

**Struggle in
a Pandemic:
A Collection of
Contributions
on the
COVID-19
Crisis**

**Workers
Inquiry
Network**

WORKERS INQUIRY NETWORK

Struggle in a Pandemic

A Collection of Contributions on the COVID-19 Crisis

First published by Workers Inquiry Network 2020

Copyright © 2020 by Workers Inquiry Network

*Released under the Creative Commons license:
Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike
(CC BY-NC-SA)*

First edition

*This book was professionally typeset on Reedsy.
Find out more at reedsy.com*

Contents

Workers Inquiry Network: An introduction	1
AnkerMag: A snapshot from Belgium	5
Plateforme d'enquêtes militantes: Between the offensive of...	14
ACTA: Nous sommes en guerre! The hardening of the class...	23
Into the Black Box and Officina Primo Maggio: Strikes and...	33
Notes from Below: The tensions of a pandemic in the UK	43
Robert Ovetz: The Working Class Pandemic in the US	53
Invisíveis Goiânia: The Call of Death Saga in Brazil	68
Sergio Bologna: The 'Long Autumn': workers' struggles in the...	86
<i>Epilogue</i>	127

Workers Inquiry Network: An introduction

This ebook is a collective effort of a network of workers' inquiry groups. Over the past year, we have been in discussions about the changing composition of the class in different national contexts and considering how workers' inquiry can be developed as a tool of struggle.

Before the COVID-19 crisis we had been planning a collective publication, drawing together our different inquiries. However, like many plans, this has been swept away in the wake of COVID-19. Instead, we have put our collective writing towards making sense of this crisis - in Belgium, and France, Italy, the UK, and the US. What follows is a collection of accounts about the impact of COVID-19 on workers and their struggles in response. We want to start by outlining some of the wider tendencies and trends that seem to emerge from the national snapshots that follow.

One thing is clear: we are never going back to normal. Things will not go back to how they were before the crisis. At the time of writing, there are almost 2.5 million cases across 190 different countries. Over 160,000 people have died so far. Although over a

hundred years ago, the 1918 flu pandemic provides an important point of comparison for making sense of this. It is estimated that a third of the world population contracted the virus, with tens of millions of deaths. The pandemic began at the end of the First World War. It arrived at a moment of increased radicalisation of the working class in different national contexts, as well as being punctuated by a wave of wildcat and general strikes in the US, the worker council movement in Europe, and the Mexican and Russian Revolutions. The response to the pandemic then was also a response to the balance of class forces in both the war and post-war period. The fear of radicalised - and indeed only recently demobilised - workers led to the expansion of social services and protections. This began laying the basis for the (now decaying) welfare state, brought in during and after the Second World War.

The situation today is very, very different. We are at the low tide of the workers movement in general, despite some brief splashes of radicalism in particular sectors. There is no will to introduce a better social contract coming from above, with little ability to enforce this from below at present. The UK, Mexico, Japan's, and Sweden's initial "herd immunity" strategy is a clear example of this callousness, hoping that by allowing the virus spread would somehow allow the economy to continue.

The pandemic is providing a laboratory for capital: testing new ways of managing workers and pushing the limits of exploitation. The possible settlements that could follow from the pandemic are therefore currently in a testing phase. The results will be decided through a class struggle that is already taking place in the still open workplaces and the newly converted

home working spaces. It will also be a class struggle in our changed communities, channelled through workers organisations, shaped by the interventions of the state, and fought between workers and capital. Any suggestion to suspend the struggle until after the lockdown by collaborating with the bosses misses that the fight is already underway. The task now is to understand what is happening, what could happen, and what we can do to circulate and expand it.

In the first chapter, Ankermag discusses a snapshot from Belgium. The second and third chapters cover France, introduced by Plateforme d'enquêtes militantes and then Acta. The fourth chapter focuses on Italy, jointly written by Into the Black Box and Officina Primo Maggio. Notes from Below discusses the UK in the fifth chapter. The sixth chapter, by Robert Ovetz, introduces the US context. The seventh chapter, by Invisíveis Goiânia, discusses Brazil. In the final chapter, as a way to connect the past, our present and the times ahead, we include a new english translation of Sergio Bologna's "The 'long autumn': workers' struggles in the 1970s."

This ebook is intended as one contribution to the debate about what comes next. While this may feel like a drop in the ocean at present, the development of networks and sharing of experiences has become increasingly important as isolation and social distancing continues. Our network is intended as a starting point, but much more is needed. On one hand, we think it is necessary to increase the effort to circulating the class struggle. On the other hand, from this ebook, we propose the following five demands, developed by Ankermag:

1. A “quarantine” salary or income
2. Suspension of rents, mortgages and bills
3. Requisitioning of private equipment and infrastructure needed to respond to the emergency, particularly in the health sector.
4. Stop of all non-essential production activities
5. Amnesty for detainees and immediate regularization of undocumented migrants

We invite responses and further contributions to the book. Our network is still in formation and we welcome other groups that are interested in participating in exchanges on workers’ inquiry and struggle. If you want to start a group, we are happy to provide support and advice too. We hope that you will contact the authors to share your thoughts, tell us about your struggles, and contribute to our network.

AnkerMag: A snapshot from Belgium

As COVID-19 was spreading rapidly across the globe, the Belgian government officially initiated a lockdown on March 18th. The reaction of the Belgian Government has been slow, inconsistent and ambiguous. This is despite the death toll continuing to rise by hundreds each day in Italy and the virus unquestionably spreading all over Europe. Collecting reliable and directly comparable data while the epidemic is ongoing continues to be difficult at the time of writing. According to the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center, Belgium has the highest COVID-19 death rate in the world proportional to its population. Although many factors are at play in these figures, the timing of the lockdown has certainly contributed.

The delay in the adoption of preventive measures to slow the spread of the virus was mainly the result of negotiations between the government and the Federation of Belgian Entrepreneurs (FEB). These negotiations centered on which activities ought to be considered essential and which could be closed. It is also worth mentioning that such bargaining followed negotiations over the formation of a new government in the notoriously litigious and complex Belgian federalist governance system.

In the discussions with the different factions and parties both the government and the FEB shared the objective of keeping as much production operating as possible. Hence, the priority of the government was clearly to secure the continuity of the accumulation process over the need to respond to the health, sanitary, and socio-economic crisis triggered by the pandemic.

This approach of consulting with the business sector has been largely favored by national governments worldwide. In addition, the Belgian government has adopted a rhetoric of “national unity” aimed at generating consensus around its emergency measures. Yet, the overall approach adopted to manage the COVID-19 crisis has not generated anything close to a consensus. In the following sections we will explore how these policies have not remained uncontested from a subaltern point of view.

The crisis from below

It is nearly impossible to present a detailed overview of the present crisis that encompasses the totality of the effects and reactions from a subaltern point of view. This is due to multiple and interdependent factors: the complexity of class composition, the rapid evolution of processes, and the infinite implications, features, and interconnections of the present phase. The crisis affects all class segmentations, however it does so at different degrees of intensity and in different ways. Because of the articulation of these effects, it is only possible to present brief snapshots of some specific class segments and the most visible forms of activation, while trying to underline some

common features. We observed an interesting and wide range of different strategies and practices of activation and resistance, both individual and collective.

From absenteeism to strike: the supermarket retail workers in Brussels

From the beginning of the crisis securing the retail distribution of food and daily use products has been a top priority. Therefore, the whole circulation process of goods, along the logistics chain up to the supermarkets and grocery shops has been deemed strategically vital and its workers immediately defined as “essential.” One of the first worker mobilisations in Brussels took place throughout the large supermarket chains. This was caused by the lack of basic protective equipment, dangerous working conditions, the impossibility of observing social distancing measures, and it being one of the sectors with the lowest wages and where the most precarious forms of work contracts are implemented. At the very beginning, the protest was characterized by a wave of individual absenteeism, to the extent that the federation of the entrepreneurs of the sector, COMEOS, and the major companies have publicly denounced the phenomenon, warning that this could lead to shutting down several stores.

Pursuing a double strategy, the big supermarket chains on one hand offered a compensation bonus in an attempt to incentivize workers to show up at their workplaces. On the other hand, the companies and COMEOS seized the opportunity of accessing a new workforce following the forcible closure of universities and

schools, proposing to lift the working hours limit for student workers enshrined in their contract.

Self-organized by the workers, with the backing of their unions, assemblies were held in several stores of the city. The workers' fear of being exposed to the virus, awareness that they were being blackmailed, and having to choose between their health and their salary, was tangible. After a couple of uncoordinated walk outs, an official strike took place on April 3rd. Despite having achieved just a few of their demands, the majority of workers were convinced to go back to work. The rhetoric of being "essential" for the population and the union's argument that they needed time to negotiate have been the main reasons for the end of the organizing.

"We don't need to be called 'heroes,' we need protections and material!": The hospital and health service

The health sector in Belgium, mainly in Brussels, has been the focus of recent organising for over a year. The backbone of the struggle has been "La santé en lutte", a self-organized movement that also includes some grassroots delegates from the unions. It is a cross-category movement that brings together all types of workers in the hospitals. From the beginning, the movement denounced the lack of equipment, infrastructure, personnel, and safety measures along with overwork, huge gaps between salaries, and the shift towards a neoliberal management of the health sector.

Health minister Maggie De Block announced yet another budget

cut only weeks before the lockdown at a time doctors were warning about the possibility of a collapse of the hospital system in the event of a pandemic. In several interviews, De Block argued that COVID-19 was nothing more than a “seasonal flu” and that the doctors, the health workers, and the scientists that were raising these concerns were “drama queens.” Once the pandemic arrived and the number of hospitalizations increased dramatically, some of the foreseen crisis materialized.

This explosive mix contributed to spark the pre-existing conflict and advanced the public health system workers political discourse. At the time of writing, the “La santé en lutte” movement managed to rally a mass consensus around itself. When the number of hospitalizations in ICUs reached a critical point, the general public rushed to emulate behaviors advertised in hard hit countries such as applauding daily at a given time of the day.

With this spotlight on the struggle of the health sector, organized workers in the sector were able to get ahead of the narrative and sway significant parts of the public opinion towards a stern critique of the cuts in the national health service. Unable to deploy traditional forms of organizing due to the pandemic, “La santé en lutte” is conducting a strong social media campaign calling not only for support of the health service but also criticism of the government’s policies. This consists of urging people to support their movement by displaying banners on windows and balconies, signing online petitions, and launching a mass demonstration soon if it can be done safely. The effects of this media campaign can be seen and heard all over the city with a number of balconies displaying slogans of the “La santé en lutte” or people shouting “to give more money to

public hospitals” during the daily 8pm celebration of the health care workers.

On a political level, we are witnessing a categorial public refusal of the rhetoric of the “heroes on the frontline.” The slogans and the demands range from calling for a massive re-investment in the health service to the requisition of private clinics and materials. The movement also questions the management of the health sector and demands that the health minister resign.

Two of their main slogans are worth a further look: “Our lives are worth more than their profits” and “after (the emergency period) we will make you pay.” The first one clearly marks the awareness of being sacrificed on the frontline of the emergency as a consequence of the inadequacy of the government in handling the situation, but also of having to pay with their physical health and their lives as a result of decades of cuts and neoliberal policies. The latter marks the fact that they will find a way to strike back, that they will not forget who and what brought them in the situation that they are experiencing these days.

“Balcony activism”

From the early days of the lockdown, in part spontaneously and in part as an answer to the calls of the social movements, we’ve seen a massive display of banners and messages on windows and balconies in Brussels. Initially, the banners were mainly in support of hospital workers. In the following weeks the slogans started to become more political and addressed many

different demands and topics, from housing issues to access to basic social services. Others denounce police repression and domestic violence, or promote environmental issues. This form of activism signals a will to be “in lockdown but not silenced” and, to a certain degree, represents a new form of political activism. From our very superficial observation, behind the windows we discovered, in terms of class composition, an intricate and complex labyrinth of multiple extremely heterogeneous subjectivities which are far from uniform.

Objecting to any effort to provide a general synthesis, we roughly divide them in three main groups:

1. Workers in the service industry, social, and cultural sectors engaged in remote work using online telecommuting technologies.
2. Workers in “non-essential” activities. Depending on their industry, some are still receiving an average of seventy percent of their salary, and others who have either already lost their jobs or are left without any source of income (for example the around 140,000 students working in hospitality).
3. Workers doing reproductive and care labor who are invisible and unpaid.

Pandemic subjectivities and tendencies

From invisible to key workers

Undoubtedly, the workers that are engaged in a higher level of resistance and conflict are the ones on the “frontline” of the pandemic emergency. Yesterday, these workers were invisible and considered on the margins of the job market. Today, these jobs are now considered to be vital and “essential.” Whether we are speaking of workers in health care, retail distribution, logistics, waste collection or in the agricultural and food industries, these jobs are among the most precarious, exploited, and underpaid that can be observed in Belgium. When we look at their social composition, we realize that this class composition is highly transnational, gendered, and racialized. These characteristics are not coincidental. In its developmental trends, capitalism elaborates or re-elaborates forms of exploitation and domination, experiments with new ways of freeing itself from pre-existing industrial relations, and devises new techniques of blackmail and coercion to counter any possible insubordinate behavior in the working class. When asked to pay the higher price for the crisis by having to choose yet again between health and salary, it becomes normal for these already highly exploited workers to display a higher level of conflict and refusal.

Restructuring tendencies

During this pandemic and its consequent crisis, neoliberalism has violently accelerated its process of development and restructuring in all directions. For instance, while remote working was already included as part of this process of restructuring work,

the necessities of the lockdown made it possible to rush its mass implementation and generalization. The expulsion of significant numbers of workers from certain sectors also corresponds to these neoliberal development needs. This dovetails with the increased focus on the global supply chain from logistics to doorstep delivery of goods and acceleration of automation and digitalization.

Such restructuring taking place on the occasion of this crisis is already contributing to the creation of new subjectivities. The talks in Europe of a new “Marshall Plan” based on the so-called green economy, new technologies, and investment in infrastructure as an answer to the economic consequences caused by the COVID-19 crisis will also determine an acceleration of the aforementioned development trends.

In such a context, the task of a workers’ inquiry is to unveil the features of this new phase, not only to anticipate the plan of capital but also to locate and explore new tactical opportunities, to identify exploitable fault lines and contribute with new elements of a class science.

Further reading

- Ankermag: <http://anker-mag.org/>

Plateforme d'enquêtes militantes: Between the offensive of capital and the development of labour antagonisms in France

The COVID-19 pandemic, in France as in certain countries around the world marked by the sequence of popular uprisings in 2019, is rooted in a context of exacerbated social conflict, in which the tensions and contradictions that cross our societies on a daily basis are increasing both rapidly and unexpectedly. At present, after more than a month of lockdown and a major economic crisis, the eighteen months of the Yellow Vests movement, with moments of near-insurgency and great democratic creativity, and almost three months of general strike against “pension reform”, no longer appear simply as re-inventions of the class struggle in the contemporary world, but as messengers of the future - the subjective and conflicting epiphanies of the collapse of the old world and the opening up of a space for experimentation and radical novelty.

The effects of the COVID-19 epidemic on the antagonism between labour and capital cannot be understood without seeing

how a powerful terrain of struggle has been opened up and is structuring the current situation. The “exceptionality” of the measures taken to deal with the epidemic does not lie in an empty space, but in a living web of forms of self-organization and social, democratic, ecological counter-powers that have been consolidated over time. Yet, on the side of the French government, the situation, and the political opportunity it represented at the beginning of this pandemic – both an health and a social crisis–, seems very clear: armed with martial rhetoric and under the guise of national unity (it was Macron who introduced the word “war” into the international debate on the current crisis), it would be a matter of taking advantage of the situation to re-articulate the state-capital relationship and the neo-liberal forms of governance that have taken hold in the aftermath of the 2008 global crisis. Rather than towards an unprecedented “global state of exception”, we therefore turn to a differentiated management of the reproductive crisis that the epidemic has initiated – a situation that calls for a materialistic analysis of social relations, within the framework of a reconfiguration of administrative and governance powers at the national and European levels.

In France, this has manifested itself in various ways, in particular through the leadership of former actors in the break-up of the health care system in responding to the crisis, such as Jérôme Salomon, the Director General of Health in charge of managing the epidemic crisis, or through the “Health Emergency Law” (Loi d’Urgence Sanitaire). This law is highly ambiguous about the purpose of the measures put in place: they are intended both to combat the spread of the virus and to “deal with the economic consequences” of the epidemic. In fact, for a large

part, this means the suspension of existing labour legislation (Code du travail). However, France's entry into a recessionary phase this quarter clearly indicates that the consequences of the epidemic will not stop there. The measures banning dismissals announced early on, have eventually been replaced by a system of "assistance to companies", (a form of exemption from social security contributions intended to finance social security), based on the idea that limiting dismissals will be achieved through more subsidies granted to employers.

We are therefore facing an obvious contradiction in the French government's programme. On the one hand, in the face of the serious crisis of legitimacy facing him, Macron insists on the "refoundation" of his political project, its development model and its social policies, in terms of increasing public spending and "revalorizing" certain public services, starting with healthcare. On the other hand, this re-foundation is done by maintaining the fundamental elements of his project: challenge to the "rigidities" of labour law, rejection of a real ecological reconversion of the economy, tax breaks of large wealth and the consequent redistribution of wealth upwards in society (issues against which the Yellow Vests have fought with all their determination).

In this rapidly changing context, one of the first effects of the government's social and healthcare measures has been to increase working time to 60 hours per week in the so-called "essential" sectors, which often coincide with the over-exploited strata of contemporary salaried work, such as logistics or the agri-food industry. In addition, compulsory leave measures have been imposed as part of this law, while some members

of the government are beginning to consider the possibility of making people work during the summer to recover production time lost due to the epidemic, as if lockdown were a parenthesis of happy spring holidays.

So the critical political question is which sectors are essential and which are not at a time like this. And from this point of view, Labour Minister Pénicaud did not hesitate to describe construction workers who refused to work as “defeatists” in the first week of lockdown. In this situation, the demand that we put forward was that of stopping non-essential production, in other words: to have production only to reproduce the species and save lives. This “consciousness of the species”, when combined with labour conflicts, assumes at the same time a connotation of “class”, assuming that today “class” is presented in multiple terms and as a process of continuous recomposition and transformation. “Social”, “gender” and “racial” factors intersect in these new conflicts at work - conflicts that are at the same time inseparable from ecological and welfare struggles (this is what we mean by social reproduction).

This crisis thus reveals the social division of contemporary labour and the new logics of exploitation. On the one hand, we have the realm of telework (see the multiple articulations of cognitive work, knowledge, linguistic and communicational work, etc.) which represents about 8 million workers out of 19 million active people, without neglecting what is referred to as “free digital labour”, i.e. the enormous mass of social data (in terms of information, content and affects) produced by each and every one of us, extracted by the platforms and integrated into the cycle of capital accumulation. On the other hand, we have the

work of services, public or private, and the neo-Taylorist manual or execution work. The latter workers, who are also the most affected by wage losses for those who can no longer work, are especially prone to contagion (especially health care workers) due to the circulation of goods and people in their workplaces. Finally, self-employed workers, the unemployed excluded from the new criteria for the allocation of welfare benefits provided for by the reform of unemployment insurance, or those who, in very precarious situations, compensate their income with forms of secondary, informal or undeclared work. This neglect of undeclared workers is also extremely serious from a healthcare point of view.

Finally, it must be stressed that it is reproductive workers - in the broadest sense of the term - who are at the strategic nexus of this crisis. It is on the basis of this observation that two perspectives for struggle can be spotted on the horizon. On the one hand, more and more voices are being raised to demand the immediate reconversion of production chains, for example of cars, towards goals that require common life to be based on reproduction and not on monetary valorisation: "Let us produce respirators, not cars!" In this connection, we must reiterate that, although the French Government claims that companies such as Michelin have "agreed" to change the organization of their production, it is the struggles of the trade union rank and file and the prospect of intensifying existing social antagonisms which have led to such a decision.

Given this situation, on the labour side the question of democratic control of production arises in two respects: on the one hand, as we mentioned, in the restructuring of production

chains to meet the reproductive needs of the species, to assume the reproductive task that neoliberal governments have largely abandoned after forty years of “rationalization” of the health system; on the other hand, in the self-management of hygiene in warehouses and factories, while the bosses, when they try to do this task, sink into irrationalism and terrifying superficiality.

In recent weeks, strike movements have intensified or are being prepared on the basis of an obvious refusal on the part of those who are still working to risk their lives in order, for example, to deliver parcels: after almost a month of lockdown, most companies have only marginally changed their sanitary conditions. Added to this is the difficulty for workers to enforce the “right of withdrawal” (Droit de retrait - the right to stop work when safety conditions are not assured). Many post offices, for example, have already gone on strike, and the labour inspection is increasingly finding that there is indeed no respect for the 1.5 meter “social distancing” advocated by the government, which is impossible to achieve in most workplaces that are still active. In this context, the response of the trade unions is becoming more and more critical as the weeks go by, despite the difficulties for the organizations themselves to operate normally because of the confinement, since trade union reps are currently unable to move around. A strike notice in the public service allows any employee, whether unionized or not, to go on strike and in companies where health and safety measures are least respected, such as Amazon, even the most moderate unions have called strikes as the number of contaminations have clearly exploded, despite the lack of transparency on behalf of managers regarding the precise number of cases.

The recent announcement of a “gradual deconfinement plan” from 11 May is now widely understood as an injunction for a whole series of workers to resume productive activity.

It is clear that in the context of the need for Macron, as for many other representatives of neoliberalism, to reactivate the economic machine, the need to defend and organize the reproduction of collective life will open up even more spaces for the construction of autonomy and social self-organization.

It seems that the reopening of schools announced for the beginning of May is a way to allow parents to go back to work, exposing education workers to massive risk of contamination. Even if it is too early as we write to comment on the question of what promises to be a return to work, we can already say that it is inconceivable that precarious workers in the national education system and other sectors will not mobilize, thereby prolonging the determination they showed during the movement against pension reform. An innovative form of national education strike could thus be experimented with in the future.

In fact, the conjunction of mass movements that now know how to be sustainable, as witnessed by the Yellow Vest Assemblies and the myriad of popular and local counter-powers that constitute it, as well as a generalised strike, seems to make the bourgeoisie fear every day more and more the long spring of struggles that it has been trying to postpone for several years now. In this framework, it is impossible for them not to make large concessions: the judicial decision taken on 14 April to reduce the Amazon sites to 10% of their capacity, as demanded by the trade union SUD-solidaire, illustrates this perfectly, as

does the rapid abandonment by the Medef (main employers' organization) of its demand for longer working hours. In addition, the demands for the recognition of reproductive work, which so often results in invisible or precarious jobs, also go in this direction: anticipating the economic crisis that will accompany the end of confinement also means thinking and building struggles that aim at a restructuring of taxation in France (return of the wealth tax, abolition of the CICE [Tax credit for employment and competitiveness]) which requires massive investment in the public sector, a better distribution of wealth and a general rejection of austerity policies. All these struggles will be to ensure that nothing returns to normal, especially in France, so that the political machine of macronism, with its reforms and its plan to dismantle the public sector, does not restart.

In this context and in order to intensify pressure, the major issue of intervention and investigation that seems to be at stake today is clearly the self-organization of alternative forms of social reproduction at a time when the question of domestic space is at the heart of our daily lives: the question of rents, domestic work, violence against women, must absolutely be raised and be articulated with basic practices, as the brigades of popular solidarity (brigades de solidarité populaire) and many other solidarity groups are already doing.

The other perspective of investigation that opens up from our point of view is the ecological counterpart of this crisis: the current ecological crisis being doubly at the origin of the situation in which we find ourselves, clearly poses central issues for ecological movements such as the global reduction of

working time and intervention with an ecological perspective in the struggles of care. The work of the Parisian Assembly of Ecologies in Struggle goes largely in this direction, attempting to politicize the ecological question at a time when the destruction of ecosystems makes such a global crisis reproducible.

Further reading

- Plateforme d'enquêtes militantes: <http://www.platenqmil.com/>

ACTA: Nous sommes en guerre! The hardening of the class struggle in France at the time of the coronavirus

Emmanuel Macron expressed this loud and clear during his second presidential speech on Monday, 16th March: “We are at war!”. An exclamation repeated six times in twenty minutes. A sanitary war against an invisible and elusive enemy, who advances every day by conquering new territories, infiltrating further into new social and geographical spaces. An insidious and difficult war, that therefore requires the mobilization of the entire state apparatus, which – in view of the size of the task – must be given the best conditions to act, even bypassing the ordinary legislative procedure. A war that, in order to be successfully won, must have the unconditional support of all the enfants de la patrie [The nation’s children, celebrated in the French national anthem]. Only national unity will guarantee victory. Without it, the war effort is likely to be in vain. “The state will pay!” the President of the Republic told us. It is up to us to make sure that his vague promise becomes a political watchword. However, if the pandemic certainly represents a major break in the current conjuncture, the sequence of events inaugurated by the mobilization against

the Labor Law in 2016, than extended by the Yellow Vests in 2018-19, and then again by the strike against the Pension Reform in 2019-20, still represents one of the major political battlefields of our times.

Denouncing repression

Since the Algerian War – the constituent moment of the Fifth Republic – most of the crises that have shaken France have been tackled through the mobilisation of a state of emergency. With the notable exception of May 68, whenever the political balance of forces was endangered by popular uprisings, the governments in power called for the temporary suspension of the legal framework. The colonial genealogy of this legal device is well known,¹ and is confirmed by its repeated use in recent history : three times in the “Overseas Territories” [These are remainders of France’s empire in Africa, the Pacific and the Caribbean] throughout the 1980s, for several weeks during the french riots of 2005 in the banlieues, and uninterruptedly between 2015-17 following terrorist attacks. Since 2017, the main exceptional prerogatives guaranteed by the state of emergency have been incorporated into ordinary law, strengthening the decision-making power of the executive and increasing the room for manoeuvre of the judicial and police bodies of the state security apparatus. The authoritarian turn at work in many Western democracies, thus finds in France a particularly visible locus of

¹ Cf. notre vidéo « État d’urgence, une histoire coloniale » <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UPJqc-bGo4A&feature=youtu.be>.

crystallization. The coronavirus crisis has of course accentuated these already existing tendencies, the Emergency Health Law is explicitly inspired from previous exceptional norms.

As is always the case, however, the concrete application of legal devices is not abstractly uniform, but is modulated in a differentiated way depending on the socio-geographical spaces and their specific class and racial stratification. In this regard, colonized territories, working-class neighbourhoods, prisons, administrative detention centres (CRAs), immigrants' residences and social and health-social establishments, offer a privileged point of entry to scrutinize and denounce abuses, violence and injustices perpetrated by military, police, prison and judicial authorities. As we highlighted in the report of the "Observatory of the state of the health emergency" that we launched with other French collectives, the current crisis has provided an opportunity to further intensify the logic of state securitisation and its control and disciplinary practices. While the rich areas and the city centres have been mainly subject to "pastoral governance", both by the police and the media, in colonized territories, in working-class neighbourhoods and in detention centres, the repressive arsenal of the state's "right hand" has been fully deployed.

In addition to the deployment of one hundred thousand members of the "forces de l'ordre" (gendarme, police, military), there has been an extension of the prerogatives of certain bodies and institutions such as the municipal police, the rural guards, the agents of the Paris town hall or the Prefecture of police, the proliferation of drones and surveillance cameras. The authoritarian State must also maintain an ultra-confined, over-

enclosed space-time where the deprivation of liberty increases as it becomes normalized in other public spaces-time.²

These discriminatory practices in the public space reflect the unequal material living and working conditions that structure our societies. It is indeed the lower classes that have been massively forced to go to work, at the expense of safeguarding – in most cases – their health. And it is always those in the lower strata of the social ladder that have not only found themselves more exposed to the deadly threat of the virus, but are also suffering most severely from the harmful effects of the interlocking crises triggered by COVID-19.³

Inquiring into exploitation

The current crisis, which articulates multiple dimensions (health, economic, social and ecological) in an unprecedented way, emerged in France after a long period of strong social conflict against neoliberal government policies. Moreover, by underlining the interdependence of the spheres of production and reproduction – or, more precisely, the contradictions between the capitalist mode of production (of value) and the social reproduction (of labour) – the pandemic highlights the issue of social reproduction as a major battlefield between labour and capital, which the Yellow Vest movement and the

² Cf. <https://acta.zone/premier-rapport-de-observatoire-de-letat-durgence-sanitaire/>. More generally, cf. <https://acta.zone/repression/>.

³ At the time of writing this article, several nights of riots have taken place in a number of French suburbs as a result of police violence.

movement against pension reform after it had already raised.

In the Parisian area, the pandemic makes social inequalities and their territorial stratification within the metropolis even more striking. While it is estimated that around 17% of Parisians have fled the confinement to a secondary residence at the very beginning of the crisis, the department of Seine-Saint-Denis (93), the poorest in France, is the one registering the highest mortality rate (a 63% raise compared to barely 32% in Paris “intra muros” at the beginning of April). How can this discrepancy be explained? It is true that housing conditions and the lack of resources in hospitals play a central role, but it should not be forgotten that these are also the territories that provide the bulk of the labour force employed into the “essential” sectors, which have not stopped their activity during the period of confinement: garbage collectors, logistics workers, cleaners, transport and care workers... Those who were “on the front lines” in the streets against Macron’s policies during the last social movements, are now largely the same ones who keep the economy afloat – and ensure social reproduction – in times of pandemic.

The crisis thus not only makes the effects of neoliberal policies more visible, but also produces a potentially unifying mass experience: it intensifies the social polarization, makes class interests more explicit, reinforces the imaginary that opposes “us” and “them” – already emphasized by the Yellow Vests movement. It lays the groundwork for new political initiatives rooted in concrete experiences of class solidarity (deployed inside workplaces or in popular neighborhoods) which make up

a strategic field of militant inquiry and action.⁴

But the pandemic is also an opportunity for Macron in order to pursue, by new means, policies that were facing very tenacious and long-lasting social opposition. The current crisis risks becoming a laboratory for new measures justified by the framework of the health emergency (the extension of legal working hours in the first place, but also the systematization of the use of big data technologies in order to control labour mobility on a large scale). It opens up opportunities for restructuring labour relations, that will be legitimized by calls for “national unity” in view of “reconstruction”, because, as we know, the objective will be in the medium-to-long term to make the working and middle classes pay the costs of this crisis, as it has been the case for the financial crisis of 2008. The directions that this restructuring will take in the long term constitutes another strategic field of investigation. Behind the official consensus of this “union sacrée” [The holy union refers to a national unity agreement during WWI in which the left agreed to abstain from challenging the government politically or industrially], social discontent and forms of insubordination are starting to express themselves in several sectors (e.g. public transports, hospitals and elderly homes, logistics, education, supermarkets ...) through the voices of workers who are worried by the lack of safety and sanitary measures. This contradiction between production and reproduction, between profits and life, will reveal itself dramatically at the moment of deconfinement. In order to anticipate the grounds for future conflicts, we thus

⁴ Cf., for exemple, our interviews with different workers on their work's conditions during the crisis: <https://acta.zone/exploitation/>.

need to focus our attention on the spaces where resistance has already arisen against the government's call for a "general mobilization" - leaning toward "sacrifice" - of labour in the name of a national "war against the virus".

Partisans in the metropolis

One of the most striking features of the situation in France is the focus on "the day after". From the most radical fringes of the autonomous movement to France Insoumise [Unbowed France - a left social-democratic party], from the Trotskyist far left to the Greens converted to the neo-liberal common sense, it appears that a consensus has been reached: "let us listen to the state, let us criticise it as best we can, and then we will see". While there is something striking in seeing the theorists of 'crisis as a mode of government', postponing their political intervention to "the day after", it nevertheless reflects the inability of the Movement, and of the almost uninterrupted struggles since 2016, to adapt to sudden changes in the situation and adjust their practices accordingly. Without mentioning the humiliating attempts at online demonstrations, we can only remind ourselves that the future, like the Coronavirus, began a long time ago, and that the development of a less murderous world cannot be postponed to better days.

Against the logic of "the day after", the call for the organization of "popular health self-defense brigades" by the comrades in Milan, seems to us a preferable hypothesis. Because it took stock of the situation and identified the crisis of command that

is afflicting the neo-liberal governance of Western Europe, it was able to spread from Paris to Brussels, from Lyon to Nantes, and in many other cities in France and in Italy.⁵ The Lega's Lombardy, Macron's France and Johnson's UK are all regions that are visibly disarmed in front of the pandemic. In France, after more than a month of shutdown, the world's 6th largest economy boasts of having produced 10,000 reanimation devices, without ensuring that there will be enough masks or disinfectant gel within a month to allow a real way out of the shutdown. What the success of solidarity and self-organization initiatives shows us above all is the failure of the neo-liberal state. In Paris, we saw one of the city's main hospitals being delivered with FFP2 masks by a soup kitchen, nursing homes being restocked by comrades, while postal workers responsible for distributing social aid had to rely on partisan solidarity, their managers having decided to donate all of their masks (24 million) to the French police.

The number of popular initiatives have multiplied and cannot be summed up under the name of the brigades alone. Solidarity ties are developing and strengthening, at the level of neighbourhoods, streets and buildings. Tasks that used to be the responsibility of a confined state management or privatized inside the nuclear family space, and whose assignment to certain social groups was normalised, are now the object of an explicitly collective organization. Vice versa, places that for too long have been considered as pure spaces of passage, where social interactions were structured only by the economy and

⁵ Cf. for exemple <https://acta.zone/seul-le-peuple-sauve-le-peuple/>, but also <https://acta.zone/une-journee-avec-les-brigades-de-solidarite-populaire/>.

consumption, become spaces where life is put back at the centre, recalling that domination provokes resistance and that “life as a political object has been taken at face value and turned against the system that was trying to control it”.⁶

The aim of these initiatives is not to replace the humanitarian organizations that for a long time have worked hand in hand with the state, but to trace a new political trajectory. They not only assume a break with the existing order, but they also sketch out the world to come, carrying practices of self-organization that can potentially break with state-centred logics.

Another important aspect of the Brigades is that they have been able to build a framework for transnational organisation inside a political sequence that wanted to condemn us to “stay at home”. Beyond the joyful irony of summoning the imaginary of the Resistance to oppose governments that multiply war metaphors, there is a basic need for the establishment of an international coordination in the context of a pandemic. It is also important not to postpone potentially mass practices and the questions they raise. Are there population-level practices that contribute to the health of the masses, without expanding surveillance and monitoring? Can the fear that grips everyone be replaced by the pride that emanates from the solidarity of an action group? Against survivalist panics, can the social movement transform private goods into public goods?

Rarely has the disjunction between our camp and continuous,

⁶ Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité, I : La volonté de savoir*, Gallimard, 2018, p.191.

persistent, reproducible and inventive mass politics been so glaring. The task is all the greater, and the urgency all the more pressing. It is urgent to bring down the abject world that produced the coronavirus without waiting for a possible brighter tomorrow, but rather by getting stuck into the long and patient journey of practice. As a young man said at the beginning of the last century: “Communism arises from all points of social life, it blooms everywhere [...]. If one way out is carefully blocked, the contagion will find another, sometimes the most unpredictable one.” That is why, in our first collective paper, we conflate two well known watchwords that characterize the socialist tradition and the renewal of the ecologist movements: communism or extinction!⁷

Further Reading

- ACTA: <https://acta.zone/>

⁷ Cf <https://acta.zone/communisme-ou-extinction/>.

Into the Black Box and Officina Primo Maggio: Strikes and ‘invisible’ mobilizations in the Italian pandemic

The progressive emergence of the sanitary emergency caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has not been simply a smooth process of top-down measures for containing it. On the contrary, Italy has experienced a quite relevant wave of struggles within and against this radically new scenario. Rather than a passive path towards “national unity” to confront with the “invisible enemy” of this new “war” (to use the language of the Government and the media), we have seen heterogeneous forms of riots in jails, mass abstention to work, strikes, solidarity actions, forms of protest, that have made visible how, even within a pandemic, inequalities and injustices still play a crucial role in forming our contemporary societies. In other words, the “exception” represented by the eruption of COVID-19 has enlightened the “normal” ways in which people are hierarchized.

The class division is more manifest than ever, and the ways in which gender and race work daily to increase inequalities is more evident. We could say that a set of contradictions is becoming

evident and striking in a mass perception. First of all: the brutal clash between health and profit and the distinction between social reproduction and capital reproduction. The demand to suspend production – especially in the Northern regions of Italy more affected by virus infection – has been harshly opposed by national industrialist trade association Confindustria, posing a serious risk to millions of workers.

Related to these contradictions, a constellation of other nodes is emerging. Just to give a couple of examples: the neoliberal political approach and almost a decade of austerity measures are now emblematic for their necrogenic effects in terms of cuts to public health system and the privatization of health branches; the notion of “essentiality” has become the forefront of public discussion to define what kind of works should be lockdowned and what should be not, defining a new public awareness on what the real role of some jobs is.

A third analytical layer, strictly related to the last reflection, should take into consideration the ways in which contemporary economies are organized and what the COVID-19 crisis tells about them. The logic of the global value chains is profoundly shaken and disrupted. The idea of organizing labour processes through fragmentation, individualization, and hierarchical subsystems is radically under scrutiny for its uncertain sustainability from perspective of capital. One of the key elements of global supply chains, logistics, has passed in the last ten years from a marginalized and invisible sector to a strategic and “essential” sector. The new metropolitan logistics represented by platforms like Amazon and delivery apps like Deliveroo have become quintessential infrastructures of everyday life. Home

delivery workers used to be labelled as “gig workers”, and now are employed in a sort of “essential sector” that needs to work also in a pandemic. The millions of people that are still going to workplaces everyday reminds us how a “traditional” working class condition is still crucial for contemporary economies, demonstrating how capital is able to integrate different forms of “old” and “new” labour conditions and exploitation. Finally, the de-structuring of the labour market of the last decades is now manifesting its violent effects. Hundreds of thousands of people working as autonomous workers with precarious contracts or in informal markets are now with no income.

Given this sketch and general framework, we now focus on some specific ongoing inquiries that we are working on during this crisis.

Logistics

In the continuous repackaging of new Prime Minister’s orders along the COVID-19 crisis, logistics has constantly been considered as crucial. The Decree of the Prime Minister of the 22nd of March (so-called “Chiudi Italia” – “Close Italy”) confirmed transports and logistics services as essential activities to be kept open, not mentioning any restriction in terms of “essential” goods to be delivered. Meanwhile, before and after that date, in many warehouses and within logistics firms, strikes and blockades took place. Since the very beginning of the COVID-19 crisis spontaneous and organized protests rose up requiring the guarantee of health social-distancing measures in the storage

places, sanitizations, plastic gloves, protective masks and other basic safety measures. From the Po Valley to the neighborhoods of Rome, from Lombardy to Piedmont, as well as in other parts of Italy, many workers stopped. GLS, TNT, DHL, BRT, Amazon (joining the Amazon Workers International declaration) and other logistics firms are still facing daily strikes: workers demand only the movement of essential commodities and the right to health at work. Just before Easter, a few unions achieved an agreement with some of the logistics firms, bringing the latter to the signature of a document in which they agreed what follows: workers guaranteed the indispensable complete movement of medicines and food; concerning other non-essential commodities, warehouses should work at a reduced percentage of their capacities. Despite the initial agreement, neither the few logistics firms that signed the documents respected the statements. The situation is still fluid and unclear, but the workers' unrest continues.

Furthermore, the agro-industry supply chain is under stress because the many grocery harvests are approaching, but containment measures are blocking the provision of workforce. Migrant workers, in fact, represent the majority of labour-force in this sector, characterized by hyper-exploitation and a line-of-colour hierarchization: the restricted mobility regime of Italian immigration laws illegalize structurally migrant workers so to expose them to more exploitation without possibility to appeal for basic working conditions rights. That is why several organizations and unions are demanding an act of indemnity to legalize the civil conditions of such workers as this pandemic is highlighting their fundamental role in agro-industry supply chain.

Riders

Even if riders are extremely exposed to the risk of infection, food delivery platforms never suspended the service. Deliveroo has enlarged its range to include some “essential” products like medications to gain some new market segments. Furthermore, the firms reduced the riders minimum hourly guaranteed income and increased the commission charged to restaurants. At first, many restaurants suspended the service, but as quarantine has been lengthened, they are now continuing to supply customers with delivery services.

Nevertheless, the platforms did not furnish any kind of protective measures or emergency benefits for their workers, discharging them from any responsibility in front of a supposed autonomous labour. A sort of reimbursement has been promised to workers affected by Coronavirus, if they can prove it (and we know this is not exactly easy as swabs are used only on extremely sick people). Riders complained about a lack of support and local autonomous union organizations have called for service lockdown and the institution of a quarantine income. The problem, in fact, is that there is a large part of riders who need to work to sustain families and have no other forms of income.

In such context, food delivery platforms are reinforcing their role of social infrastructure for urban life and can profit from the post-emergency shut-in economy.

At the same time, as this service seems to be essential in the contemporary supply chains of capitalism, workers gain new

visibility and could exploit such a role to demand for improving their working conditions.

Autonomous workers

The situation that has arisen with the spread of coronavirus has affected firms and workers (employees and self-employed) and is likely to be very heavy for many freelancers who cannot count on social benefits, welfare, or reserves of savings due to incomes often below poverty levels.

At the beginning of March, the Italian freelancers association ACTA who organizes “the professional condition”, launched an inquiry (inchiesta-lampo) to collect data on the effects of the measures to combat the spread of coronavirus on freelance work. What is concerning, in particular, is the loss of income that has already happened and that will continue to occur in the coming months. The services typically provided by this group of workers are programmed well in advance and are greatly affected not only by the conditions of Italian and foreign industries in general, but also by the lack of movement of people, in Italy and abroad. The results show that women appear to be worse affected than men, partly because the professions that suffer the most are very feminized, and partly because the blockade of schools and kindergartens has a greater impact on women’s availability to work. In fact, many people believe that there should be compensatory measures in favor of those who were unable to work due to the closure of schools.

The sectors most affected remain those directly concerned by the lockdown, but the general slowdown of the economy is beginning to have an impact on the overall scenario.

According to the measures taken by the Italian government during the emergency, there is a bonus of 600 euros for the month of March for freelancers. This is very little if compared to a loss that promises to be much higher, but a first step by those who have never been covered by social safety nets. Moreover, other measures should be taken on the taxation deadlines. Finally, this crisis reaffirmed the importance of welfare, not only with reference to the health service, of which virtues and limits emerged, but also with reference to work, where tested systems were available for employees, but not for all other workers.

Some elements of discussion

In a historical era marked by humanitarian crises, relative intensifications of migration flows, and pandemics, the transport of goods represents one of the fundamental sectors for the globalized economy. On the other hand, the health emergency resulting from the spread of COVID-19 has increased the awareness that, in a context of global value chains and strong interdependencies between economies, a shock that hits one of the links in the chain will go on to have a systemic impact. Once the emergency is over, according to some observers, the de-globalization process will accelerate. The disruptions that businesses, individuals, and governments are currently

experiencing leads us to think that globalization is at risk for such health emergencies. Firms will most likely consider the lesson learned about the potential breakdown of global supply chains due to these shocks, and this will be reflected, in the future, on a reconfiguration of the business models adopted so far.

What might the workers learn from this unexpected experience? If, as observers say, on the one hand, that the pandemic has demonstrated the fragility of global value chains and that this will accelerate the trend of de-globalization, on the other hand they predict a growth in the logistics sector (despite the slowdown in international trade), freight forwarders and couriers (due to the growing demand for home deliveries). The brand new scenario that is emerging urges us to reflect about the next disruptive struggles, learning from the past conflicts.

Moreover, there is the possibility of a shut-in economy after the emergency with an increasing role of platforms and retail companies. Tech giants are profiting from the crisis with their digital infrastructures becoming fundamental for social life. This will create a push for more automation and digitalisation of labour and services. The distinction between smart-working and work at place seems to reflect a technical composition of capital differentiated by capacity of digitalisation and outsourcing. Nevertheless, the home could not be framed totally as a safe and better place, but crosses labour with other conditions such as income, race, and gender. Not all people have access to the internet in the same way or have the same housing conditions; home can also be a place for gender violence or hierarchy.

That said, the pandemic is producing a mass experience that is opening up new potential conflictual energies. Therefore, it is important to orient inquiries and to elaborate hypotheses on the emerging tendencies. We need to be ready to catch the opportunities to verticalize potential ruptures towards the destructuring of capitalist command. The contour of the social subjects that will emerge within the new scenario is still vague, but it is possible to bet on the possibility of a political expression of a social field that will not accept to pay the high price of this crisis. The challenge is to organize the new possibilities of class struggle, finding the drivers of the subjects that have antagonistic aims towards the current system in the clash already underway. In this sense, we think that new opportunities for class struggle are emerging, and that the potential for a multiplicity of “old and new” forms of labour to act will increase. Moreover, two other fields will be strategic: the “digitalization” of work and life – including pervasive forms of social surveillance – will probably become a new terrain of conflict, with forms and dynamics to be invented; social reproduction is a field of tension where new conflictual processes could emerge. Within this heterogeneous set of possibilities, we think that this crisis should be framed not only as a space/time for capital restructuring and of social fear, but also as a possibility for re-launching new configurations of struggles.

Further readings

- Into the Black Box <http://www.intotheblackbox.com>
- Officina Primo Maggio <http://www.officinaprimomaggio.eu>

Notes from Below: The tensions of a pandemic in the UK

As we write this in mid-April, the UK has still not reached the peak of the COVID-19 crisis. It is on track to be the worst affected country in Europe. The UK government equivocated at first, with an aborted attempt at a ‘herd immunity’ strategy, planning for coronavirus to sweep through the population, killing some, and leaving others immune. Boris Johnson promised that ‘many more families are going to lose loved ones’, whilst his top political advisor was defending claims that he argued to ‘let old people die’. This strategy rapidly became untenable and after weeks the strategy changed to one of ‘lockdown’.

Following this, it is no overstatement to say that the UK government must be held accountable for tens of thousands of deaths. This also comes after years of decimating of the public health system and a long running policy of austerity. Many other underlying tensions and smaller crises have similarly now risen to the surface. The trend towards increasing insecurity at work, bogus self employment, poor quality rented housing, lack of social support, and so on are all now contributing to the COVID-19 crisis in different ways. This is not a departure from what

was happening prior to the crisis, but instead a worsening of it.

At the core of the government's strategy has been keeping people working. Despite being in a so-called 'lockdown', those who cannot work from home can still travel to work. There are regular videos of packed London tube carriages in the morning rush hour. The government has shied away from declaring workers as 'essential' or 'non essential', instead categorising those who can work from home and those who cannot. Either way, they just want to keep the economy going.

These policies have so far avoided any serious scrutiny. The approval ratings for the ruling Conservative Party have been rising, with little open criticism about the choices they have made - despite these leading to 10,000 deaths already. When Boris Johnson contracted COVID-19 criticism became even more of a taboo. Even so-called left wing pundits were tripping over themselves to wish him well and crowdfunders popped up for things like buying Johnson a set of cufflinks spelling out "thank you." Many newspapers have focused on scolding those who sunbathe in parks, while also trying to invoke the so-called "spirit of the blitz" from the Second World War. This jingoistic language asks people to rally around the British flag to "fight" the virus despite the continued refusal by the state to organise effective structural responses.

Despite this waving of the Butcher's Apron [an alternative name from the Union Jack flag, drawing attention to the bloody history of the British empire], there has also been a positive shift in public discourse around work. Just a few months ago, many migrant workers were being condemned as "low-skilled" and

told they were no longer welcome in the UK. This “low-” label had more to do with the pay of the work than the necessity of what they were doing. Yet now these workers are heralded as our “heroes.” This shift in position has not come with either pay rises or even appropriate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). However, it is shining a light on the dynamics of work in the UK, opening up conversations that were not being had before.

A key intervention from the British state has been the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme. This applies to workers whose workplaces have been forced to close. These workers are then ‘furloughed’ (or sent home from work) while having 80% of their wages paid from the government. This has been brought in as a desperate attempt to curb rapidly growing mass unemployment. However, it has not been automatic and many workers have had to fight tooth and nail to receive it. For example, workers at Wetherspoons, the largest pub chain in the country, were told in a video message from the owner that they would no longer be paid and should find a job instead at Tesco, the large supermarket chain in the country. Through an online campaign with their union, they managed to force the owner to put them on the furlough scheme.

While the use of zero hour contracts has attracted negative press coverage over the past few years, many employers instead use low hour contracts. Like zero hours, this involves regularly providing workers with consistent overtime hours without recognising it as such. This usually has the same disciplinary effect as a zero hour contract, forcing workers to rely on the good will of managers from week to week. However, for “furloughed”

workers, this means they are not receiving 80% of their total wages, but instead 80% of their low hour contracted wages. This might mean in practice that workers are receiving only 50% of their usual wage or lower. The Wetherspoons workers are continuing to fight to be paid 100% of their wages.

A second intervention that the government has made is the Self-employment Income Support Scheme. This involves self-employed workers applying for a grant to cover 80% of their profits from the government. While this scheme may be able to help some of the self-employed, it relies upon profits reported in tax returns, something that many self-employed workers will either struggle to produce or will bear little relation to their income. For example, those on bogus self-employment contracts - like Uber and private hire drivers, couriers, or food delivery - often only make minimal profits after taking off the high costs of leasing cars, insurance, mobile phone costs and so on. Those costs continue despite work almost entirely dropping off. This means that the actual 'profit' reported on a tax return is minimal, so any government subsidy will be too. In practice, this serves as a pressure mechanism to force many of these workers to continue to work despite the lockdown. For example, building sites (Construction is one of the industries most systematically hit by bogus self-employment) have continued to operate with many workers taking to social media to protest the danger of large collective employment.

Most of these workers will instead have to turn to unemployment benefits and rely on foodbanks to make ends meet. A million people have so far applied for Universal Credit, the new system of unemployment benefit, since the start of this crisis.

To put that in perspective there are 30 million economically active people in the UK. We expect this to only increase as we enter into a huge and protracted economic crisis.

Tensions of the pandemic

Since 2018 medical couriers at the Doctors Laboratory (TDL), a privatised laboratory working with the NHS, have been organising. They have struggled for the recognition of their real employment status (as limb 'b' workers) and the rights that come with that, including minimum wage and some social protections. They now organise side by side with Deliveroo and riders from other companies in the Couriers and Logistics branch of the IWGB. While they have had many recent victories, the one thing they were yet to win was sick pay.

Couriers in London risk their lives every day swerving in and out of traffic to deliver items across the city. The lack of sick pay has always been a problem when couriers have been out of work, sometimes for months at a time, due to injury. They established the London Courier Emergency Fund, a grassroots attempt to create a safety net for couriers out of work due to accidents. However, this time the lack of sick pay meant something completely different for couriers at TDL.

In early March the word slowly got out that couriers at TDL were transporting COVID-19 samples. Mostly this was dismissed as one of the cruel jokes that the controllers played on couriers. After all, many of these samples were not properly bagged

according to Public Health England guidelines. However, within a few weeks it became clear that it was not a joke, as couriers were rushing between hospitals and the laboratory delivering COVID-19 samples. The company upped the sick pay from £0 a week to £95 a week in line with the statutory minimum for employees. In this example, we can see a tension that has been building since way before the pandemic playing out under the crisis' pressure.

These couriers face a difficult choice. If they develop symptoms and follow the government's guidance to self-isolate, they cannot afford to live. If they continue to work, they risk infecting those in hospitals, the laboratory, or others. Whilst this is one case, similar situations confront many workers who are unable to stop working due to inadequate sick pay. The couriers, like many others, whether self-employed or with contracts, have little in the way of a safety net. Statutory sick pay would not even cover the basic costs of living for these workers. Many workers face no other choice than continuing to work. The UK will be hit so hard by COVID-19 because many people simply cannot afford to stay home.

Another group of workers that have been badly hit by the crisis are health care workers, on the frontline in the NHS. While paying lip service to celebrating them as heroes, and joining in with popular outpouring of support like evening clapping, the government has failed to provide them with even basic protective gear. The death toll of NHS workers is growing rapidly, having already surpassed 30, while doctors, nurses and other medical and associated staff are currently working overtime and having their annual leave cancelled. Half a million

volunteers, drawn mainly from ex- and retired health care workers have also been drafted in to help paper over the cracks of a chronically underfunded health care service, effectively providing millions of hours of unpaid labour.

For those who can stay home and still work (or at least pretend to work), the situation comes with other risks. Many commentators in the UK have said we are now entering into a new era of working from home. This new argument (which feels pretty old) claims that some of us are now free from the tyranny of the office. However, rather than viewing this as some kind of extended holiday from office work, it is crucial we understand how this could reshape work. COVID-19 provides a testing ground for capital, in which new methods of surveillance and control can be tested.

For many office workers, working from home is actually involving an intensification of work. Many are being made to work harder and faster by bosses for fear that they would be slacking off at home. The threat of layoffs or furloughing means the pressure has not lessened. Facilitated by shiny new silicon valley tech, old forms of surveillance are being reanimated. One office worker we spoke to told us about monday.com, a remote working software used in their workplace. It allows managers to “centralize all communication within the context of workflows and projects.” The app tracks, down to the second, the time spent working, as well tracking other key performance indicators. With the revelation that Zoom allows your company to track when you click away from a call, it has become clear that managers are using this crisis to implement more surveillance at work. When new, and more profitable, ways to organise

work are created in a crisis, they do not get abandoned when the crisis is over. Unless workers actively resist, there will be little to celebrate about this time working from home. In fact, for some workers, like university staff, the crisis was used to force ongoing national industrial action to an end, with workers instead forced to work overtime to move classes online while their demands for better pay and conditions were kicked into the long grass with little to no response by the union.

Working from home, or at least spending so much time at home, has highlighted the changing social composition of many workers in the UK. At Notes from Below, we consider social composition to be an important aspect of class composition analysis, attempting to understand workers beyond work. Isolation has drawn attention to the lack of community in many parts of the UK, with large numbers of people now even cut off from this during the pandemic. Despite this, throughout the UK there have been the establishment of thousands of ‘mutual aid’ groups. The movement began with Facebook groups for large areas, which then broke down into increasingly smaller sections. For example, for two of our editors, this started in the borough in London we live in (which is home to 300,000+ people). The Facebook group became so large it split into Whatsapp groups (our group covered an area where about 30,000+ people live). Again, this group split into 18 different local groups. We are now in a Whatsapp group with 50+ members that covers the three streets around the tower block we live in. The establishment of these hyper local support groups is both exciting and necessary, given the looming economic collapse. While we have yet to see the groups do more than facilitate the picking up and dropping off of food to neighbours, they are networks in formation. It

will, of course, be an uphill struggle to keep them alive as sites of resistance and solidarity and not neighbourhood watch groups, but they create an opportunity to build for something that has rarely existed in the UK before.

Where next?

The first few weeks of COVID-19 were a scramble for the labour movement in the UK. In the IWGB, the small union that some of the editors of Notes from Below are involved in, this involved fighting a wide range of fires: trying to secure jobs and personal protective equipment for members. An entire branch of the IWGB, the cycle instructors, were told they would only have one more paycheque. Cleaners in the universities and other workplaces across London were given unclear and confusing advice, with many asked to continue working as normal. In one university they were asked to clean a classroom used by a student who had tested positive for COVID-19, without protective gear and without being informed. There has also been some good news: the University of London branch secured pay rises for outsourced workers at UCL in the midst of the crisis.

Despite the smaller unions like the IWGB and UVW entering into struggles with employers, the major trade unions in the UK have, yet again, been unable or unwilling to respond adequately on a national level. There has been very little campaigning – with the lecturers union UCU calling short its strike on many campuses and another union calling off strike action all together. Union bosses have fallen for the narrative that this crisis re-

quires national unity, mirroring the Labour Party's new right wing leadership. Across the UK, many workers have been left without support. This has not stopped anger bubbling up across workplaces – both those known to be more militant and those without any history of struggle. The IWGB's response to this has been to launch a holding branch which any worker can join, providing support to previous unorganised workers.

Beyond this, it remains to be seen whether there will be a reckoning when this is all over. The government has escaped serious scrutiny until now, and could still do so after. Many are calling for some sort of reckoning when we have “returned to normal.” This threat, which can be useful in some contexts, is aimed at taking revenge on those who did not support workers during this period of crisis. However, it also highlights how powerless many feel at present. Once the COVID-19 phase of the crisis is over, it is clear that things will not “return to normal.” An unprecedented economic crisis has been triggered and there will be an attempt to seriously reshape work.

Class composition is shifting and now, like always, is the moment to organise.

Further reading

- Notes from Below: <https://notesfrombelow.org/>
- IWGB: <https://iwgb.org.uk/covid-19>
- Angry Workers: <https://angryworkersworld.wordpress.com/>

Robert Ovetz: The Working Class Pandemic in the US

By April 9th, at least [81 wildcat strikes](#) and a [threatened national general strike by two transport unions](#) have swept the US since march when the country went into lock down to stop the spread of the deadly Covid-19 virus. The organization and strike actions by workers has been breathtaking. From construction workers to nurses, warehouse, transport, meatpacking, call center, carpenters, fast food, trash collectors, prisoners, and a wide range of other kinds of workers, class struggle is suddenly back on the agenda in the US, and much of [the world](#) for that matter. Strikes aren't the only form of organizing taking place, joined by [short sitdown work stoppages](#) and demonstrations by [nurses and doctors in seven states protesting](#) the lack of critical safety equipment and petitions, and widespread media attention to the plight of essential workers. There are several key impacts and consequences of this worker self-organizing and strike action for global working class struggle.

There is no doubt that global capitalism is in deep crisis. After several years of a rising global authoritarian embracing nationalism and protectionism, much of the global economy has come

to a standstill. Mass layoffs of countless millions of workers and the collapse in income has caused investment to collapse, markets to crash, and soon government tax revenue will be depleted. The response of the state has been to further ramp up state socialism for business, corporations and large property owners and stop gap Keynesianism for workers in the wealthy countries with utter destitution and disaster for the rest of the global working class.

When the pandemic crisis passes the bill will come due. There will continue to be state socialism for corporations and capitalism for workers. Unemployment will be used to bring down the hammer on what remains of the organized and unionized working class. Work will be reorganized to become even more precarious and the workplace even more despotically managed by data based surveillance. Skyrocketing deficits, borrowing, and corporate bailouts will become justification for further neoliberal austerity, privatization, disinvestment, and tax cuts for the rich and capital and regressive taxes on workers. [Emergency executive powers](#) will become normalized wielded with grotesque violence by authoritarians and corporate parties to recoup what is owed.

To understand the immense disruptive possibilities of working class self-organizing it will also be necessary to prepare for the inevitable counterattack. There are some efforts to begin such preparation. The UNITE HERE union is organizing its members, nearly all of whom are out of work as the recreational sector has shut down, in Southern California and Nevada, as well as workers seeking out its help. The United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America have teamed up with the

Democratic Socialists of America to help [workers seeking its help to organize wildcat strikes during the pandemic](#). Recognizing that making call for a general strike is not organizing one, [Cooperation Jackson has called for general strike](#) and National Educators United and its California chapter have called for actions including strikes on May 1st.

In the midst of the wave of wildcat strikes and a surge in new organizing, there are some lessons to be learned by this rising in class struggle in the US.

Workers are Self-Organizing

The story we've heard from right to left that workers cannot be organized, capital and the state are too powerful, mass surveillance and the rise of the far right is making organizing too dangerous, are all based on the wrong premise. Faced with the terror of being fatally sickened and spreading the virus to others, unemployment, starvation, and being sacrificed for the capitalist economy, workers are not being organized—they are self-organizing.

This means that unions and others on the left need to throw out their archaic tactics and strategies and find that workers have, are, and will continue to organize themselves from the bottom up and circulate their struggles to meet their needs. Unions will come under immense pressure to finally abandon the narrow focus on bargaining over the now long abandoned legalistic [Fordist wage-productivity deal](#) and throw off the harness of the

contract and labor law. It is long past the time for our unions to apply its remaining power and vast resources in support of the working class rather than just triaging its loyal members.

As nearly all the workers going on wildcat strikes are not formally in unions, most likely have their own **unknown committees** in the workplace, they are not limited by federal or state labor laws, union contracts, or other control mechanisms. That's what makes wildcat strikes so dangerous—they are unmanaged and uncontrolled.

Reproductive and Logistics Labor are Central

What ties together nearly all of the wildcat strikes together is that they are being carried out by workers doing reproductive labor or what is often euphemistically called **caring, effective or service labor**. Most unions in the US have given up on reproductive workers except in the public education and the private health care industries. The composition of reproductive workers is that they extremely low paid and precarious (who isn't anymore, really?), disproportionately people of color, turnover rates are very high, and are extremely exploited in many other areas of society.

In addition to the mistaken assumption of reproductive workers as impossible to organize is the **fatal mistake of presuming that their labor is unproductive to capital**]. In reality, what used to be unwaged labor that reproduced labor power for capital, the work of cooking, cleaning, caring, educating by primarily women and

girls, has increasingly moved into waged work. In fact, much of this waged work is merely a commodified form of the unwaged work they still or used to do more of in the home.

As a result, capital has been virtually unrestrained in deploying a new technical composition that features various extreme strategies of exploitation, domination, and division by legal status, sex, gender, race, wage, job status, etc., and control that are now becoming ubiquitous among better organized higher skilled workers. For example, many of the same communications technologies and algorithmic data management systems used to control and intensify reproductive labor are now found among professors, doctors, nurses, and lawyers.

The wildcat strikes are demonstrating that these reproductive industries are extremely vulnerable to its disruption—a strategy first proposed by the so-called wages for housework/student movements in the 1960-70s—along numerous global [choke points](#). It turns out that the wages demanded by those movements now make it possible for reproductive workers to refuse work rather than willingly hand over their labor power—the [original objective of the movements](#).

If food production, preparation, and logistics stop, all other workers stop by default. The global attack on reproductive labor is the working class's pandemic, striking at capital's circulatory system producing labor power available for work.

Reproductive workers are now exploiting the vulnerabilities in the long and thin “just in time” global supply chain. The sudden disappearance of toilet paper is not because of scared or

greedy consumers. They are caused by unforeseen disruptions in a virtually uninterrupted global division of labor that capital is now suddenly struggling to respond to. It is this strategy of disruption at key global choke points that offers the greatest potential for turning our planet back away from its path towards ecological catastrophe.

Similarly, while the disruptive power of workers in logistics is better recognized, here unions and the left have mostly abandoned or failed to make much inroads organizing workers. That hasn't stopped Amazon/Whole Foods, Instacart, and other logistics workers from disrupting the global supply chain not only in the US but numerous other countries hit by the pandemic, such as in Italy where widespread wildcat strikes in March effectively triggered a general strike against a deal made by the big three unions and the state to keep the factories open.

As capital relies ever more on managing a global "just in time" supply chain through the use of algorithmic data management, these relative small wildcat strikes have tipped these global corporate giants off balance. We can see how quickly they are responding by raising wages and making empty promises to supply safety equipment, extending unprecedented paid leave, offering minimum income cash subsidies, and firing key organizers like Amazon warehouse manager Chris Smalls in New York City.

Disruptive Power and the Circulation of Struggle

The simultaneous eruption of wildcat strikes in numerous countries in mostly unorganized industrial sectors offers another key lesson. In this way, without any top down central coordination by vanguardist parties or corporate unions, the working class has become international for the time since the 1960s. Before the 1960s, the working class also exhibited itself as international during the waves of wildcat strikes, workers councils, general strikes, and revolutionary insurrections in the [late 1910s](#) and the 1930s.

As news of each local wildcat strike instantaneously circulates, other workers become inspired and launch their strike elsewhere. Like the children's arcade game "whack a mole," the global working class is popping up in one place and as capital and the state seek to whack it back down, pops up simultaneously in numerous places all along both up- and down-stream of the now fraying global supply chain.

These struggles offer the most significant possibility of the global working class recomposing its power in nearly two generations. To do so it will not only need to circulate but also become explicitly coordinated, prepared for the predictable and inevitable response by capital and the state to [control, coopt, diffuse, manage, redirect, and repress each separate struggle](#). For capital and the state's strategy to prevail it will require quarantining each struggle off from one another in the same way as those who are capable of doing so are quarantining off from one another to dampen the contagious spread of the virus.

While others organize and strike, we need to study and be prepared for emerging strategies of capital and the state for dampening the circulation of these struggles with the same intensity it seeks to dampen the spread of COVID-19. Here we have to prepare for the role unions tied to capital and the state will seek to play in attempting to dampen and diffuse self-organized workers. We have seen this not only in Italy but more recently when [unionized Kroger supermarket workers](#) took a temporary \$2 pay bump, sick leave, and vague promises of meager assurances of safety measures to stay at work.

In the three pandemic bills signed into law in March we also have the meager \$1200 to \$1700 cash bribes to US taxpayers, 133% increase in unemployment benefits, which were also temporarily extended to precarious platform “gig” workers, and inaugural paid family/sick leave handed out to some workers to cleave them from those engaged in disruptive class struggle. In a crisis, capital and the state are willing to resort to temporary “universal basic income,” an idea that originated in US libertarian thinktanks as a way to gut social democratic social wages, shrink government employment, and attack public sector unions.

These Keynesian stop gap measures pale in contrast alongside massive [trillions of dollars of insurance to corporations, investors and banks](#) included in the pandemic laws. These are intended to shore up corporate balance sheets in the face of the undeclared consumption strike by workers and their families who refuse to spend on anything but critical necessities. These should be acknowledged as capital and the state resorting to nationalization of both the financial and production sectors

by subsidizing companies operating expenses in exchange for stemming layoffs to no more than 10% of their workers. Similar levels of aid to the states and local governments was missing in order to accelerate the shrinkage of the public sector following the crisis as tax revenues collapse and austerity follow.

We should similarly be on the lookout for employers offering temporary family/sick leave, reduced hours, temporary pay, and minor alterations in working conditions in response to demands for safety precaution and equipment during the closures. These will be offered as a condition for increasing use of surveillance, speed ups, and lengthening the work day—all of which are already being reported by those working remotely at home. Federal bailouts described above will give corporations breathing room to launch a counter-attack by extending the crisis further beyond the pandemic to extract further alterations in the relations of production, wage and benefit cuts, outsourcing, and automation.

The Struggle is Against Work

One thing that has gone unnoticed is that workers are simultaneously struggling for higher pay and safer working conditions at the same time they are struggling against work. If Karl Marx famously observed, “[labor is shunned like the plague](#)” (MECW, Vol. 3, 274), today work is refused for literally being the vector spreading a plague. Reproductive and logistics workers are refusing to do work that degrades their humanity by making them sacrificial slaughter to the virus in exchange for keeping

capitalism going even as it is in freefall.

But more importantly, these workers are refusing to do work, the same dangerous exploitative work most are forced into for the lack of other means to survive and despite the destruction it inflicts on the planet. As useful, meaningful work at a wage level that allows one some of the comforts of life continues to evaporate the refusal of available work will be further shunned like the plague. Even as unemployment skyrockets with the number filing for unemployment shooting up 600% in the first week and doubling in the second, now at 6.6 million during the first week of April for a total of **17 million in a merely three weeks**, workers are refusing work even as starvation looms.

This struggle has demonstrated the centrality of moving the **struggle against work** to the center of our organizing and struggles. There are so many other things people would rather be doing than work, a desire we almost all share regardless of what differences keep us divided. As capital has sought for the past forty years to raise productivity and intensity of work through a new technical composition, the struggle for less, not merely better paying, work has been missing entirely from our response. The refusal of work during the pandemic has become the refusal to work for the pandemic of capitalism.

The danger to capital and the state (an adjunct of capital) from the refusal of work shows itself in the rapidity to which states have engaged in fiscal pump priming by spending trillions of dollars. The state has effectively replicated Brazil's Bolsa Família to put cash into peoples' hands to spend to artificially keep those that still have work, working. This is not simply a

demonstration of the ease in which wealth can be redistributed or ecological and social problems solved, both futile demands of the loyal opposition. Rather, it now demonstrates to reproductive workers—considered among the most powerless until March—of how quickly they can win less work and more pay by striking. No corporate foundation funded NGO social movement mobilization has managed to extract even a miniscule fraction of what has poured out in fiscal spending since March. The right wing populist US Trump administration will forever be remembered for using fiscal policy in an unprecedented level to extend cash aid to the poor, unemployed, starving, and precarious platform workers. Ironically, Trump may now become the next Franklin D. Roosevelt, saving capitalism by using state socialist strategies, a strategy he can be expected to continue pursuing to win re-election.

On the other side, it also raises warnings for what will follow once the epic dangers fade and billions return to work. Capital and the state will seek to be repaid through even deeper cuts, austerity, privatization, layoffs, repression, intensified algorithmic management regimes, precarization, and new enclosures of the public sector such as moving entire public education systems to corporate online conferencing platforms.

Recomposition of Working Class Struggle

Naomi Klein has garnered much deserved attention for demonstrating how capital and the state [use shocks](#) like the pandemic to shift power even more in its favor. During such crises, Klein

continues to remind us today, capital carries out its previously blocked plans and strategies to impose what David Harvey calls “[accumulation by dispossession](#),” a term so widely used it is entirely forgotten that Marx already documented it in [Part 8](#), “[So-called Primitive Accumulation](#),” in *Capital*, Volume I published in 1867. It’s easy to forget Marx when the solution presented by Klein and others is to wishfully return to thinly disguised Keynesianism of the Green New (capitalist) Deal.

What Klein and many other social democrats have failed to recognize is that workers also have the ability to inflict shocks too—through self-organized unmanaged strikes. Such working class inflicted global shocks come infrequently—1848, 1871, 1877, 1894, 1917-21, 1932-38, 1945-46, 1960-70s—and have now returned.

To understand these struggles it is necessary to assess how worker organizing has managed to adapt to and devise new tactics and strategies to contest and rupture the current organization of capital, the technical composition. Understanding how reproductive labor has self-organized demonstrates both possibilities and risks. Reproductive workers have found new tactics and strategies to organize and disrupt the reproduction of labor power to keep capitalism functioning during the pandemic. If they are defeated, capital will be unrestrained in further efforts to impose the strategy of platform work to other sectors such as education.

Education has long been the terrain of struggle against the imposition of a new technical composition of capital. Workers have managed to respond with rigidity, impeding these plans

by fighting charter schools in K-12, on-line education in higher education, and the continuing neoliberal attacks most vividly seen in the wave of wildcat strike waves in mostly Republican controlled states as well the colony of Puerto Rico in 2018-19.

This means that crisis has allowed the rapid ushering in new strategies for breaking recent waves of worker organizing. Platform workers have been folded into the unemployment insurance program thereby placing the increasingly organized and unruly sector increasing under state management. Borrowing from the platform sector, the state has succeeded imposing further algorithmic data management tools such as Zoom on public and private school teachers, language schools, and college and university faculty on top of recent forced introductions of Learning Management Systems and quantitative performance assessment systems.⁸ Both strategies may prove to be successful in tempering the rapid growth of organizing, unionization, and wildcat strikes in both sectors thereby ushering in a new technical composition of educational capital.

To Be Determined

Self-isolation and the massive decline in wages and the resulting collapse in production and reproduction has accelerated the

⁸ Estimates are that 1.57 billion children (91.3% of all learners) and 63 million teachers in 188 countries are isolated at home and is 372 million students attending 90,000 schools in 22 countries are now holding classes on Zoom or other on line conferencing software. (Education International, 2020; and Lieberman, 2020)

search for a new technical composition of capital with the intention of extracting even more work. As Cleaver reminds us in [33 Lessons on Capital](#) (2019),

capitalists introduce machinery not only to raise productivity...but also to increase work. Machines set the rhythm of work, so by speeding them up the capitalists can force the workers who work with them to work faster, and thus harder (and sometimes longer). With machines running continuously, workers find it difficult to create 'pores' of free time in the working day. (329-330)

As the pandemic has demonstrated yet another mortal vulnerability of the global human population to the myriad terrors of climate catastrophe, so too has it demonstrated the vulnerabilities of global capitalism to a recomposed global working class. Around the world many are documenting and assessing this newly recomposed working class power and working to circulate it. Its success holds out the greatest promise for reorganizing the planet to reverse the five centuries of damage caused by the pandemic of capitalism.

Notes and References

Harry Cleaver, [33 Lessons on Capital: Reading Marx Politically](#), UK: Pluto Press, 2019.

Education International, “Statement: Educators Must be Part of the COVID-19 Crisis Response,” March 19, 2020, <https://www.ei-ie.org/en/detail/16660/statement-educators-must-be-part-of-the-covid-19-crisis-response>

Education International, “Education International COVID-19 tracker,” April 8, 2020, <https://www.ei-ie.org/en/detail/16669/education-international-covid-19-tracker>

Mark Lieberman, “Zoom Use Skyrockets During Coronavirus Pandemic, Prompting Wave of Problems for Schools,” [Education Week](#), April 3, 2020,

[Marx Engels Collected Works](#) (MECW), Vol. 3, UK: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975, p. 274.

Robert is the author of [When Workers Shot Back: Class Conflict from 1877 to 1921](#) (Haymarket 2019) and [Workers’ Inquiry and Global Class Struggle: Tactics, Strategies, Objectives](#) (forthcoming from Pluto Press, January 2021).

Invisíveis Goiânia: The Call of Death Saga in Brazil

For those who only pay attention to high politics and the news, what is happening in reaction to the global pandemic in Brazil appears like insanity driven by crazy politicians and businessmen. A huge majority has been in favor of the quarantine since the beginning, **about 73% of the population**. The percentage gets even higher in the poorest parts the population: **96% of the population in favelas defend quarantine** and 76% of unemployed people and workers under precarious conditions defend quarantine, **even without guaranteed income**. Workers and poor people in Brazil are quite aware of the value of their own lives and of the fact that no one but themselves will be able to guarantee their livelihood. Yet, we are experiencing a huge surge in infections, the death rates are doubling every five days, and streets are starting to become crowded. Why? Is it because poor people are ignorant and do not believe in the pandemic, as some people would urge to think? That is not the case. The Brazilian working class is struggling with a desperate day-to-day fight, trying to protect themselves and their loved ones from economic and psychological coercion without any support from the unions and the political left. For instance, a project offering an emergency relief fund for poor

people of R\$600,00 was celebrated by the left as a major victory at the beginning of April, but by the end of April there are at least 45 million workers who did not receive it yet. 5 million workers cannot even register to try and get it because they do not have smartphones to make the application. The other forty million are having to expose themselves to infection in long lines at the banks. They have to wait to see if they will be able to register to get a chance to get the benefit, but this is often held up due to bureaucratic problems, such as not having an “active” social security registry.

The minimum wage in Brazil is R\$1036,00. There are no debates of any further relief funds. If there were any health, safety, and security measures in the hospitals, workplaces, commerce and anywhere, it was because of these desperate yet very conscious struggles of people trying their very best to live and preserve lives. Our small collective of workers chose to translate and reproduce this saga of struggles in a call centre in Goiânia, because we believe it to be representative of a reality lived by many workers in our country - they are being deprived of information, given contradictory instructions, and poor equipment. At the end of the day, if anything survives, it will be due to their struggle, not because of any enlightenment of their managers. We hope that by sharing their voices and thoughts, workers and people of other countries will be able to hear another call from them - not just those ones when they offer a service or charge the payment of a bill, but their call to be able to breathe freely, like all workers and human beings should be able to do. This text also represents a form of political and theoretical practice that we believe is important to be shared and discussed. These texts were produced over a month of

repeated collective discussion of day-to-day battles and shared pain, angst, and joy over the small victories obtained every day. It took these workers immense courage and resilience inside the call center to keep contacting us and exposing what was happening, even under threat. The courage of these workers was an inspiration to us and - we hope - may be an inspiration to others as well.

The Call of Death Saga: The Unwavering Struggle of Atento's Call Centre's Workers For Their Lives in Goiânia

Part 1: Panic in the service bay

As of the 20th March we are receiving desperate workers complaints about the situation at Atento's call centre, which provides services to companies such as "Vivo", "BMG", "Oi" and "Enel." The situation is dramatic. Ever since COVID-19 cases increased, call centre operators are being fired and disappearing from their workstations: "I realised that this week the number of employees has been decreasing every day, without warning or explanation", a worker denounces. "Since the coronavirus issue started I realised that people were disappearing, I was talking to my colleagues "guys, it's disappearing"" , said another worker. The method for dismissing workers without having to pay for rights is cruel: "They are giving a four-day suspension for breaking two minutes, because with three suspensions it is just cause". In this inhumane condition, mass layoffs are

happening: “I heard the testimony of an employee today, saying that 150 people will be fired immediately, among them newbies who had started at the job three days ago, people in training and hired workers”. In addition, those who stay are obliged to accept a work schedule on alternate days, without the right to a food allowance on break days.

For workers in risk groups at the company, there is no urgency in discussing home working. It does not apply to workers with relatives at risk: “If you have a family, they don’t consider it. It only applies also for those who have a personal computer and internet”. These workers are left to fend for themselves because even after a court order for the workplace to be sanitized and ventilated, the cleaning conditions at the stations remained terrible: “They say that they are cleaning several times, but even hair came out of the keyboards, which, by the way, were not cleaned”. There is also no hand sanitizer available and workers cannot wear masks: “They say they have [70% alcohol gel] hand sanitizer, however it’s also a lie. They’re putting cleaning alcohol on them. Today the union gave a bottle of about 20 or 30ml in half for each one. But it was alcohol mixed with water... Ah! They banned the use of masks for saying that it covers the face and the company does not accept it”.

Workers also report that it was only after an inspection that banned workstations due to poor hygiene conditions that the proper hand sanitizer began to appear. But they still continue to demand that the workers have the necessary equipment to work at home: “Because they are asking again who has a PC or notebook, but they say that it must be an 20MB internet or over... Then the people stayed silent and I asked: ‘and who does not

have?’”. The company is silent, but workers know that those without the equipment will continue to work, taking all the risks working in terrible working conditions. Instead of hiring more cleaners, the company just overloaded the existing cleaners, who are not in the least able to do all the work. With a lying attitude, the company is concerned with taking photos that do not represent reality at all: “Today I also saw people taking pictures of the cleaning ladies (who are visibly overloaded by the way). Pictures of them cleaning tables and smiling. They made us tap the keyboard and wiped the tables only”.

The guidance for sick workers is just to be silent: “There have been cases of employees being sick with the symptoms of coronavirus and all they said was to ‘be quiet’ and hope to get better.” This is pushing workers to the limit of mental exhaustion. They live with the fear of contracting the disease, infecting family members at risk, and/or losing their job. The result is desperate workers: “Dude, people are freaking out. There are people feeling sick and the staff [managers] inducing them to focus. I’m rubbish, I can’t think now, I’m freaking out. I’ve been crying all day and colleagues are already quitting”.

Faced with this absurd situation of inhumanity, workers demand a total and immediate interruption of activities: “Our claim is to stop! Because the recommendation was to avoid any kind of crowding and we spent 6 to more than 8 hours a day in a closed environment, with air conditioning and countless people. Not to mention that the vast majority depends on public transport, which is still crowded today and requires us to have direct physical contact with several people.” The company replies to the workers that their lives are worthless: “Their argument

at first was that we didn't have to stop, because the service was over the phone and meant no risk to customers". And the risk to workers?

Enough is enough

Initially what seemed like a distant threat, on the other side of the planet, ended up knocking on our doors. As a student of higher education, I was caught by the rumors of teachers who came back from a trip from Europe with the suspicion of contamination. The terror began to spread quickly and we feared for our safety and the safety of our family and friends.

The first cases of contagion and/or suspicions were reported, college activities soon stopped, but in the company everything remained as before ... Until we started to organize by ourselves to demand action.

A whatsapp group was created on 17th of March "Atento pro Corona #2." It is the first one that I have participated in so far. This was decisive for our organization. One, maybe two days later, I learned that my supervisor was in the group, denouncing and passing information through screenshots to the manager, coordinator of our group (someone above in the company's hierarchical scale). We could hear, even from our service environment, parts of the conversations, whispers, and in the meantime laughs without any censorship that occurred at the supervisory meetings right next to our service, distant at times by just a few meters. The loud laughs of scorn provoked

curiosity in me and soon I asked another close colleague about what was happening. That's when he answered me that "they heard about our 'whatsapp' group, they think we are making a splash, they are underestimating the risks that we represent to the company." That angered me but it did not surprise me, it made me want to participate in the demonstration, to me it was a clear sign that we needed to be heard.

The demonstration was scheduled for the 19th of March. It was due to start at 2:30pm, but I arrived early (1pm) to join the others. When I arrived the large number of people surprised me, I did not imagine that people with limited moments of pauses, which normally prevented them from even going to the bathroom, would take their 5 minute break to fight for rights. Not counting those who left their homes, even outside their office hours and took the bus, they stopped doing anything else to be participating. I realized that there were others in the same situation as mine, I could feel that the concern about the country's situation and our working conditions was widespread. The cries of the demonstration stretched across the block, people left the balconies of the buildings. It was then that we decided to block part of the traffic on the street. What we wanted was visibility! Not that it was an obstacle for those who circulated around the place. At no time was anyone "stuck" in traffic for even 10 minutes. Even so they called the police, and guess what? They were the same ones that the other day got together to make fun of people. I looked in the corner and recognized people from the top of the company, managers, directors, in short: people who had the power to fire or admit, punish, or persecute anyone they wanted in that domain. They, together, pointed the cell phone cameras towards us and filmed

us. For me the attempt of coercion, of intimidation, was explicit. I thought for a moment if I should end up there and disperse ... That's when I remembered my reasons, in any case it was my integrity that was at stake. The question was, "to be fired or infected, what could be worse?" I stayed! The vehicles arrived, a countless number of them, should have more than 15 vehicles, even from the elite PM group, so the number of police officers was equal to that of the protesters. I was very tense with the situation, but I was convinced that I did nothing more than fight for my rights.

The second half of the act started from there, the police tried to disperse the protesters, as they were unable (or simply could not) they went to the negotiations. It was when we presented our agenda and demands and we were heard. The company representative, named "Alessandro", promised to meet our requirements as quickly as possible:

1. Availability of alcohol and gel in all parts of the companies
2. Constant cleaning of service bays and phone sets
3. The rotation of the number of employees, with the distance of PAS of 1 meter, at least, of distance (or even isolation as our right to contain the health problem)
4. Make the medical team available for preventive exams
5. Release employees who are within the risk group

In addition to the elderly, people with the following chronic diseases are also within the risk group and would be allowed home office work:

- Diabetics
- Hypertensive
- People with heart problems
- Asthmatics
- Kidney patients
- Smokers, whose lungs are most affected by smoking

Coincidentally or not, that day I already had flu symptoms and I went to the demonstration wearing a mask anyway, I, until then, couldn't tell if it was a common flu or Corona virus, the fact is that there was no preventive action, I I knew that it was that environment that was always conducive to this that hurt me, that dirty air conditioning and people working exposed close to each other without any protection. I walked away with a 4-day certificate and during those 4 days I was under observation. I sent a message to my closest friends at work asking for care and clarifying my situation. My supervisor called me directly on my cell phone after that, he didn't even want to leave a message, he was brief, what marked his tone of voice and his words was his intention to hide my case, he said something like "you don't have to talk to me everyone that you are sick, it doesn't help at all, it ends up making people afraid (of coming to work) "".

When I came back (23rd of March), the spacing between PA's had changed and gel alcohols had already been made available, cleaning started to occur more frequently, the dispensations to work in the home office gradually also occurred, but we never knew how it was happening, there was never a minimum of dialogue between management and other employees in this regard, people just disappeared ... We never knew the criteria.

Many people at extreme risk are still in person, I even talked to a lady at the 52-year-old company who worked and still took care of her father at home, bedridden, with chronic illnesses, she complained to me that she had already lost hope of being released, this, while people outside the risk group are in the home office. Not to mention the forced layoffs, those who were on experience were fired, others, for fear of continuing to work, asked to leave on their own, the operation was emptying. Insecurity remains. And for some there is no way out, they cannot leave the post and risk the feared unemployment in times of crisis. We are taking risks and this text is a cry for help.

Perhaps it is the content for another text, but the situation for those who work at home is also not favorable. Nobody was released from my area, but I hear from colleagues in other areas who work at home that the conditions are also terrible. The internet network does not work the same way, the system as a whole is not supported by computers that end up damaged, there is no technical assistance for everyone and we have the impression that there is nowhere to run, wherever we are we will be unattended.

Part 2 Atento: Resisting Death's Call

17th of April, 2020

At first, almost everything seemed like a joking matter. If someone coughed or sneezed, they asked, “No, it’s not corona, right!?” The company used to argue that “a call center can

keep going, it does not mean a risk to our customer!” OK! But what about us? 13th of March, when quarantine began in Goiás, was also the day on which our first colleague disappeared. She took two weeks off on a medical certificate. When they saw her returning with a mask, they took her away in a hurry. We never saw her again.

Then the news suddenly started to sound like a warning signal. Not for managers, but for the employees. The managers started to organize when they heard the news of an alleged general strike of call center operators.

They brought, I do not know from where, a woman called “Polly”, a so-called superintendent of Atento – and this, hours before the scheduled time for the beginning of the demonstration. It was on the 20th of March. She was talking nicely, telling us about how she took a plane and left her daughter at home just to come here and reassure us that it was safe to keep working. But was she aware that we need to leave our children at home and take a crowded bus to work every day? Does she realize that sometimes we wait hours to catch these buses? That there are many people coughing inside them and we do not know why? “Leave your house a bit earlier!” and come back if you can!

Whether it is rainy or sunny: how many times have I seen colleagues working six hours a day, drenched in rain, in a room with AC? Polly, said over and over again “We are doing everything we can! We will do everything to ensure your safety, we will ensure that everyone can do home office, we are holding meetings every day, from 8am to 9pm for you! But if you still want to leave your PAs (work stations) and go to the

demonstration, feel free to do so.”

All of the managers went to the demonstration, but not really to hold signs. They decided to call the police, they boasted. There were more police officers than demonstrators, and although the voices of those who were there were quiet – at that particular moment they were making some important changes.

The next day, the 21st of March, we saw the following scene: a supervisor running from side to side, asking questions, wanting to know which employees were in the risk group (they still did not consider relatives). They asked and made a list of people who had small children, notebook, internet (but considering only those with a 20MB connection or higher).

They decreed the mandatory use of alcohol gel in companies and the union brought a bottle for each operator, half-filled. Alcohol gel? I heard that it was ethanol! It was a strange liquid, which, if shaken, turned white and had things inside that no one could identify. For the company, alcohol was meant to replace the disinfectant gel. They forbid the use of masks because they cover part of the face. And if someone came in masked, they would kick the person out immediately. And the funny thing is that those colleagues who wore masks disappeared and no one ever brought this fact up. If someone asked for the management, they would talk it out. If someone went to talk to them face to face, they would all give the same answer: “I have a medical certificate” and in a tacit, strange, and only way. Ultimately, they were always gone for good.

They decreed that everyone should be two meters away from

each other. In the company they arranged the work stations so that they would be separated by “one meter at most!” The inspectors went there and told the supervisors that everything was wrong, that it was “to get rid of all that mess”, or “it would be on them.”

So the managers made the cleaning ladies take pictures smiling, but you could see the despair and tiredness in their eyes. Pressure and fear too. They blocked some of the benches in the cafeteria, but only until our local TV reporter went there. Then they took it out and started releasing the staff.

Regarding working from home, the majority of those who had a notebook and internet were teenagers, with parents who support them. Mothers and fathers with small children, as well as those who had family members in risk groups remained working at the company. At first, they argued with the lack of the specific equipment for the call center operators. But they were giving away a similar one in other departments. I overheard a supervisor say off the record “just pack it up and take it home!” But Atento was choosing to whom they would give the necessary equipment! And it went on with the argument that the list of priorities was following the type of service being provided. But wait ... weren't they trying to prioritize at first? What about the small children? The families at risk? But these workers did not have a notebook or 20MB internet useful for the company, so they remained at the end of the line.

What about the decree that “if you have someone with a cough or flu symptoms, or someone in the family, you should stay home”? What you do not stop hearing inside is the sound of

people coughing, sneezing, blowing their noses. There were some who had shortness of breath and were told to “be quiet” until it went away on its own. I saw people asking to leave and they would not let me because they had a waiting list. And, of course, people kept disappearing.

The argument now for not allowing people to work from home is that they lack technicians; others say that they do not need technicians to install anything, just plug it in and that should do it. Every day there is a new sign with new COVID-19 instructions. The impression is that the sign means that “someone who died here was infected with coronavirus.” But nobody says anything, nobody knows of anything, or of no one.

They make videos with photos of those working from home, making hearts with their hands and saying “we are here for you!” But what about us who are at risk day after day? Who are we here for? And who is here for us?

We have been waiting for a month now, I have lost count of the days - and of their countless excuses. Some of us in the call centre - and all of those who work for BMG - were released to work from home on Thursday 16th of April 16 after a lot of struggle. But what about the rest of us who provide service to other companies? Why haven't we been released too? There are colleagues who are deemed as members of a risk group or who care for sick family members - who themselves are also at risk group - and have yet to be released. We will need the solidarity of those who went away. And build more strength among those who stayed.

Atento, we do not need the chocolates that you give us day in day out - as if this was some kind of joke - because we are working though we should be at home. We should have the same rights as the “chosen ones”. We are not for sale! We work under these conditions because we have families to support. But every day it becomes clearer that, until it is not one of you, you will not understand that our situation is very serious!

We do not want to stop working, we just want what is our right! Equal treatment for everyone! Released one, release them all!

Part 3: The death call continues in Atento: at home and in the house

25th of April, 2020

The conditions of Atento’s call center workers, whose company provides services to “Vivo”, “BMG”, “Oi” and “Enel”, continue to be terrible. Whether in the company or working from home, workers continue to be threatened with dismissal and the loss benefits. They do not receive protection masks and quality alcohol gel. So, they are still at risk of dying at work.

HOME OFFICE OF FEAR AND REDUCED SALARY

Atento has been slowly releasing workers from some operations to their home office in recent weeks. What seemed like a

relief, turned into a nightmare. Because, the system that was bad became even worse and the workers started to lose many calls. However, even with technical problems, the pressure of the bosses for goals is maintained through virtual groups. The workers live a real death odyssey until they are released gradually. In the beginning, only those who had a computer at home were allowed to work from a home office. After that, the company released the company's computers and headsets, but only for those with access to the internet. To get the equipment, workers were forced to sign a term in which they are responsible for any damage, which will be reduced from their salary. A worker says: "... if something happens, they deduct it from our 'big' salary ... that would happen in installments. I don't even like to breathe near them. " An important part of the income of workers was lost once they worked from home, because they no longer receive the transportation voucher, which is worth around R\$200. For a salary as low as R\$830 per month, receiving the voucher is essential. The company promises to provide aid to cover electricity and internet expenses. Nobody knows how much it would be, but according to some people it would be only \$R80.

When asked about the value of this, workers respond: "We have no idea. Supervisors said they plan to estimate energy and internet spending. And they already pay more than that."

STILL “IN THE HOUSE”, WITH FEAR OF DEATH AND “THE FIRING SQUAD”

Other sectors in Atento have not even discussed offering home working possibilities to their workers. A female worker told us that “no one in my sector was allowed to do home office.” The work conditions for those who stayed remained the same as before the pandemic: terrible and dirty. Ever since the demonstration on the 19th of March, the two meter space between the service stations has been maintained, but they do not have masks, alcohol products to clean their hands, or adequate cleaning of their working spaces. A worker says that by the end of March, “ever since the demonstration, a few things have changed, yes, but just a bit... and it stayed that way, there were no more adaptations after those initial ones. In fact, the ones that happened were those that we demanded, they did not offer us any changes. And they stopped at the few things we demanded, we don’t have any masks and aren’t allowed to wear them.”

April is now nearing its end. There was no distribution of masks by the company and there will never be. The company distributed a warning: “Bring your own masks, you need to be mindful of your health and safety”. It was clear then, the company will not give us proper protection gear. As to the alcohol gel, “the workers are given something that is supposed to be the 70% alcohol gel in a pot for each one, but it smells and feels like soap, because it generates foam just like soap and we never saw alcohol generating foam like soap.”

Until when will the workers of Atento be threatened, fired, and forced to work in conditions that can cause death? Our demands remain the same! We want adequate working conditions for those working from home, in the company building, for everyone. We are all equal, we are all running risks, and we all need and want to survive.

Further reading

- Invisíveis (in Portuguese): <https://invisiveisluta.milharal.org/quem-somos/>
- English translations: <https://notesfrombelow.org/article/invisible-nodes>

Sergio Bologna: The ‘Long Autumn’: workers’ struggles in the 1970s

In 1969 the national collective labour agreements in important sectors, affecting metalworkers, chemical workers, construction workers, food workers, hospital workers, bus and train operators, agricultural labourers, to name but a few, were coming to a close.⁹ The renewal of collective bargaining agreements affected four and a half million workers. When the main trade unions – CGIL, CISL and UIL – organised a series of industrial actions, angry, committed workers joined the protests en masse.¹⁰ This led to an exceptional state of mobilisation in the country, from September to December of that year. That time in Italian history has since been known as “the hot autumn”.

⁹ The original version of this essay in *L’approdo mancato*, ed. Franco Amatori, “Annali Feltrinelli 2017”, Milan, 2017.

¹⁰ CGIL, *Confederazione Italiana del Lavoro* (Italian Labour Federation), founded in 1944. CISL, *Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Lavoratori* (Italian Federation of Workers’ Trade Unions), founded in 1948. UIL, *Unione Italiana del Lavoro*, founded in 1950; in the 1970s CGIL was a trade union close to the Communist and Socialist Parties, CISL to the Christian Democrats, and UIL to the Social Democrats.

Even if we look at these events from a medium-term historical perspective, such as the second post-war period, they are still to be viewed as exceptional, not so much for the actions taken – strikes, marches, demonstrations, occupation of public spaces, etc. – as for the strong sense of identity expressed by factory workers towards the rest of society. What had gone on in the preceding decade, starting in 1960 with the protests of electromechanical workers in Milan, was like a long prelude to the increasingly bitter confrontation between trade unions and employers' associations, concluding in the autumn of 1969 with a veritable class conflict. The “hot autumn” should be viewed in this sense as the culmination of a historical “cycle” during which moral values and material conditions were the centre of attention. A conflict that went beyond industrial relations, and involved all members of society. But also a starting point for another cycle, marked by strong social and political tensions, which called into question the balance of power between social classes by challenging the balance of power in the workplace. This is why the “long autumn” of the 1970s seemed to be an apt phrase.¹¹

A shift in trade union struggles from working conditions to power within the factory and decisions on social issues (housing, health, etc.) entailed the transformation of bargaining tools –

¹¹ *La fabbrica fordista e il conflitto industriale*, in “Storia del lavoro in Italia”, vol. VI, edited by Stefano Musso, “1945-2000”, Castelvechi, Rome 2015; Giuseppe Berta, *L'Italia delle fabbriche. La parabola dell'industrialismo nel Novecento*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2001; Bertucelli, Pepe, Righi, *Storia del sindacato in Italia*. Vol. IV, *Il sindacato nella società industriale*, Ediesse Edizioni, Rome 2008; Aris Accornero, *La parabola del sindacato*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1992.

such as strikes – into a manifestation of political will. This can be defined as a movement with a social dimension, or “soziale Bewegung”.

This is a way of looking from another viewpoint at the so-called “pansindacalismo” of the 1970s, namely the trade union’s claim to consider itself a wide-reaching political subject, independent of political parties and even ready to direct its actions against the interests of the party supporting it. In the 1970s unions did not limit themselves to taking positions on general social issues – health, housing, transport, the environment – through verbal statements or documents. They mobilised broad swaths of the population, involving them in a broad power confrontation at the national level, and helping to create the space typical of social protest movements.

This militancy and intransigence was widely shared by the rank and file. There was indeed a will to change living and working conditions, and a conviction that the time to try had come.¹² Parliamentary democracy had proved inadequate in bringing about change. After 1948 US pressure led to a split in trade union unity, with the creation of two confederations competing

¹² The communist press had perceived this new atmosphere, as was written in “L’Unità” on 29 October 1968: “There is no immediate contract renewal that can cause, in the normal way, a general state of tension even among categories not directly affected; rather the worker movement that is becoming established is a sweeping movement regarding the condition of workers inside the factory, over and beyond fixed deadlines and beyond the limitations of red tape regarding worker conflict, based on artificially fixed rules”, quoted in Claudia Magnanini, *Autunno caldo e ‘anni di piombo’. Il sindacato milanese dinanzi alla crisi economica e istituzionale*, Franco Angeli, Milan 2006, p. 53.

with the CGIL, one of Christian inspiration (CISL), the other social democratic (UIL). A repressive regime was re-established, with the firing of trade unionists, mostly communists, the “confinement” of militant workers in out-of-the-way areas within the factory, and a systematic refusal to recognise negotiating powers for workers’ representatives. Among workers therefore the difference between working conditions under fascism and under the young republic was not such that it might be said “something has changed”.

The condition of the working class in the 1950s was not just that of the masses still held under an authoritarian regime - apart from a few rare exceptions of “enlightened” capitalists - it was a condition “unworthy of a civilised nation”. Women workers were often subjected to sexual abuse. In areas like the Veneto region this was considered normal, and even accepted by the victims themselves.¹³ A section of the clergy would recommend that women should not enter factory work if they wanted to keep their morality intact. Many companies, small and large, did not have canteens or decent changing rooms. This was not justified by the need for discipline, rather it seemed to be aimed at humiliating employees. As unrest began to break out, the reprisals of persecuted communist leaders were compounded by the revolt sparked by Christian trade unionists, in defence not so much of the working classes as of human dignity.

¹³ Giovanni Trinca, *Nomade per scelta. Dalle grandi trasformazioni del Veneto agli insediamenti industriali nel Sud*, Edizioni Bibliolavoro, Sesto San Giovanni 2011, anticipating some comments taken up in *'Preti rossi' e 'sindacato bianco' in destra Piave tra gli anni '50 e '60*, presented at the seminar: “C’era una volta la Città del lavoro”, Montebelluna, 24 May 2014.

New directions in the Catholic world and Marxist thought

Between 1959 and 1970 a radical change took place in the Catholic world: “striking was no longer a sin”. This change of mentality shocked employers, who had grown accustomed to using the Catholic hierarchy and parish priests to keep the workforce under control (parishes also served as employment offices), and explains how trade union conflicts took on a two-fold political connotation: “classist”, inspired by marxist and socialist thought; and “humanist”, from a Christian point of view, according to which man is made in God’s image, and must be respected. So it was that the parish became a place for trade unionists, Catholics and Communists, to meet after many years apart to discuss and decide on common demands and forms of action. Changes within the CISL union were driven by an ecclesial movement, deriving its impulse from the Second Vatican Council and the encyclical “Mater et Magistra”.¹⁴

¹⁴ An important source for the history of the CISL in Lombardy are the recent testimonies from around thirty trade unionists of the 1970s, *Impegno e passione. Gli anni caldi della CISL in Lombardia*, Edizioni Bibliolavoro, Sesto San Giovanni 2016. See also Sergio Zaninelli, *La FIM e il progetto di una ‘nuova CISL’ negli anni 60 del secolo scorso*, in *Lavoro, mercato, istituzioni. Scritti in onore di Gian Primo Cella*, edited by Bordogna, Pedersini and Provasi, Franco Angeli, Milan 2013. In addition to the testimonies of CISL Lombardy officials, quoted in note 6, there is the long interview by Paolo Feltrin with Pierre Carniti, “Una vita senza rimpianti”. *Un profilo di Pierre Carniti nel suo tempo*, in Mario Colombo and Raffaele Morese (editors), *Pensiero, azione, autonomia. Saggi e testimonianze per Pierre Carniti*, Edizioni Lavoro, Rome, 2017, pp. 17-124.

At the same time, the unrest of new generations sensitive to Marxist ideology led many to challenge the moderate line of the Italian Communist party (PCI), creating room for discussion outside the party's walls. These "classist" and "humanist" pushes arose from the perception that workers in large and small factories, and "red" and "white" regions, were undergoing a change in attitude towards factory hierarchies and the established order, as part of emancipatory processes whose dynamics and evolution remained largely obscure. Someone called it "the discovery of antagonism".¹⁵ Thus a historical analysis must consider not only institutions, parties, trade unions and the State but also interpretative aspects, such as "spontaneity", "subjectivity" and the like. We will understand little about that period if we fail to appreciate the enormous consensus enjoyed by the most radical of trade union positions.¹⁶ Even though at that time the trade union organisation was a well-oiled machine, we might say a bulldozer, the Hot Autumn would remain an incomprehensible phenomenon if we were to neglect the extent to which workers shared union goals, indeed many had the desire and the will to go further. Workers were no longer in awe of corporate hierarchies, and people were no longer afraid to rebel. They had become fully aware of their rights.

Italy had been making great strides on the path to modernisation, even though educational standards among the working

¹⁵ Paolo Feltrin, Adriano Miolli, *La scoperta dell'antagonismo. Gli anni 60 alla Zoppas: operai, lotte, organizzazione*, Marsilio, Padova 1981.

¹⁶ Andrea Sangiovanni in his fine research on the image of the factory worker in films, in the press, in the ideologies of the 1950s and 60s, *Tute blu. La parabola operaia nell'Italia repubblicana*, Donzelli Editore, Rome 2006, p. 110 ff., puts the spotlight on these changes in the collective mindset.

class remained low. Many had not even completed compulsory education. Information was available and in circulation, the economic boom had introduced new consumer habits, millions of peasants or their children had switched to industrial jobs. As many as 17 million people had moved home in just a decade. The country was reaching a level of maturity that facilitated efforts to seek a concrete path towards emancipation. This came in the form of conflict with corporate hierarchies and despotism in the workplace, and in facing up to and defeating a boss/underling mentality, for which giving a job and a wage was a gesture of generosity, requiring unlimited gratitude in return. It took millions of hours of strikes to make it clear that a job is a contractual relationship and not an act of charity.

Mass production and the new workforce

In the 1960s Italian factories specialised largely in continuous-cycle mass production of durable goods and consumer goods. Production, in a market that guaranteed rapid absorption, focused on large figures, exploiting the available national workforce. Factories employed mostly non-skilled workers who had to keep up with intensive production rates on assembly lines. Trade union practice was to “monetise effort” and negotiate better piecework pay when the chain accelerated.

This trend came to an end in 1967/68, as a consequence of a growing collective awareness and changing attitudes towards working conditions, with calls for a reduction in worker fatigue, and demands not only for higher wages or more bargaining

power but rather the abolition of the piecework system as a tool binding workers to productivity. The Fordist assembly line is a rigid system that leaves no room for any flexibility in the organisation of work. When young workers, who had felt the brunt of its command, found out how fragile it really was, that a strike called by one section was enough to damage the entire cycle, that some segments of the chain were more vulnerable than others, they put in practice their revenge.

Another aspect of those years (1966/69) in Italian factories concerns technicians, who ceased to be passive executors of their expected role of disseminators of science applied to the production process. Loyal to their own skills rather than to the company they worked for, they played no role in the disciplinary apparatus, unlike white-collar office workers, who would continue to play such a role.¹⁷

Three factors were behind trade union struggles in those years: situations doing damage to human dignity, increased workloads due to intensive production rates and the antagonism of technicians. Protests that reached their peak in the “hot autumn”. It is indeed too simplistic to attribute responsibility for the change in worker behaviour to the spread of revolutionary ideologies or

¹⁷ The condition of these technicians, for example engineers having studied at Milan Polytechnic and hired as designers, according to a survey conducted by student bodies dealing with exchanges and work experience in other countries, was very poor in the mid-1960s, from an economic point of view, with pay no higher than that of a foreman. Thus there was widespread discontent (as described by Vittorio De Gara, an engineer who as a student ran the Centro Nazionale Stages, and would go on to have important experience in construction companies serving the chemical and steel sectors).

to the propaganda of radical groups and actions of extremists coming from the ranks of the bourgeoisie.

Summary judgement on the 1970s

The biggest obstacle when looking back at the history of that decade is the dismissive judgement contained in the phrase “years of lead” (lead meaning bullets), in which the actions of terrorist groups are given a significance that “crushes” all other social and political events, and acts of terrorism are tied in a cause and effect logic with the radical nature of shop-floor mobilisation and insistent union demands.

The prominence attached to this particular aspect tends to hamper any reflection attempting to explain why trade union conflicts in the factories met with so much support. The whole question has indeed been given the *damnatio memoriae* treatment.¹⁸

The 1970s are thus an extreme case of “divided memory”. We will not go into the merits of this contradiction, but believe that going to the root of the reasons for such radicality and continuity in trade union conflicts in the 1970s is the way to try and understand phenomena that have not occurred again in the

¹⁸ See how the period is treated in most common school textbooks in: Carlo Tombola, *Un caso di ‘memoria lacerata’: l’Italia degli Anni Settanta nei manuali di storia*, in the online journal “Altronevencento” della Fondazione Micheletti, no. 29, 2016, <http://www.fondazionemicheletti.it/altronevencento/articolo.aspx?idarticolo=29&tipoarticolo=dlettore&id=68>.

half century since 1968.

The questions we have asked ourselves are: “why was that autumn so hot?” and “why did it last so long?”

A new cycle begins

One event in particular marked a break with the 1950s: Milan, 1960, and the protests of 70,000 electromechanical workers. The forms of struggle adopted were very much on a par with those practised in 1968, such as rota-based strikes, productivity go-slows, pickets outside factory gates and smaller surrounding factories, the invasion of the city with marches, the recognition of factory workers as citizens.

The protests of Milan's electromechanical workers took organisations of the labour movement by surprise, in particular their unexpected level of combativeness. It was a spontaneous but not self-organised struggle, handled by FIOM union leaders.¹⁹ This union had a rigid culture concerning job hierarchy and its recognition in economic and regulatory terms. It was indeed a non-egalitarian culture. The leading figure was the skilled worker (e.g. toolmaker), who would be a long-standing communist, member of the Internal Committee, who for the first time engaged in dialogue with a mass of unskilled workers put on the assembly line, mostly women. Here we have three

¹⁹ FIOM, *Federazione Operai Impiegati Metallurgici*, trade union of the metalworkers, the oldest industrial Trade Union of Italy, founded in 1901.

harbingers of 1968: the forms of struggle, women's militancy and communication with the city, placed in the symbolic sphere (whistles, silent marches, where only clogs on the pavement could be heard, etc.).²⁰

We are led to believe, regarding the peculiar nature of this strike, that by 1968/69 a wealth of experience and knowledge had been acquired about conflict actions that had entered the collective consciousness of the factory, and was not the exclusive property of union militants. When the time was right it would drive spontaneous action. The term "spontaneity" should not evoke images of uninformed workers who join union struggles on the basis of purely emotional reactions. It has to do with rational behaviours, making the factory worker more independent and enabling him or her to seek conflict even without instructions from the union. Whether he would be able to govern the process is another matter however.

The new and crucial phenomenon that emerged during the "long autumn" was the establishment of a communication "terrain", a sort of broadband network, in which knowledge

²⁰ Ivan Brentari, *Giuseppe Sacchi. Dalle lotte operaie allo Statuto dei Lavoratori*. Unicopli Edizioni, Milan 2010. See also his interview in www.ivanbrentari.com/giuseppesacchi. Another significant testimony from the CGIL is that of Antonio Costa, at the time official of the FIOM Lega Solari, as part of the documentary *Oltre il ponte – Storie di lavoro* by Sabina Bologna, fully reproduced in the volume by S. Bologna and P.P. Poggio, *Dalla classe operaia alla creative class. Le trasformazioni di un quartiere di Milano*. Derive&Approdi Editore, Rome, 2009, p. 69 ff. Costa states that he himself introduced the whistle in the communication of workers' marches after having seen the protests of UK white collar workers in the insurance sector on TV.

was transferred about factory conditions and ways and means of the struggle. Experiences were circulated, and ended up having a considerable influence on the proletariat's "art of living".

The basis for this communication channel was the high worker turnover in large factories: on average 10-15% of the workforce changed jobs during the course of a year. Sometimes the percentage was much higher. There was also an accumulation of industrial experiences conveyed by those returning from work experiences in foreign countries.

We should thus reject the idea of the 1968/69 period in Italian factories being a sequence of events on "virgin" territory, as if it were the "discovery of industrial civilization" on the part of peasants entering a production unit for the first time, or the inhabitants of small towns in the South or in the Veneto region in the north going to live in the big city and remaining open-mouthed.

The four main ideas of the workers' 1968

Strikes and demonstrations in 1968/1969 were not a sudden explosion of anger. Already in 1967 and the first few months of 1968 workers' protests happened at Fiat, Olivetti, Innocenti, Falck, Italsider, Dalmine, Zoppas, Indesit and at the Petrochemical plant at Marghera, to name just the most important. Everything was on the table with employers: work intensity, workforce numbers, overtime, harmful works, canteen rights, and so on. One needs to remember that confidence in the trade

unions had been ebbing following contract negotiations in the 1961/63 period, which saw workers coming out second best. There was no need to mention Berkeley, or the assassination of Che Guevara, or the bombing of Hanoi, to set factory workers on the warpath.

What were the “big” ideas underpinning the protests of the working class in 1968/69? At the top we might put egalitarianism. A demand for equality was a difficult one to see through in the trade union culture of the time, even more in the communist culture. Not only did it undermine party officials, it also went against factory activists who had stood their ground in the 1950s and 60s.

It has been said that egalitarianism was a phenomenon of pure union demagogy. Instead, egalitarianism was conceived as a tool to undermine the control system in place at the shop-floor, whereby a chain of higher and lower leaders operated on the basis of various forms of blackmail and division. Workers were able to see with their own eyes the contradiction between merit as recognised in words and the arbitrary nature of punishment and promotion, which had little or nothing to do with individual performance and skills and a lot to do with favouritism and

harassment.²¹

The second big idea was to win respect for dignity, even more as a person than just as a worker. There were no changing rooms or showers, and personal searches were routine. Then there were the fines, suspensions, favouritism, blackmail. It was a system involving personal humiliation. This goes a long way to explaining the anger and the persistence of that anger over the course of a decade. It was the revenge of those whose dignity had been offended, the belief that workers had to be constantly on their guard so as not to return to the situation in place before the hot autumn.

The Workers' Charter, approved in May 1970, took this aspect into due account. In articles 1 to 13, relating to "the worker's freedom and dignity", sworn guards were prevented from entering production lines, responsibility for medical examinations in the event of work absences was transferred from the company doctor to INPS (national social security institute), the remote control of workers through audiovisual equipment was

²¹ Recalled very clearly by Pierre Carniti in the interview with Paolo Feltrin: "the subject was not a pointless egalitarianism, it was the rejection of wage differences managed unilaterally by company management, bonus systems left to the discretion of factory hierarchies, the challenge to wage discrimination. For me it was a typical question of (trade union) principle: to raise the dignity of work it was necessary to introduce objective criteria for job classification, putting an end to discretionary bonuses based on company loyalty". In 1969 the trade union had consulted many workers, who had expressed, by a large majority, the desire for equal rises for everyone. See for greater details Fabrizio Loreto, *La nascita del sindacato dei consigli: la piattaforma contrattuale unitaria dei metalmeccanici nel 1969*, in Causarano, Falossi, Giovannini (editors), *Il 1969 e dintorni. Analisi, riflessioni e giudizi a 40 anni dall' "autunno caldo"*, Ediesse edizioni, Rome 2010.

prohibited. The most effective rules to come into force were in article 7 (disciplinary sanctions) and article 13 (worker's transfer to other job duties). The Charter constituted legal recognition that the condition of workers in Italy was such as to offend human dignity.

Some employers ignored the Charter completely, forcing unions to resort to legal actions. Even though an agreement had been signed, it was not necessarily respected, and the effort to enforce it sometimes exceeded that needed to obtain it. If we had statistics on shop-floor micro-conflicts in those years, the stoppages or strikes caused by the failure to respect agreements already signed by the parties we would probably find that they make up the lion's share. This goes to explain the length of workers' resistance, and the notion of "permanent conflict" assumes a new meaning

The third big idea was the reduction of workloads, achieved through self-reduction. Literature in this field, even that friendly to the position of the industrialists' confederation, acknowledges that in the 1950s and 60s, and especially in the sphere of mass production, the physical exploitation of workers had intensified, in a survival of the fittest regime. This was possible because labour supply outweighed demand, and exhausted workers could easily be replaced. It was a period of very high turnover. Union practice was to monetise fatigue by improving the piece rate. Joint committees were set up to assess the sustainability of time reductions.

The biggest assault on these union procedures took place at Pirelli in Milan. And the response of its Comitato Unitario

di Base (CUB) conferred on it a legendary status.²² How did the fight against piecework work? Units in the production chain would work at a speed decided by the team, compatible with the physiological capability of the individuals. This form of struggle spread rapidly, and was practised throughout the decade. It was accompanied by wage demands, which shifted from a focus on piece rate to basic pay rates. CUB Pirelli was not the only promoter of this kind of initiative: among the first to carry out such strikes was Candy in Brugherio, the main Italian manufacturer of washing machines. In the summer of 1968 Petrolchimico in Porto Marghera came up with similar conclusions.²³

²² I will not go into whether the CUB came from organisations outside the worker movement or was actually “remote-controlled by communists”, as a trade unionist claims in *La condizione operaia ed i consigli di fabbrica*, edited by Fabrizio d’Agostini, Editori Riuniti, Rome 1974. Much has been written about CUB Pirelli and the situation in the Bicocca plant in Milan, see Marianella Sclavi, *Lotta di classe e organizzazione operaia*, Mazzotta, Milan 1974; more recently Edmondo Montali, 1969, *l’autunno caldo della Pirelli. Il ruolo del sindacato nelle lotte operaie della Bicocca*, Ediesse Edizioni, Rome 2010. In the pamphlet from the collection “Linea di massa” entitled *Lotte alla Pirelli* there is an elaboration of the interview I had with one of the founders of the CUB, Raffaello De Mori, just after the events of September–October 1968. The pamphlet was part of the publications of the Potere Operaio group.

²³ Gianni Sbrogiò, Devi Sacchetto, *Quando il potere è operaio*, manifestolibri, Rome 2009. The situation at Candy was also viewed as an exemplary case of new worker democracy, Bruno Ugolini, *Candy, i nuovi poteri alla prova*, in “Sindacato moderno”, April–May 69; the position of the FIM in *La lotta operaia alla Candy* in “Dibattito sindacale”, November–December 1968. Candy is the subject of one of the more painstaking researches conducted in this millennium regarding the period under review: *Il conflitto industriale negli anni Settanta: il caso della Candy (1968–1973)* which can be downloaded from <http://docplayer.it/22987459-Il-conflitto-industriale-negli-anni-settanta-il-caso-della-candy.html>.

The fourth big idea was the protection of workers' physical integrity. A fundamental pillar for workers' changing mindset was the attitude towards their own health, the fight against the harmfulness of the work environment and relative manufacturing processes. This was a major legacy of that period, due in large part to the involvement of physicians, which saw new horizons opening up for professional ethics, with the emergence of new models of disease prevention and treatment. There were big changes in occupational medicine. New relations developed between workers and technicians, making it possible to discuss plant modernisation or maintenance management in a constructive manner.

These four big ideas underpinned conflict-related conduct and led to a change of mentality, forming an organic and coherent whole. Conduct that was the result not of anger or ideological infatuations, but of a thought process, being aware, maturing, discovering a social position that was no longer subordinate, putting one's self at the centre, in a similar way to the process of women's emancipation. Workers' subjectivity was the real, fundamental driver of the long autumn.

This led not only to new forms of representation, such as the Council of Delegates, but also to new forms of direct participation, such as the workers' assembly. At the outset this was a kind of Agora, where the worker became citizen of a separate republic. It would go on to become a place for exhausting debates, losing its initial freshness, and the manipulation of the assembly became a common practice. It could not prevent unpopular decisions from being taken. For thousands of people however the assembly was an opportunity to break free, an

unforgettable time in their lives, when for the first time they got up the courage to speak in public.

Reactions of the institutions

Driven by these intentions, workers' subjectivity grew greatly in strength from the hot autumn to the expiry of contracts in 1973.²⁴

What was the reaction of the two parties affected by this wave, i.e. trade unions and businesses?

Companies refused to acknowledge that something radical had happened, deluding themselves that workers would have tired of this new line. They were unable to see that workers had become different people, blaming troublemakers for the change

²⁴ The most complete analysis of the struggles going from 1968 to 1973 came from a group of researchers coordinated by Alessandro Pizzorno in a series of six volumes published from 1972 to 1980. Each volume is dedicated to a single sector: automotive, steel, electro-mechanical engineering, household appliances, telecommunications. The titles and authors of single volumes: L. Luppi, E. Reyneri, *Il settore dell'automobile (Autobianchi-Innocenti)*, M. Regini, E. Santi, *Il settore degli elettrodomestici (Candy e Ignis)*, L. Dolci, E. Reyneri, *Il settore elettromeccanico (Magnet Marelli e Ercole Marelli)*, I. Regalia, M. Regini, *Il settore delle telecomunicazioni (Sit-Siemens e GTE)*, G. Abbatecola, B. Beccalli, G. Carabelli, *Il settore siderurgico (Dalmine, Falck, Redaelli)*. The summarising volume came out at the end of the decade, edited by Pizzorno, Regini, Reyneri, Regalia under the title *Lotte operaie e sindacato in Italia (1968-1972)*. The approach, Pizzorno underlines, focuses on sociological aspects of social mobilisation.

of climate.²⁵

The inadequacy of the management culture came out. Human resource management courses had influenced younger executives, but not succeeded in affecting top management. Employers could not conceive of a cultural evolution of their employees, therefore they underestimated the pressure that had been building up.²⁶

Trade unions reacted better. They seized the opportunity of internal renewal, without thinking too much about how to govern the process. They too, perhaps, underestimated the autonomy of workers' subjectivity, and the contradictions that such autonomy might create. The FIM CISL union was convinced it could reliably represent these new demands.

In the FIOM union elaboration was more complex. Communist education suggested as a priority the problem of how to govern

²⁵ One of the few texts that looks into the reaction to the hot autumn from the personnel departments of large factories, is written by Giuseppe Berta, *Conflitto industriale e struttura d'impresa alla Fiat (1919-1979)*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1998.

²⁶ Michele Pacifico provided me with documents he had drafted at the request of group heads when, in the mid-1970s, he was head of personnel at Motta. These documents analysed the dynamics of conflicts inside and outside the factory with great clarity and managerial prudence, but remained a dead letter. Pacifico was a member of the original Olivetti group, and had helped to found the Fiat management school at Marentino. Having left Motta after the merger with Alemagna, he was CEO for a number of companies in Italy and elsewhere, in both the public and private sectors. I was able to compare his experience in Motta with that of Beppe De Simone, at the time one of the leaders of the internal protest and activist in the struggle committee.

the movement, before trying to understand it. Some principles of the movement clashed with CGIL tradition: egalitarianism first and foremost, and the assembly movement. Painful but necessary actions were taken, accepting the election of delegates by “white ballot” and replacing the Internal Committee with the Works Council. It was the right choice, however, allowing FIOM CGIL to remain a dominant force.²⁷

Was a new system of industrial relations possible?

Actions in the period after the hot autumn focused on ensuring that contracts were complied with, and that gains made were expanded to more marginal situations and workers. Assolombarda maintained a “hard” line: fourteen thousand complaints were brought against trade union activists, delegates and rank-and-file workers.²⁸ In the short term this attitude seemed to intimidate workers, but in the medium term it rekindled the fire of workers’ protests.

Would it have been possible to imagine a new model of industrial relations? To channel workers’ energies and govern the move-

²⁷ *Scheda bianca*, white ballott. Before 1969 the representatives of the workforce in the factories were elected from a list of names proposed by the trade unions CGIL, CISL, UIL; after the new agreements of December 1969, workers and employees could elect every member of their team or of their office, whom they trusted.

²⁸ Assolombarda: employers’ organisation of Milan, Lodi, Monza, and Brianza; the strongest local organisation of the national employer’s *Association Confindustria*.

ment? After the labour contract had been signed, the Intersind, representing state participation companies, denounced the end of the system of industrial relations built up in the 1960s. But could a system based on separate agreements be defined as such?²⁹

Trade unions tried by accelerating the unification process. Trade union unity multiplied the force of impact of the working class however, making the situation more ungovernable from the point of view of businesses and politics.

Perhaps no one wanted an institutionalised system of industrial relations. Unions were too committed to governing, stimulating and restraining workers' energies, while the bosses, divided between the public and private sectors until the mid-1970s, held different views on trade union policies. Politics did not want such a system either.

Politics played a leading role in the final stages of the hot autumn, however in following years the Christian Democrats (DC) tended not to meddle in union affairs. A laissez-faire policy was pursued, leaving employers disoriented. Perhaps the aim was to weaken Confindustria (industrialists' association), so as to make it more malleable. The important thing for the DC was to strengthen its grip on public sector industry. The DC was not a party to preoccupy itself with social conflicts, rather it used them for its benefit, just as it took advantage of

²⁹ Intersind: *Organisation für die Vertretung von Staatsunternehmen bei Tarifverhandlungen, 1958 gegründet* (d. Übers.) (Intersind: organisation of state-owned industries for negotiation of national labour contracts with the trade unions, founded in 1958).

situations created by armed struggle. In general the DC, while “manoeuvring” to prevent organic trade union unity, appeared to keep the government at a distance from union affairs. And this attitude caused bewilderment to employers, who felt deprived of a defensive shield.

After the hot autumn: shop-floor delegates

The years 1970–1972 marked the spread of shop-floor delegates.³⁰ The formation of this new social stratum had a great impact in terms of bargaining tools, but above all as regards workers' emancipation. Often coming from unschooled backgrounds, they had become observers of the production cycle, dispute management professionals, agents for the improvement of conditions of the working class. A new “human type” was born, someone giving a new meaning to the terms “trade union” and “politics”, in the belief that politics was only that of social and factory struggles. There arose a profound mistrust towards the political party system and towards extra-parliamentary groups. What has been called “the Council movement” had many common features all over Italy, even

³⁰ Important testimonies on the relationship between the worker movement and new bodies of representation (works council, shop-floor delegates) were contained in addresses presented at the conference in honour of Pio Galli held in Lecco on 19 April 2016. For the role played by participants, in trade unions (Pizzinato, Garibaldi, Morese ed altri) or in sociological and legal studies (Romagnoli, Cella, Baglioni, etc.), this conference was the most propitious opportunity to reflect on the story of shop-floor delegates from a present-day perspective.

though it mirrored very different local realities. Local situations were the combination of traditions going back to the origins of the workers' movement or to the Resistance, the traits of single productions, the presence or absence of individual figures with leadership qualities, a particular make-up of the workforce.³¹

At the end of September 1972 the Metalworkers Federation (FLM) was set up, a unified union, which could count on thousands of new members and cadres, able negotiators by now. But it is one thing to know how to bargain, another to back a radical push, with a view to changing everything, in order to see tangible results for one's struggles. It was here that contradictions began

³¹ The "Turin model" exerted the most influence on all left-wing currents present inside and outside the trade union, due to the fact that Turin was the "cradle" of Italian worker struggles, to the memory of Gramsci's activity there, and because Fiat was the symbol of capitalist despotism. See the dynamic of trade union struggles and negotiations in Turin before and after 1969 in Stefano Musso, *Il 1969 a Torino: il conflitto industriale nella città-fabbrica*, in Causarano, Falossi, Giovannini, *Il 1969 e dintorni*, cit. A clear reflection on the Turin experience was written by Renato Lattes in the new Millennium, *Testimonianza e ricordi. Delegati, Consigli, Sindacato a Torino tra gli anni 60 e 70*, in Associazione Biondi-Bartolini and Fondazione Di Vittorio, *I due bienni rossi del Novecento, 1919-20 e 1968-69*, Ediesse edizioni, Rome 2006.

to arise very quickly.³²

After the hot autumn: factory working conditions

At this point it is worthwhile to follow up the question of workers' subjectivity in order to understand what happened on the shop-floor after the hot autumn, the creation of Councils and election of delegates. Despite all the limitations, a revolution was underway as regards workers' mindsets, which followed a different path from trade union strategies. Understanding its characteristics requires a return to basic studies. In 1972 the FIOM union conducted a survey among delegates. The results were published in 1974, with a foreword by Bruno Trentin.³³ What conclusions did delegates draw for the first two years after the hot autumn?

³² Until December 1969, the *Commissione Interna* (Shop Floor Representatives) were members of a trade union. After the *Commissione Interna* was replaced by the *Consiglio dei delegati* (Council of Shop Stewards), who were not necessarily members of a trade union, trustworthiness among the workforce was sufficient. The number of members of this council was ten times as great as the number of Internal Commissioners, but they were also much less experienced. Many of them were young workers hired in 1968-69 with no bargaining experience compared to the long careers of the commissioners as trade-unionists. At the beginning, the employers' organisations did not recognise the new representatives and continued to negotiate with the *Commissione Interna*, while many of the newly elected shop stewards abandoned the Council, which suffered from high fluctuation. It took years for the *Consiglio dei delegati* to stabilise.

³³ *La condizione operaia ed i consigli di fabbrica*, edited by Fabrizio d'Agostini, cit.

In the foreword Trentin says in no uncertain terms: “...this is therefore not only a crisis of Italian employers and entrepreneurs, but a political crisis, with a political unwillingness or an inability to at least attempt a dialogue (italics are mine, author’s note) and a new relationship with workers and with the labour movement that does not imply their subordination”.

This would be the leitmotiv for trade unions in the years to come: the counterparty was unwilling to acknowledge the change in power relations.

As far as interviewed workers were concerned, the only change was the reduced power of foremen. The sore point was that of working conditions. The response of delegates to the FIOM questionnaire can be summarised as follows: something had changed, especially in relations with bosses, but neither the intensity of worker exploitation nor the work environment had changed. This explains why conflict began to become “permanent”. Numerous agreements were reached, but there was a big gap between signing the paper and putting the deal into practice.

Contract renewal struggles in 1973: no repeat of the hot autumn

The labour contract renewal season was very tough in 1973. Confindustria was not willing to negotiate.³⁴ On 6 March Inter-sind signed the contract, on March 29 something unexpected happened: Fiat workers occupied the factory. An action led by the most combative delegates, some having links with Lotta Continua. This dramatically called into question the trade union's control of the workers. On 3 April Federmeccanica gave in: it was an unsatisfactory agreement for workers, but the signature had been affixed.³⁵

If one looks back at the daily news in 1972/73 the number of strikes was impressive. All types of subordinate employment were in a state of turbulence. This picture might give the impression of unchallenged trade union power. The situation was different however on the shop-floor.³⁶

It would be false to depict that period as the start of a phase in which workers had the run of the factory, and the trade union

³⁴ Confindustria: the largest private employers' organisation in Italy, founded in 1910; *Democrazia Cristiana*, Christian-Democratic Party, founded in 1943 and dissolved in 1994.

³⁵ Federmeccanica: *Federazione sindacale dell'industria metalmeccanica italiana* (Employers' organisation of the metalworking Industry), founded in 1971.

³⁶ Graziano Merotto, *La fabbrica rovesciata. Comunità e classi nel circuito dell'elettrodomestico*, Derive&Approdi Editore, Rome 2015, pp. 544. This major research on one of the key sectors of Italian industry is very useful for an understanding of the dynamics of industrial conflicts in the 1970s.

had excessive power. Companies were unwilling to acknowledge the gains made by workers in 1969/70. Conflicts were mostly caused – and would continued to be caused for another decade – by the need to resort to strike action to enforce agreements already entered into.

The 1973 contract would be remembered for the conquest of workers' right to access education – the so-called “150 hours” – in order to achieve a high school degree. With regard to the organisation of work, working hours and work intensity, progress had been slow, but workers really wanted a substantial improvement in this area, and continued to pursue this end throughout the 1970s, often venting their anger against white-collar workers and managers. Here we have, in my opinion, one of the causes of the “long” autumn.

The image therefore of a working class that went beyond agreed limits, not happy with what it had obtained, is a distorted one. The wage rises obtained were often eroded by the number of hours of strikes needed to obtain them, and by inflation. It became increasingly difficult to find people willing to serve as delegates, and relative turnover was very high. The works council was increasingly controlled by the union executive, which in turn was controlled by the provincial leadership of the union.

Workers' struggles conquer sectors of the bourgeoisie

Many professional categories felt the effects of a series of stimuli from factories, triggering within them the will to challenge institutions and ethical norms. School teachers in particular became involved into the "150 hours" experience, that allowed thousands of workers to complete their compulsory education and carry on a political-cultural education that had started in the factory. Doctors intervened as experts in disputes on the harmfulness of working conditions, replacing company doctors and willing to sacrifice their career ambitions and economic prospects to serve workers both inside and outside hospitals. Then there were magistrates, in particular those dealing with labour disputes, architects, urban planners, scientists, chemists, engineers, not to mention journalists working on newspapers, TV and radio. A new newspaper came out, "Il Manifesto". In addition to representing a well-defined political line ("communist newspaper"), it embodied a new way of providing information "under the mandate of the working class", and relaunched investigative journalism. A new generation of lawyers emerged in that period, further to rights recognised by the Workers' Charter, working in courtrooms to defend the working class.

The history of innovation within the professions has not yet been written. Factory activists who had given rise to the delegates movement might have felt that they had won allies among the bourgeoisie, the educated middle classes and the liberal professions, and that they held a stronger hand in society, being able to count on a greater understanding in public opinion and, sooner or later, to break down the resistance of factory bosses.

This belief was another cause of the “long” autumn.

The oil crisis and the monetary variable

The cycle that started in 1968 ended due to an external event: the oil crisis. The consequences in the factory were extensive. The energy crisis put workers on the back foot. They would never return to the attack, except for some positive incursions into territories such as the environment and harmfulness in the workplace.

The Italian capitalist front began to outline an exit strategy from the blind alley into which workers' struggles had driven employers. It began to be understood that a long-term strategy was needed, that did not have to rely on either the government or the Christian Democrats. The institution to which the shrewdest Italian capitalists clung, making it a point of reference for its moral revenge, was the Bank of Italy. The principle of authority had been shaken at the foundations. Now the Bank of Italy was given the role of restoring this principle. It was in those years that the myth of the Bank of Italy's independence was born. Its Governor Guido Carli became a prestigious figure, later

enabling him to become the President of Confindustria.³⁷ But a large educational effort would be needed to get Italians to believe in the market economy as the realm of reason. A cultural initiative that began, in 1974, with the establishment of the LUISS university, and continued in 1976 with the foundation of the newspaper “La Repubblica”.³⁸ A new “common sense” had to be formed in the sphere of public opinion. Above all the leadership of the PCI (Italian communist party) had to be converted intellectually to the religion of compatibility, getting it to exert all its influence to bring the CGIL back into a line of cooperation with the business world and with the government. Monetary constraints emerged as the most powerful instrument for limiting the sovereignty of politics. In terms of government this resulted in a focus on income policy, setting the parameters for distribution policies, thus for wage demands, thus for political control over trade unions.

So a course of action had been decided on, a strategy of sorts. But regaining control of the situation was another matter entirely. Workers continued to exert pressure, and employers did not know how to regain control of the situation in large factories.

³⁷ Interesting testimony from Gavino Manca on Carli as President of Confindustria, *Sul filo della memoria. Cinquanta anni di Pirelli e dintorni*, Egea Editore, Milan 2005. It appears that members of the Employers' Association's Board had some difficulty following the banker's words, filled with monetary terminology, and took with them consultants to act as “interpreters” and “translators” for a greater understanding. We recall that in the mid-1970s there was no management control even in large companies, cf. Giorgio Garuzzo, *Fiat: i segreti di un'epoca*, Fazi Editore 2006.

³⁸ Luiss: *Libera Università Internazionale di Studi Sociali* (Free International University for Social Studies), private institution close to Confindustria in Rome.

In some quarters, indeed, they were seized by a sort of cupio dissolvi, leading to the demise of large corporations and entire productive sectors, with the complicity of a part of the political class, the state apparatus and the banking system.

The working class was put on the defensive, but did not become impotent. Different situations existed. The oil crisis naturally had a great impact on the automotive sector and related industries, but the most serious consequences were felt by the chemical industry, which used crude as a raw material. Spiralling costs pushed numerous plants, especially in the South, out of the market.

The right to education

This violent rupture of the economic cycle appeared to have brought both sides - workers and capitalists - to their knees, yet it did not prevent a new cultural dynamic from emerging in the process of emancipation of factory workers, along a path that cannot be ignored. The trade union agreement on the "right to study" was the most important factor in this direction. With this deal employees were given the opportunity to attend classes, with a number of paid study hours. For the vast majority of unschooled ordinary workers this was an opportunity to obtain

minimum school-leaving diplomas.³⁹

Teachers were faced with a complex problem: having to use a language suitable for people who had left school early, become adults and had factory life as a frame of reference for their mental parameters. The more sensitive of teachers felt the challenge this situation posed to their ethical values. New study tools were created to replace normal school textbooks. The right to education, the so-called “150 hours”, left an indelible mark in the subjectivity of many workers. It was one of the most positive experiences of that tormented decade.

A weapon of mass appeasement: the redundancy fund

In 1975 agreement was reached (the “Agnelli-Lama” agreement) on a unified system for cost-of-living adjustments. Quarterly cost-of-living wage increases would be the same for everyone, and in the first three years, from 1975 to 1977, they would be aligned to the maximum allowed value. Franco Modigliani shouted out his disapproval from the US, public

³⁹ See the special issue of “Inchiesta” and “Fabbrica e Stato” July–August 1978 dedicated to the “150 hours”. “Still in 1971 76.6% of the population did not have a lower school-leaving diploma, 32.4% did not have any academic qualifications, a little over 50% of youngsters sat their lower school examinations on time, and still in 1976 over 15% of youngsters between the ages of 14 and 19 did not have a lower school-leaving diploma” (Barbara Pettine in <http://www.treccani.it/scuola/dossier/2010/150anni-istruzione/pettine.html>).

industry managers could not believe it, small business owners were seized by panic.⁴⁰ But what did Agnelli, recently elected President of Confindustria, get in return?⁴¹ The agreement was also tied up with the Wages Guarantee Fund (CIG). What Agnelli gained was nothing less than a key tool for managing worker mobility. It was an almost perfect system for crushing worker conflict, implying that the employer had his entire workforce available even if there was little or no work for them to do (redundancy pay for zero-hours contract). This allowed the worker to receive a wage supplement from INPS and the employer would pay only the balance. Making everyone happy. A weapon of mass appeasement, one might say.

In actual fact, the CIG instrument was designed for different purposes: to allow businesses in difficulty to have some respite, temporarily freeing themselves from the obligation to pay wages, and having the possibility to concentrate on restructuring their business, which would allow them to return

⁴⁰ Franco Modigliani (1918–2003), Italian economist, U.S. citizen (1946–2003), Nobel Prize for Economics (1985).

⁴¹ Giovanni (Gianni) Agnelli (1921–2003), main stakeholder of FIAT, President of Confindustria (1974–1976); Luciano Lama (1921–1996), General Secretary of CGIL (1970–1986).

to the market stronger and more competitive than before.⁴²

Here we have one of the keys to understanding the 1970s. The CIG instrument perfectly represents the conflict containment strategy adopted. Rather than taking up the challenge thrown down by trade unions by modernising factory technologies and the organisation of work, Italian employers preferred to protect themselves with a “shock absorber” paid for out of taxpayers' pockets.⁴³

Public service strikes

In 1976-77 the landscape of labour conflicts changed somewhat. The impetus to change among workers seemed to have lost momentum. Any new initiatives appeared to be the dying

⁴² This was shown by the case of SIV, Società Italiana Vetro, which was the first firm to apply Law 164, the “guaranteed wage” law, as it was called. The producer of windscreens and rear windows for motor vehicles was a public company, 50% controlled by Eni and 50% by Efim. It had run up billions of lire of debts as it continued to use an obsolete technology purchased in the mid-1960s from Ford. Cash from the redundancy fund (and of course from public funds made available) was used for the complete overhaul of the production process, with the adoption of Pilkington-patented *float glass* technology, resulting in its return to the market and, four years later, profits of 11 billion lire, having taken back all workers put into CIG (except for early retirements and voluntary redundancies).

⁴³ Employment insurance coverage is from 80 to 90% of the salary: the cost is shared among the government, employers, and employees. The National Insurance Fund (INPS) is charged for payments. The proportion between the three contributors has changed several times over the years, but most of the burden lies with the state.

embers of the fire of achievements and awareness gained in the 1968-72 period. A new front opened up in the public services sector: hospitals, public transport, public administration, etc.

These conflicts were a different way of dealing with structural reforms. In 1970-71 the mobilisation drives carried out in the areas of housing, transport and health, had led workers to question their status as citizens. Managing a conflict in the public services sector presents great difficulties. A strike has an impact that inevitably creates contradictions. All the strikes declared in the public services sector had the goal of improving the service for users as well as improving the working conditions of public sector workers. It was, and still is, difficult to convincingly communicate such a goal. The rift between the country and labour disputes emerged in those years, with public services rather than factories being the battle front. Sometimes workers' solidarity was lacking in these struggles. Yet these protests arose in response to real, unresolved problems.

The trade union line taken in public service strikes in the years 1976-77-78 bore little resemblance to the picture in 1968 in Italian factories, when union structures - old Internal Committee members, young council delegates, various breeds of extremists, Catholic and Communist - had achieved a cohesion that had been able to produce an impressive impact force. In public services and public sector struggles in the period 1976-77 the rift between strikers and confederal unions was practically a *conditio sine qua non* for opening a dispute. Dialogue was difficult with service users, and was difficult with confederal unions. This slowly created a climate of "a country tired of strikes".

Youth movements in 1977: no future

There is no comparison between the wave of protests in Italian universities in the winter of 1976/77 and those of 1968, in terms of both incisiveness and theoretical elaboration. Why then is so much importance attached to the “movement of 77”? Firstly, that movement made it clear that the Fordist model was going into decline in the West. Then, it marked a new way for people to look at work, and for capitalists to manage it. There was an acceleration in the decentralisation of production, with the establishment of tenders to replace subordinate employment. And youngsters no longer viewed the factory as a place of emancipation and politicisation, rather as a prison. The working class thus lost an ally in society. The ideology of “flexible”, or precarious employment, spread as if it were a way of escaping the discipline and monotony of permanent employment.⁴⁴ Yet in demonstrations, which attempted to be imaginative, and shunned Third International symbols and rituals, there was a dark foreboding, which might be reduced to the slogan: no future. There were those who said it was terrorism that spread an impelling sense of death. That might be so, but it was certainly the use of drugs that spread with epidemic rapidity, in particular heroin.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ An attempt to analyse that movement which for a time aroused interest in Italy and elsewhere was made by the journal “Primo Maggio”, and was later reprinted as a pamphlet by Feltrinelli: *La tribù delle talpe*, Milan 1977.

⁴⁵ *Dobbiamo arrenderci all'eroina? Il problema della droga nell'Italia di oggi*, in “La civiltà cattolica”, 3 November 1979.

New jobs at Fiat, the EUR volte-face

From close up, the situation inside the factories certainly did not resemble that of a retreating army. Quite the opposite, in fact. At Fiat bargaining on the organisation of work reached its apex. The thick network of delegates did not miss a trick. But if we look elsewhere, for example in the textile, chemical or agrifood sectors, the picture was different. There were fears about the Redundancy Fund and the continuous attacks on supplementary collective bargaining. One of the last blasts of trade union autonomy and unitary will was the demonstration held on 2 December 1977 in Rome, called by the FLM union on the occasion of the general strike. The CGIL, CISL and UIL Confederations acted ambiguously. The PCI did not support the demonstration. It was preparing the “volte-face” that would be approved at the Rome EUR conference on 14 February 1978.⁴⁶

Whether or not it was a response to the about-turn of central trade unions, Fiat sought applications for job vacancies for the first time in four years. Young people with an education, many women, most holding high school diplomas. A fragmented generation entered the factory, with no collective identity

⁴⁶ The EUR about-turn was summed up thus by Cesare Cosi, then FIOM delegate at the Fiat of Turin, today major contributor for the website www.mirafiori-accordielotte.org: “The new economic policy placed as a central issue the reform and renovation of the State, in relation to which the trade union declared its readiness to support policies regarding wage claim containment, the reform of wages, the negotiated mobility of workers from one factory to another, individual consumption containment to favour public consumption, and investments in productive activities. This proposal had clear connections with the PCI’s “austerity” policy”.

and varying behaviour. During strikes it might be passive, uninterested, or hyperactive.⁴⁷ The line taken at the EUR conference, sensitive to business needs, ended up by having an adverse effect on the most mature and complex experience of workers' struggles in the 1970s: bargaining on aspects of the work environment and the monitoring of health risks for workers. It was a return to the monetisation of risk.⁴⁸

Building up to the epilogue

The “EUR volte-face” and the PCI's attitude towards trade unions had created a clear contradiction between the situation in the factory, where delegates were confident of being able to persuade company management to make changes to work plants,

⁴⁷ *Coscienza operaia oggi. I nuovi comportamenti operai in una ricerca gestita dai lavoratori*, edited by Giulio Girardi, De Donato, Bari 1980; Silvia Belforte, Martino Ciatti, *Il fondo del barile. Riorganizzazione del ciclo produttivo e composizione operaia alla Fiat dopo le nuove assunzioni*, La Salamandra, 1980, Marco Revelli, *Lavorare in Fiat*, Garzanti, Milan 1989.

⁴⁸ The battles for a non-harmful work environment saw the emergence of unforgettable figures, like Luigi Mara, Montedison technician at Castellanza, Ivar Oddone, physician and lecturer in Turin. His works include *Esperienza operaia, coscienza di classe e psicologia del lavoro*, written jointly with Alessandra Re and Gianni Briante, Otto Editore, Turin 2008. He was assisted by Gastone Marri, founder in 1965 of the Research and documentation centre on occupational risks and damage, operational until the 1980s, and director of the journal “*Medicina dei lavoratori*”. There is an up-to-date review of that experience in Diego Alhaique, *Il Centro ricerche e documentazione sui rischi e danni da lavoro (1965-1984)*, which can be downloaded at www.ecologiapolitica.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/08-Archivio.pdf

and representatives of the workers' movement who were more concerned not to burden companies with wage or investment demands. The energy needed to press for change was stifled much more by this contradiction than by the confusion caused by terrorism.

The "long autumn" ended in October 1980, with the last clash at Fiat, caused by the threat of twenty thousand layoffs. Workers struck for 35 days, and against them forty thousand foremen, managers and white-collar workers took to the streets of Turin, pleading to work.

This episode would probably not have had such an emotional impact, and the emotional aspect would not have remained such a part of the historical judgment, had the union, rather than immediately surrendering after the march of the forty thousand, resisted a little longer, and found a way to end the clash with its heads held high. Instead, that immediate and total surrender, as if it could not wait to hand itself over to the winner, made the defeat seem even more disastrous and humiliating, leaving even the victors slightly stunned.⁴⁹ It is likely that the union would, sooner or later, have had to retreat and change course, giving up supplementary bargaining, the area where delegates gave of their best. But it would have been another ending, and the judgement on the decade might have been less damning.

⁴⁹ Cf. Giorgio Garuzzo, *Fiat: i segreti di un'epoca*, cit.

Observing history from the present

If we refuse to assign to the march of the forty thousand the symbolic meaning of it being a death blow to the centrality of workers, we can with good reason consider the cycle from 1960 onwards a single cycle right up to the referendum on the wage sliding scale (*scala mobile*), namely from 1960 to 1985. After that another era begins, which Trentin called the “trade union of rights”. However, the only rights that the union would attempt to protect were those of employees in permanent employment, completely forgetting about other employment relations, which would become more and more common in the labour market: the rights of non-standard workers, the rights of the self-employed, in particular of the intellectual professions. It is only today, with the arrival of the first forms of organisation, protests and proposals of these subjects, that trade unions, the political class and the media are able to see this tragic oversight, which has contributed so much to voters’ shift to the right and to their loss of loyalty to parties of the left.

For a large portion of public opinion it makes sense to identify the 1970s with terrorism. For perhaps a lesser portion of Italians, the history of that period is in the distant past, separate from modernity, looking at the way capitalism has developed and the way lifestyles have changed. For the minority who wonder about the hows and whys of those years, there is the danger of becoming nostalgic or of homing in on the wrong target, focusing only on institutional implications. The best way to grasp the meaning of that historical period is to put oneself in the shoes of the youngsters of today, grappling with the problem

of work, using as a magnifying lens the current condition of work, in particular intellectual work. So where can we see, now, the gains that cost so many sacrifices back then?

(translated by Paul Warrington)

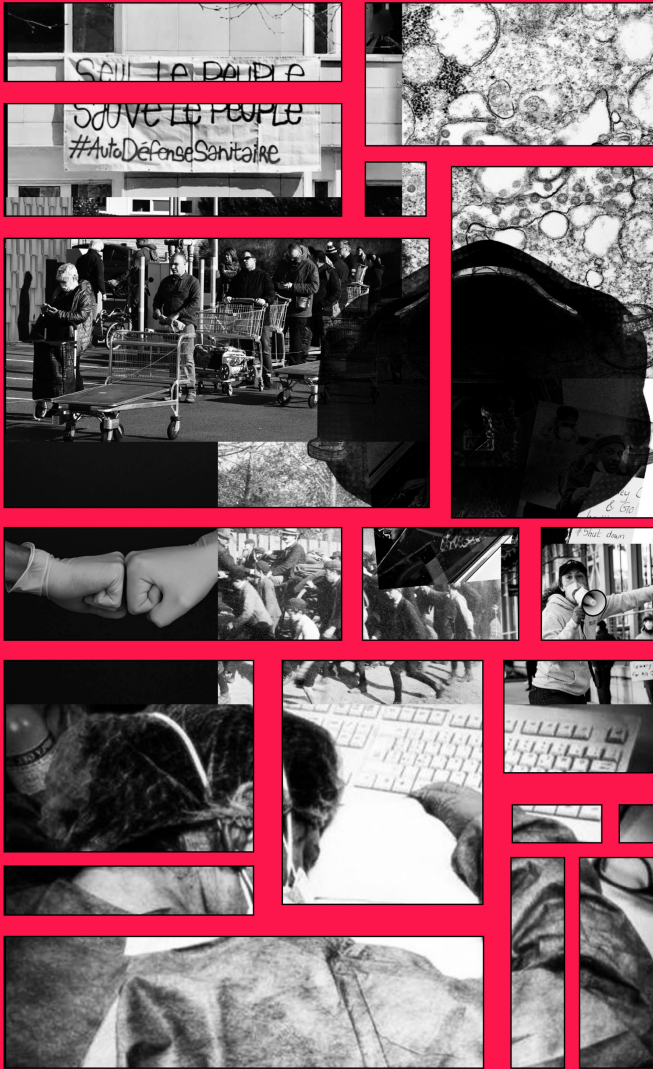
Epilogue

We invite responses and further contributions to the book. Our network is still in formation and we welcome other groups that are interested in participating in exchanges on workers' inquiry and struggle. If you want to start a group, we are happy to provide support and advice too. We hope that you will contact the authors to share your thoughts, tell us about your struggles, and contribute to our network.

We see this collection as one step towards greater collaboration and sharing of struggles.

* * *

STRUGGLE IN A PANDEMIC



A Collection Of Contributions On The Covid-19 Crisis

WORKERS INQUIRY NETWORK