each other).

What happened? A small group of female workers went on strike, were sacked and then re-instated after three days more of strike action.

Outcome: Target pressures were alleviated, they got better wages, the male managers were all replaced with female ones. They still don't have the wage agreed in the national contract though and some women in SI Cobas have been moved to other warehouses further away. A significant increase in SI Cobas membership inside the warehouse also did not materialise after the first strikes. More recently, three women have been suspended (with full pay) but there was a small strike in June 2015 to get them back to work. They have now been given back their jobs as a result of the strike but some others have been suspended for clashes with security.

Company name: SDA (subsidiary of Poste Italiane, parcel distribution)

When? 2015

Where? Bologna

Main issues: Workers wanted to enforce the same national agreement that was gained at TNT, BRT and GLS.

What happened? On the 23rd and 24th of April 2015 SI Cobas and ADL Cobas organised a national strike in the distribution centres of SDA (this is one of SI Cobas' strongholds), in order to enforce the same national agreement which has been gained at TNT, BRT and GLS. SDA only agreed to some of the demands and left a loophole in case the contract with the cooperatives changes.

Outcome: In response to the national strike SDA decided to close the distribution centre in Bologna between 27th of April and 12th of May, affecting around 500 workers. Militants told us that the work was transferred to a distribution centre in Firenze, which is about one-and-a-half hours drive away. A SI Cobas leaflet states that this closure was meant to break the workers' resistance in Bologna, but that it had no impact on the workers – and they add that even the bourgeois law sees this closure as illegitimate. Prior to the closure the management in Bologna had tried various other ways to divide the workers, e.g. by introducing a second cooperative as labour pool.

There have been four meetings at the Prefettura (town council, also location of the police president) between the 4th and 8th of May without a result. On the 7th of May SDA signed a contract with CGIL, CISL and UIL NAZIONALE, a similar contract to the national contract agreed with SI Cobas, though with disadvantages regarding sick pay and other extra payments. So management is able to use the different interests of the various unions to split workers. Another aspect of this division at SDA is that during the national strike called for by SI Cobas, the members of USB, another rank-and-file union, went to work. Former delegates of SI Cobas who had been recalled after they didn't represent workers' interests anymore had joined USB and with them, some other workers.

We are not sure about the following events. As we understood it, SDA basically said that they will make most of the 500 workers at the distribution centre redundant due to mechanisation of parcel sorting. Some militants questioned whether it was actually about mechanisation, or more of a threat against SI Cobas. SDA presented a list of 300 workers who could go back to work, a list which excluded the SI Cobas delegates and active workers. Between 12th and 14th of May various meetings and protests take place, with around 300 SDA workers participating, refusing the management's redundancy list. On 14th of May the workers at SDA Bologna went on strike against a new list, which still excluded some workers – the USB guys went to work. Similar situation on the 15th of May, though this time 200 police turned up at the depot. SI Cobas told the police that if they don't retreat there will be solidarity strikes in all other SDA depots, which worked.

When we arrived in Bologna on the 20th of May the situation was still that around ten SI Cobas delegates were excluded from the list. During the late evening there was a blockade of the SDA depot in the outskirts of Bologna. Around 150 SDA workers took part. In Rome SI Cobas organised a similar blockade, but when police retreated for some time, some 'truck drivers' at the depot attacked the SI Cobas picket with batons and four workers had to go to hospital. It is unclear who these 'drivers' were: some say that the bosses of the drivers' cooperative are fascists, others said that it were 40 CGIL members who attacked the workers.

We asked militants whether they see a chance to expand the dispute to Poste Italiane, but they said that workers there would be too afraid. Meanwhile further restructuring in companies where SI Cobas is active is taking place, e.g. TNT in Italy has been taken over by FEDEX, which might have an impact on negotiated contracts.

FOOTNOTES

[1] <http://www.workerswildwest.wordpress.com>

[2] See <http://www.labournet.tv> for full film online (italian with english subtitles) in September 2015

The trailer can be viewed here: <http://en.labournet.tv/video/6783/ditching-fear-trailer>

[3] <http://en.labournet.tv/video/6676/cycle-struggles-logistics-sector-italy>

[4] <http://effimera.org/the-revolution-in-logistics-di-anna-curcio/>

[5] <http://www.uninomade.org/the-revolution-in-logistics/>

[6] <http://isa-global-dialogue.net/striking-against-cooperatives-migrants-lead-the-way/>

[7] <https://libcom.org/forums/announcements/call-our-friends-distribution-day-after-action-drinks-grnford-13122014>

[8] <http://www.gmb.org.uk/newsroom/m-s-swindon-yes-for-gmb>

<http://www.gmb.org.uk/newsroom/demo-at-m-s-swindon-store>

[9] <http://www.striking-women.org/module/striking-out/gate-gourmet-dispute>

[10] <http://www.striking-women.org/module/striking-out/grunwick-dispute>

[11] <http://www.wildcat-www.de/aktuell/a035sud.htm>

This is a good interview with former activist of the rank-and-file union SUD – unfortunately only in French and German. SUD formed in France during the end of 1990s. The interviewed comrade was a 'full-time' delegate, working in the postal service. He relates

that the internal structure was pretty rank-and-file during the first years, up to the point when the elections for works councils took place at France Post in 1994: SUD became second biggest union in the telecommunication sector, third in post. Delegates started to participate on various boards (health and safety etc.). He also describes the problems concerning the alliance with CGT during 1995 public sector mobilisations.

[12] <http://www.uninomade.org/the-revolution-in-logistics/>

[13] <http://en.labournet.tv/video/6691/ikea-dismisses-24-workers-piacenzaitaly>

[14] <http://en.labournet.tv/video/6686/granarolo-january-20th-25th-week-passion>

Challenge of the Councils of Freelance and Precarious Workers in Rome

CLAP is an acronym standing for Camere del Lavoro Autonomo e Precario, Councils of Freelance and Precarious Workers. The Councils were opened in the autumn of 2013 in three self-managed spaces of Rome and form a common union association. These spaces are: Officine Zero, a regenerated factory in the Casal Bertone area; Esc, a self-managed atelier in the San Lorenzo neighbourhood; and Puzzle, a self-managed student house in Tufello. A fairly new experiment, hence, that still has a long way to go and many tests to pass. But one that is trying to provide a daring answer to the most relevant issue of our time: the (almost total) insignificance of existing trade unions when it comes to protecting precarious, casual, freelance, migrant workers. But before going into the details of this experience, allow me to discuss the background context and challenges within which it emerged. A look at the context (section 1), then one at what has been done so far (section 2), to conclude with a comment on the political perspective (section 3) that CLAP, among others and together with others, is helping to open up.

1. The two transformations

Since the beginning, CLAP set its challenge along two main trajectories: transforming self-managed spaces – social centres – in a new union device; and promoting a return of the labour movement to its trades council form.

Two trajectories converging in an essential urgency: putting an end to the dichotomy between mutualistic practices and bargaining, (horizontal) solidarity and (vertical) conflict.

For almost three decades now, social centres and self-managed spaces have innervated the urban scene in Italy with forms of alternative social aggregation, education and training, protection of the most fragile citizens (especially migrants), despite their total lack of influence on labour and workers struggles. And in the course of such decades – those of the neoliberal counter-revolution – trade union organisations, with a few noble exceptions (FIOM, the metalworkers federation, being one of them, together with grassroots unions) gave up the struggle and paved the way to precarisation and to the impoverishment of an entire generation that came with it. With the end of the No Global movement and the outbreak, from 2008 onwards, of the Great Depression, on the hand social centres came at a standstill, incapable of regenerating themselves and attracting new young life forms, while on the other the labour movement proved to be completely powerless in face of an accelerated neoliberalism. This made the harsh truth ever clearer: there is no elective community that can survive the working poor and mass unemployment wave; and there is no trade union that keep existing without going back to the struggle and, with that, to the experimentation and expansion of new mutualistic practices – the only alternative being that corruption and subordination to the dictates of company management.

Of course, these are subjective trajectories, requiring boldness, commitment, tenacity. They are imposed by the historic change we are immersed in. The Bismarkian and ordoliberal management of the European crisis is attacking wages with great violence, both directly and indirectly by attacking the welfare state (education, health care, pensions). If underemployment used to be exception, it is now the norm – in southern Europe in particular. In Italy, the Workers Bill of Rights (Statuto dei lavoratori), national collective bargaining and the use of fixed-term contracts have all been deregulated: a new scenario, where employment is replaced by employability and under-paid work leaves quickly the way to free, unpaid work (see the EXPO model for example). After all, anything would do, as long as it's a job.

To contrast such violence all weapons seem ineffective: working people have been stripped of their rights and appear weak, isolated, almost always immersed in a wild competition with poorer workers (migrants in particular). Rebuilding solidarity, where a hopeless and angry sense of solitude reigns, is the first, major battle to win. As much as opening up spaces where fragmentation can be recomposed, the tragedy of daily life can be shared, and the little spare time one has left can be used to pursue common objectives. And in doing so, find a way for the many disputes, for the many 'NOs' that are out there, not to remain totally fragile and inoffensive. Keeping together labour struggles and mutualism means going back to the origins, back to the trades councils, but doing so using new weapons: those of digital

communication, knowledge-sharing, of the viral circulation of claims and struggles, of the transnational connection of organising efforts.

2. What is CLAP?

Back to the origins, hence, but in the name of innovation: with many limits, typical of any young experience, this is the challenge that the Councils of Freelance and Precarious Workers have set for themselves. But let us go further into the details.

CLAP is trying to connect three functions that, within the crisis of traditional trade unions, tend to be disconnected: providing services, organising workers, promoting mutualism. It does so in the first place by providing labour and legal counselling in both collective and individual labour disputes, and tax assistance to freelancers and self-employed workers, as much as to associations and cooperatives. These are essential tools in order to reach out to, investigate and protect workers who are often isolated, scared, unorganised. Moreover, they represent precious opportunities to start a first, albeit insufficient, process of union alphabetisation. Secondly, when the labour dispute in question allows it, real and proper organising efforts are put into motion. Of course, both the technical class composition and the barbarian nature of today's labour market mean that, in most cases, such labour disputes involve a small number of workers; in fact, on many occasions, they are individual disputes. Yet, CLAP's organising support is essential: be it a matter of staging a picket, planning a communication campaign, conquering an institutional negotiation (when institutions of proximity are involved).

Thirdly, providing forms of mutualism, meaning education and training opportunities on tax accounting topics and on the labour law (or what is left of it after the recent labour reform, the 'Jobs Act'), but also time banking opportunities and mutual support at struggle level. Indeed, mutual support is the only way to respond to the tragic weakness that fragmentation implies.

So, through its activities, CLAP tries to connect different typologies of workers who are often hostile to one other. The main division runs, unquestionably, along the line of colour. With the crisis, and with mass unemployment in particular, the migrant workforce has become a "threat": it can be, and it is, constantly blackmailed; it costs less; it is used to impose a generalised reduction of wage and protection levels, etc. The second source of division regards self-perception: despite being poor, with a turnover not exceeding 12-15 thousand euros per year, freelancers tend to perceive themselves as something completely different from MacDonald's precarious workers. They feel they belong to the skilled workforce, despite being poorly paid for their work and being subject to an extremely high tax pressure; but they feel that, with a bit of luck, they could make it and climb the ladder... Too bad that luck has long abandoned Italy, and social mobility is a nothing but a memory of the past. Skilled workers who cannot count on their daddy's help have only two options: either exodus – with 100,000 young people a year fleeing the country – or under-paid work. And the working poor disaster is increasingly investing not only generic freelancers but also self-employed professionals listed in specific professional registers, from lawyers to journalists, from paraprofessional chemists to engineers. This is why the urgency of the coalition, and the need to leave parochial interests aside, is felt with increasing awareness.

Since it was activated, less than a year ago, CLAP has supported about thirty small and medium labour disputes, involving: self-employed health care workers; social workers; precarious workers from the services and retail chains sectors; workers of the logistics sector; migrant workers. The most frequent, tragic problem is people not being paid for their work. Labour disputes do not always bring about a greater political awareness, but we are managing to create new bonds, a small web of resistances where isolation and loneliness used to be the rule.

3. The urgency of the Coalition

Why creating a small union association, instead of contributing with our new young forces to already existing labour organisations? There are at least two answers to the question. The first: existing trade unions, even the most militant ones, keep focusing on a specific type of worker, that of the employee. Of course, with the Jobs Act [i.e. the recent labour reform in Italy] things are turning ugly, very ugly, also for employees having a permanent work contract. But some differences still persist, at least in terms of the way workers perceive themselves and, consequently, of organising practices. The second reason is that speaking of work, nowadays, means dealing with an irreducible plurality of forms of exploitation, ethical profiles, languages and relations. And such plurality must also be reflected at the level of union and organising devices. On top of all this, we also believe that the major trade union confederations in Italy are by now impossible to reform, their neoliberal conversion having – in many cases – reached a point of no return.

And if we have two reasons motivating us, we also have two challenges to face: on the hand, fully politicising the economic conflict; on the other, building a Social Coalition. Let me clarify this point.

The main objective of neoliberal governance, beyond that of fully imposing the competition principle as the holy law to be enforced on Earth without complaining, is to de-politicise the economy. What does this mean? It means to completely empty out and violently marginalise the conflict between capital and labour. Corporate interest is the only thing that should count, us all being – according to the dominant rhetoric – the makers of our own success, i.e. our own human capital. Even when we cannot make our ends meet: actually, when that's the case, we are the ones to blame, for having lived beyond our possibilities. Conquering back the “two” dimension, the separation, the vertical conflict, means re-politicising work and workers' struggles. Yet, the kind of politicisation we need is also one capable, for once and for all, to get rid of the division between the Political and the Social. Organising and defending unorganised labour must increasingly coincide with the development of political subjectivity: since years now, the new technical class composition (mass education, access to IT technologies, etc.) has been demanding such a leap!

In this sense, the Social Coalition is a way to think of the labour movement to come. The tradition wants labour organisations to exist to protect workers; when these organisations wish to go political, they are expected to form alliances with the “civil society”. Meaning: the labour movement at the centre, surrounded by all its allies, with everyone holding on tight to its identity. On the contrary, the idea of the Coalition speaks of a pluralism of subjects and organising practices which rejects any *reductio ad unum*. To borrow the philosopher's words, the multiple becomes the noun. Trade unions defending employees continue to exist, but their action is accompanied by that of many small and big union devices that help protecting precarious workers, freelancers and self-employed professionals, students, migrant workers. The Strike Meeting and the Social Strike of November 14, 2014 – two mobilisations that CLAP whole-heartedly participated to – represent an attempt to start experimenting such a Social Coalition. Nothing more than a first attempt, of course, but also the unexpected good surprise we should continue to pursue. An injury to one is an injury to all.

Transformations of the Unions and movements of the strike in Germany

Precarious disconnections

We publish an interview concerning the right to strike in Germany. We talked with Heiner Köhnen, member of TIE, a global network made of workers, trade-unionists and activists who since decades produce initiatives and organization across the borders. The so-called *Tarifeinheitengesetz* law was approved last May by the German Parliament; it imposes that only the most representative trade union is able to take part to the bargaining related the labour contract (i.e. the dream of our Renzi comes true) and, thus, to strike, since the strike can be legally declared only in conjunction with the renewal of the contract. The law enjoys the support of an entire social block that, beyond the *Große Koalition*, includes DGB, the trade unions confederation, as well as *Arbeitsgeberverband*, the association of the entrepreneurs. This is a front which coalesced without too much difficulty against the wave of strikes, mostly organized by minor trade unions, that run over the «German locomotive» in the last months.

The message is clear: the strike must be a poorly sharpened weapon and it is necessary to impede that workers and small trade unions get the chance to «held the society hostage», no matter why. As Heiner maintains, this law is telling about the will to solve in a legal way the political insufficiency of the big trade unions in front of today's transformations of production, from the point of view of both the precarization of labour relationships, and of the transnational dimension of production. The motto «one company, one collective agreement», which is used to back the law, recalls an old slogan against trade union fragmentation, a slogan that, when proclaimed today, reveals nothing but a guilty anachronism. There is no more company unity to refer to. Company unity is therefore a fantasy that overshadows the real factory organization and the diffused precarity which fragmented that unity. In order not to contribute to this removal and to imagine the strike neither as an empty threat nor as an instrument of technical management of the disputes, it is necessary to start a discussion which is able to face the transformations of production and the problems that it poses on the side of organization. It is necessary to take into account some questions like: what does it mean today to be an industry worker? Why are male and female workers less and less organizing themselves inside the trade unions? How to accumulate the power that is necessary not to be «held hostage» by a society which demands more and more and gives less and less?

These questions crossed the experiment of social strike in Italy on the 14th of November, and cross the attempts to involve, through the strikes, that society which purports to be untouched by the needs of the workers. These questions have been made clear during the strikes in the kindergartens in Frankfurt and dwell in the transnational communication between the German Amazon warehouses on strike and the new warehouses in Poland which have been recently

built in order to soften the consequences of the blockades of the distribution. These questions will be central in the meeting towards a transnational social strike, which will take place in Poznan from the 2nd to the 4th of October 2015.

Many see the «Tarifeinheitgesetz», the German law concerning the unitary collective bargaining, as a direct attack to the right to strike. Can you explain why?

The law says that a union that has not the majority in an enterprise is legally not allowed neither to strike nor to bargain. It means that, unless you have the majority, it is very hard to form a union, because if you can't strike, you can't make collective bargaining, then what's the union for? The right to strike, as well as the freedom of association and organization will be wiped out by this law. Furthermore, the law that will be voted is part of a wider project to be enforced in the future. This project includes the so-called Daseinsfürsorge, that is the obligation of providing a part of the work in the places where a strike takes place, like it is now for hospitals and transportations; the obligation of announcing the strike four days before; and the presence of an enforced mediator that mediates the bargaining process in order to arrive to an agreement. So it is more complicated than a technical issue, even though it is often discussed just as a technical issue: the whole threat and strength of the strike is endangered.

The law has the support both of the Arbeitgeberverband and of the DGB. What is the position of the major trade union on this law?

It is obvious that the Arbeitgeberverband wants peace for assuring competitiveness. For example in the auto industry the bargaining of collective agreement is carried on with the IG Metal and they don't like that new small unions suddenly raise problems. The strong unions part of the DGB are supporting the law, for various reasons. First, this is part of the ever existing split between union members that are for co-management and those who are for building power from below. Now the major unions, like the IG Metal, are working to keep the model of co-management. If you will be the only union to make the bargaining then of you are not forced to organize those that are not yet involved, you just have to seat at the bargaining table and you go straight to the solution. Second, for instance in the case of the IG Metal, they say that they represent the auto industry, which means the whole supply chain, including logistics. This claim puts it in conflict with the Ver.di, that claims to represent the logistic sector. So, instead of starting a joint political process of debate and organizing it is like wanting to change a political issue into administrative praxis, through a law, in order to exclude other possible 'competitors'.

The proposal of the law came after a wave of strikes in particular in the sector of transportations, but also in Amazon warehouses throughout Germany. Do you see this as a reaction to that?

This is a good moment because there is a certain mainstream that says that the strike for example in the transportation are bad because a bunch of guys takes the whole society as a hostage. It is a good moment also because there is a strong political unity, so it is certain that this law will pass. Nonetheless, there is a wider background that has to be kept in mind. The motto «ein Betrieb, ein Vertrag» [one company, one collective agreement] was introduced after the second world war in the context of the recomposition of the left confronting its defeat in front of fascism. This led also to the founding of Einheitsgewerkschaften (unity unions), to reinforce the unity of the working class. One must say that it was never truly «unity», first because the Christian-democrats and the social-democrats always excluded communists and anarchists. Second, in practice it excluded the possibility of raising some issues such as conflicts around the rationalization of production. Furthermore, it excluded the feminist stance towards women work, part-time work etc. Even though it excluded important contradictions and problems, it had at least a real ground: one can say that a union engaged in the bargaining for a whole industry was actually bargaining for the whole industry. In the last 30 years this state of being was completely challenged by capital itself. First of all, since the '80s and even more after the wall fell, many companies left the employers federation that is the counterpart of the bargaining. They did so in order not to be part to the collective agreements. In the Eastern state the majority of the companies did never enter the federation. Second, the logic «ein Betrieb, ein Vertrag» is challenged by the major process of deregulation, privatization, precarization, outsourcing, temporary labor and the like. The presumptuous «unity» is all the more divided now. Even in industries like Daimler, where the IG Metal has a long term and strong hold, in various factories more than half of the workers are no more Daimler workers. They are whatever else, outsourced, contract, all kind of workers. The fantasy of «ein Betrieb, ein Vertrag» did make sense back then, to be strong, and would make sense today, if you can build unity on a political term, but has been overcome by capital itself and the transformations reflect the defeats of the working class. What is now a metal worker? This problem does not have only an objective side, but also of course a subjective one. Even in the centers of Fordist production it is very different now what it means to be a worker.

So you are saying that the principle of «ein Betrieb, ein Vertrag» does not come to term with the current transformation of the working relations. What are the consequences on the organization of work struggles and strike of this wider background?

There are many problems coming out from this. The conflicts between the unions arise now because the major unions do not cover the whole of an industry and its workers. Many struggles now are not part of the collective agreements. The traditional unions do not succeed now in getting really the whole industry. Subjectively, this is beyond this specific law, it is different when we consider the deep precarization of labour. For precarious workers don't see the union anymore, or at least these big unions, as their own. For them, these unions are not able to articulate their interests. I find this very serious, because the union is not only a bargaining device, but also a place where your experience is valued or devalued. It is a form of public, in which you build your political consciousness, where your demands and needs are articulated, in which they become important or not (in the case there is no democratic public). In these traditional unions there seems to be no or little space for precarious workers to build a movement. It is not only that big unions do not succeed in making the collective agreement for them, but also subjectively they don't feel them as their organization. And this is a fact, a reality, independently of the Tarifeinheitsgesetz now being discussed. So the problem has two aspects. On the one hand it is a matter of competition between unions, that some of them try to solve administratively. On the other, it needs to be placed in the context of the crisis, independently from the specific law and from Germany itself, which demands new ideas on how to organize, how to search for a unity. And this is not very much discussed.

Another element of this wider framework is the new or renewed activism of smaller basis unions.

Yes, the rise of smaller unions is to be placed in this context. For example the doctor's union, the Marburger Bund, if you did ask me 20 years ago: «is that a union?». I would have answered: «No, it is a right wing association». In the end they emerged and they act in a conflict that the unions do not succeed anymore to cover. This is true also for the train drivers, for the pilots, and it is even true for the anarchist union (FAU). They have also existed for many years, but they were very small, suddenly their members are growing in some workplaces. These are symbols of major changes. The political problem is that the bigger unions are mostly not willing to face these contradictions through a political discussion, asking themselves: what is our problem? What is the changing situation? What do we have to do differently? There was a meeting two months ago of IG Metal, Chemical Union, the BAU, EVG, in the frame of the DGB but excluding Ver.di, that is part of the DGB. The meeting was meant to decide which union «owns» which sector. The intention is clearly to try to solve the changing reality and the erosion of the role of unions through administrative measures and not through a political discussion. It shows that these unions are not willing to understand the problem they face, that is why the workers don't see them as their organizations.

How was organized the opposition to this law?

Part of the basis unions and part of the social movements have started a collaboration and we had a nation-wide demonstration the last month. Independently from how many people took the streets, it was funny because I never had such alliances. Groups with different perspectives, such as the GDL, the train union, parts of Ver.di, the FAU, and some left groups, came together. Something is happening at many levels and it is this new kind of alliance that might be interesting for the future.

From what you say it is clear that the right to strike has two sides, one is «administrative», can be part of a law that says yes or no, the other comprises the power necessary to strike and points to a wider political problem that is not reducible to the intra-union conflict.

Yes, that comes for me to the social strike discussion. It is interesting for me to link these discussions. Because, on the one hand, if you come from the old unions, you have to link it now with social questions. For example, at the Kita, they wanted to involve the parents, the clients, so that they can get stronger. But it is not just a technical issue, how are you technically able to strike. The problem is also how can we mobilize people around the problem raised by the strike as a practice. For doing that we have to ask ourselves a lot of questions: how do we organize? How do we link social and work questions?

Transnational Europe. Precarity and workers' organization in Poland

Precarious disconnections

We publish an interview with Magda from Inicjatywa Pracownicza (Workers' Initiative), a Polish trade union which took part in the demonstration My Prekariat on the 23rd of May. Magda tells us also about the situation in Amazon warehouses in Poland, where since a few months the workers started to organise and discuss among themselves and together with their German colleagues. The interview shows a context where the building of processes of social struggle and the issue of strike clash with an extreme precarization of labour, even on the legislative level. It also shows a picture of Europe as a space where the wage regime and precarity are by now firmly played across the borders and exploited by the employers. These issues shall remain at the core of the discussion opened around the perspective of a transnational strike.

Can you tell us something about My Prekariat?

There was a demonstration, last Saturday [23rd May], in Warsaw, of My Prekariat. Basically the demonstration was organised to develop a discussion about the precarisation of working conditions in Poland. According to Central Statistical Office right now 13% of Polish workers work on civil law contract, 8% is self-employed. It means that they are not recognised as workers. Another thing is that 27% employees work on fixed term contracts. That numbers grow. Basically the idea is to network these workers together.

Can you please tell us something about the concrete demands and about how the protest went?

Few hundreds of people came which is not bad in Polish condition. There were artists, freelancers, workers of the NGO sector, nurses, students, people employed on universities, workers of kindergartens, construction workers, teachers, Amazon workers etc. So, the people who took part in the demonstration basically wanted to protest against this idea of making the working conditions very elastic. The main demand were protection of stability of employment, freedom of associating in the trade unions and the right to benefit from social security system. Demonstration received wide coverage in the media and got very positive comments. There were lot of discussions about it in press, radios and Tv.

Can you please tell us something about the novelty of this idea of «My Prekariat»?

In Poland first temporary job agencies were opened in 2004. We all know that Capital have been using temporary employment since its beginning. However nowadays we have to learn again how we can effectively organise ourselves and break new divisions between us like this between temp and permanent employees. As I said the aim of «My Prekariat» is to bring these who work in super precarious conditions together and this is something quite new.

Few years ago there was a campaign against «junk contracts». Then, the media started to see and talk about this problem. By junk contracts we understand civil law contracts, self-employment and temporary, fixed-term contracts. Then in 2012 artists organised one day strike. One of the main slogan was «I am an artist. This does not mean I will work for free». They protested mainly against low paid or unpaid work and flexible forms of employment that disqualifies workers from basic rights like right to security system (unemployment benefits, pensions, social assistance benefits). After that around 150 of art workers and freelancers joined Workers Initiative to continue their fight. We can see «My Prekariat» as a kind of continuity.

The problem is that although we all agree that working conditions have been flexibilized, we are still discussing the use of the word «prekariat». Some artists and intellectuals talk about themselves as a kind of different class – «Prekariat». Construction workers, nurses, teachers: the people who took part in the demonstration, they don't see each other as a different group; but as «normal» workers: proletariat. So I had a few discussions with them about the fact that this demonstration is not only about creating this prekariat identity, but also and mainly about working conditions. It was problematic for us because it reproduced division, usually created by employers in workplaces, in our Union and we had to put some effort to break these divisions.

Another important idea is to popularise the idea of self-organising and unionisation, but basically of self-organising among people who work in precarious condition. This is actually very important in this perspective and also that's why we decided to support it.

One of the groups who took part in this demonstration is a group of workers employed in Amazon warehouse. Amazon was opened in Poland in the end of 2014, in the beginning in Poznan, and then two other warehouses in Wroclaw, that is 180 km from Poznan. In the beginning the working conditions there were not so bad. Also people from other warehouses, like H&M, left their work in the H&M warehouses, and brought themselves in Amazon warehouses. A local media wrote a lot of texts about Amazon, saying « it's a labour camp » etc.. Workers were not very happy about it and said that it was not really a labour camp, for them the work in Amazon was better than in other places. But, shortly after that, Amazon started to increase targets and workers started to have problems with pays which were calculated in wrong way. On the other hand, there were complicated regulations about bonuses, so they were usually unsatisfied with their wage.

But the situation changed. Two weeks before the most intensive peak time, they fired one hundred agency workers. Amazon said that they dismissed these people because they were not fast enough, but the people who were sacked were really pissed off because the way of accounting their productivity is not transparent. For example, they don't care that there is no products to pick or pack or your computer is broken. It showed to all workers that Amazon it's not such a good place, as they thought in the beginning and work is heavy.

Targets are one of the most important issues because they started to increase them very quickly, currently workers can't reach these standards because they are too high. They organised petition against such high targets. In Poland you can be sacked because of targets, they don't do it in Germany. Amazon workers from Poland are aware of it because they exchange information about working conditions with German workers. Till now they met 3 times: in Frankfurt, Bad Hersfeld and Poland. People from Amazon in Poland earn four times less than in Germany. The working conditions are maybe even worse, because of targets that getting higher and higher.

Which trade unions were involved in the organisation of the Amazon workers?

The first union which was established in Amazon was our trade union, Workers' Initiative. It was started by leaders who were trained abroad. They saw unions working in Amazon warehouses in England and decided to establish a union themselves. They also didn't get stocks like leaders in England what pissed them off. Then they started to involve more people, also agency workers. Right now there are 180 workers in the union, it is just the 10% of 1700 people working in Poznan. In Polish condition, it is quite a lot.

Are the other workers involved in other trade unions?

In Wroclaw 80 people is unionised in Solidarity (Solidarnosc), a mainstream union. There was a meeting in Wroclaw between Solidarity and Workers' Initiative, so we don't have any open conflict right now, but we don't like the way in which Solidarity works as a union. Sometimes for them it is more important to take care of law regulations and have a good relation with employers, than to really fight for workers rights. We don't agree with such way of organising.

What is the average wage inside Amazon in Poland?

All the people who are in the shop-floor get 10 zloty without taxes – 2,5 euro per hour, without taxes. We have to know that if you pay the rent, it is much cheaper than in Italy or in other countries, but some prices in Poland are very similar. So it causes situation where you work, but you are still very poor. That's why people from Amazon also started to demand higher wages. Right now they have this demand, but there are discussions among Polish and German workers on how they can get wage rises. Workers are still in the process of organising themselves and of discussing it with German people.

Are you planning a strike? Have they ever gone on strike?

Amazon workers are going to maintain pay rise demand, they don't exclude the option of labour dispute. But in Poland it is not easy to organise legal strike action because of the law regulations. Recently there is around 15-20 strikes a year in our country. One of the reason of it is the complicated and very bad law on strike. On my personal opinion, in Amazon they should organise something different, like a slow-down action and don't give a shit about these formal things. Generally atmosphere in the warehouses is quite hot, people want to do something. In one week 400 people signed this petition against too high targets and low wages. They [the bosses] were a bit scared about that. But if you want to organise a strike, you really have to be prepared for it, you have to know the workers, your colleagues, you have

to know when you have to hit, when to organise the actions... They need some time to learn how they can organise themselves in Poznan.

The workers from Amazon in Germany went to Frankfurt on the 18th of March, during the protest against the ECB, and on the 19th March at the assembly towards transnational strike. They start to be involved in the process. What about the Polish Amazon workers? Do you see them in the future participating in the project of transnational strike?

I think so. But I also think that the priority at the moment should be to build strong relations and solidarity between workers, learn what they can do in their workplace and how their work is organised, how are the relations between workers, between shifts. Then they will be more prepared to organise something. Of course they know, and we all know that it is important to link our struggles.

The Amazon warehouses in Poland were established also because there were strikes in German Amazon warehouses. We got some information – but we are not sure whether it's true or not – that they are planning to move the 70% of distribution from German warehouses to Polish ones. Even if the percentage is lower, it's obvious that they want to use Polish workers as a counterbalance to German workers and against their protest. Of course we know that if we don't link our struggles then we will be in a situation where the capital will use Polish workers as kind of strike-breakers. We don't want this situation. The only possible way to do something with it is to break the divisions between workers, and to build something together. First, though, we have to break the divisions in our workplaces and build strength in our workplaces. But, as I said, we also think about international connections and building international links and strength on the international level.

Towards a social and transnational strike? Working meeting in Frankfurt, 18 March 2015

Notices and minutes from the plenaries and the four workshops

Notices of the Opening plenary

After a welcome with reference to the impressive mobilisation at the day before we started with a brief round of presentations to learn about the composition of the meeting. Some efforts had been done successfully in advance to invite active workers and labour activists from various countries, who did not participate in the (Blockupy- connected) strike workshops so far and to extend the spectrum of labour struggle experiences.

More than 100 persons joined the meeting in Frankfurt and present were:

workers from Amazon Bad Hersfeld and Poznan; ADL Cobas and FIOM, Italy; SUD Solidaire, France (union active in Rail, Health, Call-Centers); Workers Initiative Poland and SAC Union Sweden (who know each other through anarchist union meetings); verdi and TIE Germany; And more activists from networks and organizations dealing with the issues of precarity, social centers, solidarity networks, from the UK, Ireland, Sweden, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Germany.

After a reference to the printed reader with a kind of chronology of Blockupy connected activities on precarity and exploitation during last years an input was given by a friend from precarious disconnections from Bologna (in full version documented in the reader). Afterwards, a first exchange started to comment this input, to define expectations on the meeting or to describe the biggest problems and challenges. At the center of the discussion was the idea that the „politicization“ of labour struggles is not just a „technical“ problem but, on the contrary, it has to be faced with the ambition of producing transnational organization in order to hit the global chains of exploitation and of thinking at common demands able to hit also the institutions that enforce them.

A few excerpts from the discussion:

- The interest and need to develop a European struggle and a better coordination on the transnational level, but also to deal with still very different national/regional conditions;

- The increasing limits of traditional forms of labour struggles and the need to find new strategies of organization;

- The ambivalent relationship to bigger (nation orientated) unions, but still one tool of organisation and often a legal precondition for strikes;

- The relationship and connection of labour struggles to struggles for commons and rights;

- The difficulty of unions to go beyond single and localized struggles and the necessity of politicizing labor struggles;

The differences among workers in terms of labor-contract, legal status and origin, including the potential strength of multiplicity but also of concurrences, racism and internal conflicts

- The gap between the quick process of transnationalisation of capital and the slow one of building transnational networks of workers;

- The criticism, that Blockupy started to act on the textile sector, but hopping too quick to electronics/apple in its next mobilisation.

After this first common round of discussion we presented the four workshops in order to separate ourselves in four rooms for the next slot:

I. Acting and striking along and against the global exploitation chain

II. From the workplace into society and vice versa

III. Migrant labour, migrant strike

IV. Common demands as organizational tools. Discussing European Minimum Wage, Welfare and income and EU minimum visa

It was emphasized again, that these four workshops reflect some of our key questions in earlier debates and that we are interested - as the main aim of this working meeting - to start the process of deepening. And of course with this selection other questions are not forgotten for the further debates: from the general perception of strikes to the relationship to unions and to concrete forms to organize the unorganizable.

Notices from the Final plenary

We heard first some brief reports from the four workshops (see the respective minutes above). Afterwards we confirmed, that the mailinglist „transnational strike“ will remain our main tool of communication and that we need more commitment in this communication. Quickly proposed was also the idea of a common website as additional tool of exchange: it could serve on one hand as a mapping/synopsis of the various labour conditions and rules to understand the differences in the various regions/countries. And on the other hand to create a mapping and overview of the various actors, practices and (successful and failing) experiences.

The relationship between our network „towards a social transnational strike“ and Blockupy was another topic in the final round. Many groups, who are part of the transnational Blockupy alliance, are interested - as the Blockupy perspective is under discussion now - to establish the „strike“ as one main axis of daily struggles after the mobilisation against the opening of the ECB. It has to be decided in further Blockupy conferences and in any way the networking process on strike should go on.

As appointed in earlier workshops and in the meeting in Rome in February an extra meeting (from Friday to Sunday with more space for exchange and discussion) is needed and in the final round in Frankfurt we agreed, that it should happen in a weekend of September 2015. As some groups hope for and like to propose an europeanwide day of strikes and actions in November 2015 the meeting in September might be too late. Thus we want to use the transnational blockupy meeting (expected for June) for another working group on transnational strike and as opportunity to approve a possible first common call for actions, which can be deepened in the three days meeting in September.

In order to follow the various tasks of the Frankfurt meeting we decided to build a coordination group, which should be composed by singular delegates of the various networks and labour struggle realities.

Translation from Italian by Eva Gilmore

