

With this newsletter we want to support the exchange of reports, interviews etc. on worker's struggles. You can download it as a printable pdf-file from: www.prol-position.net. To be informed about new editions subscribe to our mailing-list by sending an empty email to: prol-position-subscribe@list.free.de To get in contact/contribute write to: ppnews@prol-position.net

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editorial

This is the first issue of the Prol-position Newsletter. The newsletter is an open project discussing and circulating articles from different regions, translated from different languages, and reporting on different spheres of exploitation and proletarian struggle around the world.

Why such a project now?

Today, many struggles have an international dimension. The people involved face a social and international context mediated by capital which is turned against them. Capital and workers themselves move faster than their struggles spread:

- * Migrant agricultural workers are being replaced by other newer migrants,
- * Workers in older core-industries are put under pressure by (threatened) relocation or closure,
- * Workers in new factories and development areas are threatened by flexible work-rules and unemployment,
- * The unemployed see themselves forced into more intense flexibility and into undermining work standards,
- * Workers in many production units are being played off against each other by intensive transportation and new communication technologies...

If we want to understand these trends and support the struggles taking place under these circumstances, we have to acknowledge and analyse their international dimension - and organize an international debate about them.

Unions and other forms of workers' representation clearly remain an obstacle for further development of struggles. By narrowly focusing on the interests of single companies, professions, nationalities etc., unions can do nothing but widen the divisions within the class. They need to stick to forms of representation and delegation to negotiate, and therefore have to suppress tendencies towards self-organisation and autonomy within the struggles. They do this, for instance, by retaining and manipulating information or by releasing reports merely glorifying struggles (whether lost or won).

There is also growing potential for links between the so-called social movements, the new forms of organizing they develop and the direct action of proletarian struggles. Some of these trends we could see within the so-called antiglobalization movement. We want to circulate reports about experiences of self-organisation within these conflicts, understand their material conditions, and acknowledge their potentials and difficulties.

Several projects, newspapers, etc. now operate on a regional or countrywide level, engaging in struggles and writing about them. Most only write in their own language. So far cross-national exchange on these experiences beyond one country is limited by language barriers or takes place individually between those who speak a couple languages and thus is rarely coordinated or has few practical consequences. Despite international meetings, the internet, etc., information on struggles in many countries is hard to get. We don't expect to solve these problems merely by translating more articles into a more widely spoken language (English), but we think this newsletter can help by spreading inside views on some struggles and facilitating debates around them.

What will be the newsletter's content?

We will translate and write articles on struggles in different regions of the world. For the newsletter itself we will focus on reports on proletarian struggles analysing their material conditions, experiences and difficulties - rather than just announcing the mere existence of the conflict. Background information and other useful material will be published in the archive section of the website (www.prol-position.net).

We want to collect enough material to publish the newsletter on a bi-monthly basis and in-between when necessary. We will hold an editorial meeting before each edition to discuss the proposed articles and the political issues, the class situation etc.

How can you get involved?

You can send us articles, interviews, reports. We wrote a rough questionnaire on struggles which can (!) be used as a guideline (also on www.prol-position.net). We are also interested in background information relating to the conflicts, which we will archive or use for the introduction.

You can also help us by translating and proofreading material. Most of us aren't native English-speakers (and we can only speak a couple of languages), so it would be great if people could volunteer to help with these tasks.

You can forward the newsletter-link to other people, and you can print out and photocopy the newsletter and give copies to friends, co-workers, strikers, and other workers. Or you can take copies to bookstores, hand them out on meetings and conferences...

Finally, you can take part in the discussion and exchange via Email. The newsletter will be our main focus for now, but if people feel the need to discuss and share material through an email list, we will consider setting another one up. Till then you can email us at: ppnews@prol-position.net

About this issue!

The articles of this first newsletter address struggles in Western Europe in the second half of 2004. The articles about the wildcat strike at the automobile plant of **Opel/GM in Bochum, Germany**, the **policies of Saab/GM in Sweden** and the **new wage model at VW, Germany** describe the attacks on the (old) centers of workers' power and capital accumulation, attacks that at least in Germany the automobile workers had previously been able to ward off. In 2004 Germany saw a major breakthrough for capital. Capital managed to impose longer working hours and lower wages in industrial strongholds and big companies like Siemens, Daimler Chrysler, DB (German railways) and Karstadt. The wildcat strike at Opel/GM Bochum was an unexpected response by the workers; a response mobilising a united front of employers, politicians and union bosses which managed by heavy-handed tactics to quash it.

While the capitalists are using mass unemployment to put more pressure on both those who have legal jobs and those who don't, so far we haven't really seen any collective expression of resistance among those who are temporarily unemployed. The „Monday-Demonstrations“ in Germany against the **welfare-reform Hartz IV in Germany** surprised everyone and in the begin-

ning at least were in large part self-organized. The protests captured international attention, but very few reports circulated abroad grasped the initial strength and spontaneity of the demonstrations, their internal dynamics and ultimate weaknesses. This article summarizes the different stages of the movement in various cities and describes its internal composition. We added a **short update** on the current situation around the introduction of the reduced unemployment benefit, the so-called One-Euro-jobs, and attempts to fight against this attack.

The analysis of the solidarity committee supporting the **strike of immigrants** working in the kitchen of Frog Pubs in **Paris** quite clearly shows the interaction between immigrant communities, the strike itself, the union and external strike supporters. We think it's important to reopen the debate on the question of external strike support, a debate that we saw raised on a more serious level during the strikes of Arcade, McDonalds and Pizza Hut workers in Paris in 2002, all strikes which took place in small shops and often led by immigrant workers.

The **travel report from France** discusses experiences at three different sites of struggle during Fall 2004. The trip starts at a picket line in front of a McDonald's branch in Paris, goes south to an assembly on the day of action held against the Nestlé factory closure, and ends in the strike kitchen of the occupied software centre of Schneider Electrics in Grenoble.

The **short reports from demonstrations of DHL-employees in Bruxelles and the picket line of baggage handlers at the airport in Gatwick** describe two examples of conflicts taking place in the aviation sector over the past few years. In the introduction to that article you will find raised some questions on the increasing political importance of this sector in the globalized class struggle.

The final article describes the **struggle of construction workers in Britain** working on some big sites like the cargo rail link through the Channel Tunnel. One company, Laing O'Rourke, tried to change the workers' status by turning formerly self-employed workers into Laing employees. For the workers this change in status meant major pay cuts, worse working conditions and more leverage on the bosses' side to pressure workers' resistance. After meeting the workers, some activists from the so-called anti-capitalist movement supported the struggle by occupying cranes on one construction site.

Enjoy!

opel bochum

From wildcat no. 72, January 2005. You can find more articles on the situation and struggles in the automobile industry in this newsletter. On DaimlerChrysler see the article on the wildcat-website [<http://www.wildcat-www.de/en/wildcat/71/w71edaim.htm>].

One week of wildcat strike in Bochum, Germany

It is one of the last warm days of autumn; the oil price is rising and at Opel in Bochum, they are playing football. The work has stopped, the workers are striking and the young Peter Jaszczyk is their leader. A large, strong man, 30 years old, long hair, convinced communist. Faced with the rise in the price of petrol he is demanding a wage increase for him and his colleagues. He is aware of their strength. In Bochum, they make the axles for factories in half of Europe. Production has now slowed down everywhere. For the management there is no other choice. They have to increase the wage of the Opel workers, by 8.5 percent plus extra bonuses on top of the regular wage.

That was then. In 1973.

It is one of the last warm days of autumn; the oil price is rising and at Opel in Bochum they are worried. The work has stopped and the workers are striking. That was three weeks ago. This time they do not feel like playing football. This time they are afraid for their jobs... In Bochum, they still build axles for other factories, but today there are rumors going round that the management want to relocate the production to the Czech Republic. The workers ended the strike after one week. Since then the union and works council have been negotiating with the board of directors. In the next few days, they will agree, and then the tragic numbers of jobs axed and wage cuts will appear in the newspaper...

That is today. In 2004.

For the employees it is a year of defeat: First Siemens threatened to move the production of mobile and cordless telephones from Bocholt and Kamp-Lintfort to Hungary. Then DaimlerChrysler announced they would possibly be producing the Mercedes C-class in Bremen and South Africa instead of Sindelfingen in the future. Finally, VW are considering over 30,000 redundancies if the personnel costs in the West-German plants do not drop significantly.

(Published in "Die Zeit", liberal weekly newspaper, on November the 11th, under the heading "The disempowerment of the workers")

Alone against the rest

Fear over losing ones job, threats of relocation and outsourcing, the closure of workplaces, wage freezes and increased pressure at work (and to accept any kind of work) leads to "disempowerment" of workers, so

they say in "Die Zeit". It that true? Does this strike not show just the opposite? A few hundred workers organized themselves independently from the union in the clear knowledge that they could force Opel, Europe-wide, to its knees – and how! It impressed hundreds of thousands of workers, provided the VW workers with a substantially better final agreement than their personnel manager Hartz had intended and given a new dynamic to the rather timid discussion about the Monday Demos. The strike in Bochum was the first item on the news every day and parliament held a special session to discuss it...

Colossus on clay feet

Producing about 5.5 million vehicles per year, General Motors is still the largest car producer - and is hit particularly hard by the worldwide sales and overproduction crises. The discount battle in the USA and Canada (where 50 percent of the cars are produced) has lead to GM paying out for every car sold, and over 1000 dollars per car goes to pension payments, a mark of the (past) workers' strength in the USA. That is why GM is particularly affected by the falling sales - and the Opel shares on the German market have fallen below the average amount. The 2003 business year saw GM make losses of 286 million dollars in Europe. The years gains of 3.8 billion dollars for the company as a whole is recently based on gains in the financial sector (we described a similar development for Ford in Wildcat 68). These 3.8 billion gains are much more than out weighted by the 15.5 billion Dollars lacking in the pension funds.

Car production is only possible with a high number produced per factory, which means a high capital investment and a strong connection to the location. The car industry has reacted to the crisis of the last three decades with ever more rationalization measures: today, less than ten percent of the total costs are spent on wages. The worldwide over-capacity puts pressure on the prices - something the car companies try to evade through ever faster product cycles and by churning out new types of cars (town cars, SUV, Vans, Mini-Vans, Fun cars), in order to achieve a short-term advantage over their competitors. Complains about "mis-management" relate to the fact that Opel has not had a "sales booster" on offer for a long time, hiding the general problem: the car industry is in over-accumulation crisis. The constant costs in the factories are too high. "Constant" are not only the costs for machinery, "constant" are also the wages and pension funds, which cannot be cut.

The complaints about mis-management reveal a second problem: for years now, the automobile companies have not been able to come up with solutions other

than repeating the same cost cutting measures repeatedly. Outsourcing leads to a disproportional growth of the supplier industry. The cost-cutting pressure of the automobile companies forces the suppliers into a concentration process - in future there will be 30-50 mega suppliers left, worldwide.

Cost cutting and increasing use of electronics on the new car models leads to a deterioration of the quality, expressing itself in more frequent and expensive product recalls. Despite this situation, the research and development departments are being downsized (Synergy effect). However, looking at the downsizing and cuts alone gives us a false picture of the situation: since the low point in 1994, the number of people employed in the sector has increased by 130,000, today about 775,000 people work in the car industry (plus another 1 Million in supplier industries). Most of the new jobs are created in the supplier industries, in line with their share in the production of 75 per cent. The car industry is the most effective sector in Germany but not able to accumulate sufficient surplus value.

The just-in-time strategy has reached its limit: the original intention of the new production structure (outsourcing, low stocks etc.) was to diminish the impact of industrial actions; then the workers discovered the vulnerability of this structure and their power within it. If the automobile companies declare today that the production strategy "one car model in one factory" [Alleinfertigung] is the new remedy, they will create new bottlenecks and will potentially become more vulnerable to collective actions of the workers. If the new Astra is only produced in one plant, the production cannot be compensated or shifted with short notice if a strike does occur.

Here we can see the general problem of the most advanced capitalist mode of production: either it creates flexibility, which means it will be expensive, or it creates dependences, which makes it vulnerable. The 7,600 workers producing the Astra and Zafira models in Bochum can be replaced with short notice by their colleagues in Ellesmere Port and Antwerpen, where they produce these models as well or by the colleagues in Gliwice, where they assemble the next generation model of the Zafira. This parallel production structure is cost intensive and therefore on the agenda of the negotiation process.

The power of the workers in Bochum today is based on them producing the axles and gearboxes, and in their pressing plant. The production of the plants in Antwerpen (Belgium), Rüsselsheim (Germany) and Ellesmere Port (Britain) is dependent on the "bottleneck" Bochum and on about 2,000 workers working in these specific departments.

The workers in Bochum were aware of the key position that they have. The desperate attempt of capital

to overcome the profit squeeze means that the workers have an even greater potential to interrupt the international production chains effectively. The media does not like to write about this fact, because it has absolutely nothing to do with "disempowerment".

In Bochum, the workforce has been "socially acceptable" halved from 19,200 (in 1992) to 14,200 (in September 1999) to 9,700 today, (without any mass redundancies, mainly by not replacing retired workers). The leap in productivity means that despite this even more cars are (or could be) produced today. The union mediates the downsizing and the intensification of work. As compensation, they got some adjustments to the collective contract. The IGM (Metal Workers' Union), the works council, and some retirement age workers taking on part time work were happy. Capital however was not happy for very long; everything developed too slowly at Opel, the social peace was paid for too dearly. Forster, who was taken over from BMW board of directors in 2001, didn't achieve the set targets, despite his cost-cutting program, Olympia, which had made two billion Euros in cost- and turnover "improvements" by the end of 2003. The company works council was always willing to negotiate. In November 2003, they introduced the program 30-plus, which reduced the weekly working time to 30 hours, due to there being not enough work for the number of employees in Rüsselsheim. Included was a minor wage compensation for the workers. Despite all this 'progress' and despite of the showcase factory in Eisenach, they expected losses of 400-500 million Euros on the European market in 2004 - and the sales numbers of cars in the USA slumped even sharper in autumn 2004.

Overall, Opel has many reasons to join the frontal attack, of Siemens, DaimlerChrysler, Karstadt-Quelle. Moreover, for the workers the time of socially compensated downsizing seemed to have ended: "Either we walk out now - or Hartz IV [the new, harsher, unemployment benefit] is waiting for us tomorrow".

Self-organized - against union and management

In the plant in Bochum the group *Gegenwehr ohne Grenzen* (GoG, Resistance without Borders) has been active for a long time. They started in the 70s as an independent group, standing as candidates in opposition to the union in the shop steward elections, without falling for the trap of the various ideologies of party politics or for the role of mediator focused exclusively on their company. One of the struggles in 1973 was for information meetings between the works council and the union shop stewards that would ensure a permanent flow of information to and from workers in the different departments. But the class struggle in 2004 goes beyond this kind of institution: a 35 years

old warehouse worker is one of the spokespersons of the workers but is modest when describing his role: "Any of my work mates could do this just as well". The workers do not want a strike committee, but have assemblies every two hours instead, where information is exchanged and decisions are made.

In 2000, two days of spontaneous strike by the workers created a domino effect of missing parts for other Opel plants. The tactics of the strike in 2004 were based on this experience and those of two other spontaneous actions that happened between 2000 and 2004. The activists were aware of the fact that their power was based on the factory and its productive links with the other plants. The gates were blocked immediately and stayed locked throughout the whole strike, in order to prevent the delivery of completed parts. Whole gangs of workers roamed the departments in order to "convince" those still working of the necessity of the strike. 1,000 to 2,000 workers were actively involved in blocking the gates. For six days, they only went home to sleep. They were busy discussing, they gave interviews and established new contacts within the factory and with workers from other plants. By occupying the factory, the weakness of the "strike-free" weekend, which has been problematic before, was turned around: on Saturdays and Sundays, the strike opened itself to the outside, and not only relatives came to the "family days", many workers from other companies used them to express their solidarity. The feeling of being a fish in water was evident during the demonstrations. The strikers were quite happy to have a go at the work-mates who had not been seen in the factory or at the gates for days and who now posed with their union caps on the demo.

The management reacted with dismissals and warnings. They had a list of 20 - 25 alleged ringleaders, but at first, they only sacked one uninvolved worker and one active works council member and the spokesperson mentioned above received several warnings. These threats could provoke new reactions. The question remains, is what we are seeing "disempowerment" of the workers or to a new workers autonomy?

Unionists, Cops and Dog-collars

During the dispute the works council members who follow the official IGM line didn't dare to act openly against the strike, but they had their revenge later by making sure that strike activists were not re-elected as shop stewards. They also used the regular information meeting in the factory to manipulate the workers who were not engaged in the blocking the gates.

After the sixth day of strike, when the other plants were finally brought to a halt, the union answered with a call for an international day of action. For the protest in Bochum town centre, they mobilized the priest, the mayor and party and union reps against the strikers.

In their speeches, they all spoke more or less openly in favour of ending the strike. Active strikers were banned from the stage and they did not get a chance to speak. The IGM was finally able to enforce itself on the general assembly the following day. As well as a manipulated ballot sheet, the IGM relied on ID-checks, security guards by the stage and missing microphones at the assembly.

In order to confront the workers, the union gathered pious priests and skinhead-type security guards around itself. This time they were still able to avoid calling on the cops to intervene, which was allegedly threatened if it did come to prolonged strike actions.

Employment security

At Opel the 500 million Euros cost reduction is not on the negotiation agenda, merely how they will achieve the cost cuts, something that IGM boss Huber had already made clear at the beginning of the wildcat strike:

FAZ (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, conservative newspaper): "Lower wages, longer working hours, cuts in bonuses? What are you going to scarify?" IGM-Huber: "Longer working hours can be counted out due to the existing under-utilisation of capacity. In addition, wage reduction alone does not help. I am not telling any secrets if I say that we will have a closer look at the extra payments at Opel."

On 9 December 2004, the preliminary result of negotiations was announced: in Germany between 8,500 and 10,000 jobs were supposed to be reduced through redundancy payments, early retirements, outsourcing of departments and by shifting workers to special government sanctioned "employment and training" agencies. This is a third of all the staff! In Bochum 2,900 workers are supposed to change over "voluntarily" to so-called transfer associations. The extra costs of one billion Euros (for the redundancy payments etc) are met by the remaining workers giving up extra payments (see Huber). Over 60 per cent of the personnel, costs of the transfer societies are paid for by the ministry of employment.

Contrary to its official announcements, the IGM does not expect that enough "volunteers" will be found, so right away they created a so-called "arbitration committee". The aim of this board is to set up lists of "dispensable" workplaces for each department, in line with "industry standards". There is also a legal test case planned, but not in order to attain security against dismissals. Just the opposite, the aim is to establish criterion that can be presented as examples for further redundancies and which would exclude the possibility of appeals or objections.

The next steps of the negotiation process deal with the possible outsourcing of departments (spare part

department, axle production), wage reductions and maybe at some point they will look at employment security up to 2010.

The outcome of the negotiations at DaimlerChrysler and VW give a hint of what to expect any actual “security” is of course - as laid out in the contract - excluded; instead, the union is defined as a negotiating partner. The union principle “equal wage for equal work” does not count anymore: people who are hired more recently will permanently earn less. Service departments will have a worse status. The core staff is more or less left in peace, but they are increasingly outnumbered by temporary workers, workers of outsourced departments and recently hired employees who earn less. Those working for many years continuously in these core departments have become a minority. For most of the workers a few months or years of unemployment are as common as cash-in-hand work, temporary work and travels abroad.

The unions attempt to re-define their diminishing role as a “social partner”. The “employment security” fits the wage reduction and work intensification just like the 35-hours week fitted the flexibilization of working time, like a hand in a glove. In this way, the “partners” in this wage agreement were able to force through the cost reduction and wage cuts as a kind of “social partnership”. Above all, this means taking the decision as to timing out of the hands of the workers. Instead of a hot autumn, we saw a series of conflicts and negotiations where one part of the deal was avoiding them taking place at the same time: KarstadtQuelle had been settled before the strike at Opel started; the wildcat had been defeated before the dispute at VW intensified etc... Because the main danger would have been the copycat effect: Bochum and Wolfsburg (VW) on a wildcat strike at the same time - unthinkable!

In the IGM magazine, the article about the Opel strike was published under the headline “fighting and negotiating”. The union fights for its function within capitalism and therefore against the workers. Like the formulation of the expert for wage- and collective, contract Hagen Lesch, working for the employer-friendly Institution of German Economy (Institut der deutschen Wirtschaft): “That is part of the tasks of the unions, to rein in radical developments”.

“We should stop the production at GM European-wide; otherwise the bosses will play us off against each other”.
(Worker at Vauxhall)

From the stitched-up Siemens workers, to the B10 motorway occupation by Daimler workers in Mettlingen, to the six days of wildcat strike in Bochum... The factory is still the most concentrated expression of the capitalist contradiction, not only in terms of production of surplus value, but also as an arena of class strug-

gle. During the strike, the self-organized coming together and collectivity in the factory offers a glimpse of a new society. This experience might develop a similar importance for the future class confrontations, as did the wildcat strikes in the 70s. However, the conditions have fundamentally changed, after 35 years of capital’s crisis the class has to free itself from a common downward spiral. Only in a new independent movement, can they have the necessary experiences and discover new possibilities.

A continuation of the strike in Bochum could have directly involved tens of thousands of other workers from the supplying industries and the other GM factories in the dispute. Apart from their innumerable amounts of solidarity declarations, these workers kept practically silent and did not join the strike. Incidences of open workers’ power remain isolated in a few factories, but nonetheless they are connected by the production process and have been for some time. Across the big companies and the supplier chains, this can be avoided by diverting the production process. In small and medium-size companies, a small number of confident workers are able to make a big impact.

The IGM and works council’s structure was left out of the organization of the strike, which also indicates a new quality of the class confrontation. There were single work-mates with official functions who acted in solidarity with the strike, but for many activists it is clear that the officials have been in their way and that next time they should be “excluded or locked out”. The information meetings, which have been fought for, can also only be an intermediate step towards independent workers assemblies.

Despite the independent organization and practice of the strike, the demands remained defensive: “No compulsory redundancies”, “No dismantling of plants 1, 2 and 3”.

The IGM and its concept of “employment security” can happily support these demands. Despite the independent struggle against management and the company works council, the workers relied on exactly these two bodies in the negotiations. Those workers who wanted to give negotiations a chance and voted against the strike are now confronted with a provisional result that confirms, and makes more concrete, the initial threats that lead to the strike.

The strike shows the current boundaries of class confrontation. The unions try to save themselves and to confirm their role - the workers can only rely on themselves and are going to have to adjust their future actions accordingly.

The current class composition leaves space for a new workers’ autonomy. This autonomy can only be experienced within struggles and, in order to be successful, these struggles have to be waged against the nego-

tiators, too. The wildcat in Bochum has shown once more: class struggle is not a democratic and institutional event, but a living confrontation, which requires a determined and activist core as a reference point for workers that are more cautious. Both will now have to reflect on the results of the negotiations and the strike itself.

The “volunteers” for the redundancy program are supposed to be found by January, and then both sides expect a re-emergence of the confrontation. This will have to be at a higher level. As one activist at a meeting put it: “To give in now, to take a step back, would be hard. The step forward will also be a hard one!”

This next step of emerging workers’ autonomy - against the “disempowerers” and “negotiators” - we should support!

Volkswagen

Whilst the production at the European Opel factory was still running behind after the strike in Bochum, the second round of negotiations began at VW on the 28 October; the ‘hot’ phase of the pay round.

The VW firm also made losses in 2004 in their car-producing department (38 Million Euros in the first nine months) and has had to balance this against gains in the financial services branch. The personnel boss Hartz wants to instigate a 30 percent saving in personnel costs by 2011. To start this there will be a two-year wage freeze and a lower starting wage for new employees in order to bring the VW wage in line with flat rate agreed by the IGM collective wage agreement for Niedersachsen (it is currently 20 per cent higher). Even before the second round of negotiations began, the works council and the IGM reduced their demand from 4 percent to 2 percent. They were indicating that they were prepared to negotiate on the lower starting wage when it comes to getting employment guarantees.

For VW conditions, workers are ready to struggle. At the first round of negotiations on 11 October, 7000 workers in Emden and Kassel had already downed tools. A delegation went to visit the strike at Opel. But even when a few thousand VW workers protested by driving very slowly in their cars and so slowing traffic for hours during the negotiations in Hannover and when the information meeting in the research and development plant blocked the HGV entrance, they never achieved the independence that they did in Bochum. In Emden, Kassel, Braunschweig and Salzgitter it once again came down to warning strikes and demonstrations with the usual few thousand people taking part. VW had an official agreement of no strikes while the original collective contract was still running, but as soon as this was over there were strikes in all the VW factories on the 1 and 2 November - these were the first (warning) strikes in Wolfsburg for 20 years. With 50,000 workers strik-

ing, almost the entire company workforce took part. There were huge demos outside where the negotiations were taking place in Hannover.

The actions that the IGM organized at the end of the official no-strike agreement is a testimony to how much the workers in the factory are ready to fight, as well as to the lessons of Bochum, using focused, controlled warning strikes and information meetings to keep the discontentment under control. The mobilisation kept the IGM and company works council from pushing through a strike ballot, the results of which could not be predicted. Instead, on the 2 November, the negotiation results were suddenly presented.

A 28-month wage freeze, which is half a year more than the VW management had originally demanded. An end to the yearly bonus payments and new results orientated bonus scheme brought in 2006. In 2005, there will be a one-off payment of 1000 Euros. The work time account will be extended to plus/minus 400 hours and the possible weekly working time rose to 40 hours. In order for workers to take early retirement from the working life, they can accrue 66 hours a year onto a life-work-account. This raises the weakly working time by a further 2.6 unpaid hours.

The pay for apprentices has been reduced and now be only 85 percent of the apprentices will be taken on. The other 15 percent will be placed with the VW daughter company AutoVision, where extra trainee places will be created. There is a lower wage agreement there as at VW. The employment guarantee until 2011 contains a revision clause.

Nevertheless, one cannot simply refer to this as walk-over by the employers. The wages of the permanent employees remain the same. However, a two-tier system and a split workforce have been created with the lower starting wages. The wage levels will drop in the long term. The permanent workforce will be directly affected financially by the cuts in bonus payments and the loss of the overtime bonuses. Ever increasing flexibilization of work time means that workers have ever less of their own time at their disposal. Although most of the workers are pissed off, the spark from Bochum has not caught light. This is partly because at VW - the showpiece of the German social partnership system - the higher wage was not won in the self-organized struggle, but rather as a result of the negotiations. However, exactly this pacification of the large VW workforce using generous wage packages is also now in crisis. It still worked this time, but the legitimization of the works council and the union is showing cracks.

Material

Now we are leading 2:0, they are taking the best players off the field. [I.e. in Antwerpen and Rüsselsheim the production has ceased and the union is now finishing the strike]

In the future struggles the international chains of production will hit considerably harder, as we have shown, so I am very optimistic.

It has to be much harder. Like at Opel where they shut down the production completely. So that they know what is going on here.

(VW workers, 28 October, in Hannover)

Eisenach: The factory for experiments on living workers

(From Freitag (German Magazine), 14th of February 2003, www.freitag.de/2003/08/03080601.php):

One example of cost-cutting and increased productivity is the Opel factory in Eisenach (East Germany), which was opened on the 23 September 1992. In the following eight years about 2 million Deutsche Mark (about 1 billion Euros) were invested. The factory has a production capacity of 178,000 cars per year, and of employing about 2,000 workers. The works council boss, Harald Lieske, is boasting that in contrast to other German Opel plants, they work three hours more per week and earn 25 per cent less. In November 2003 so-called 'corridor-days' (Korridorstage) were agreed on for periods of low sales: all workers in production are asked to give up one shift (eight hours). Part of the deal is that the staff in Eisenach got guaranteed employment up to 2007. However, by 2001, there were several periods of reduced working hours (short time) and the annual production was only 137,000 cars. In order to achieve this number they had to get the Astra production to move to Eisenach, the Corsa already being produced there, and all with very short notice. In summer 2003, this was given back already. For 2004, the production of 158,000 up to 160,000 of Corsa was taken. Now about 1,800 people are working there (the promised 2,000 was never reached). This will not change after the negotiations.

"Last year Eisenach celebrated its tenth anniversary. The media reported euphorically about the most modern car plant in Europe. The fact that we have been the guinea pigs, which General Motors used in order to test new production models on, models that now are enforced in other Opel-plants, they did not say a word about. Today we are worn out by the enormous strains that the assembly line demands of us. Many workmates have problems with their backs and joints. The spirit of Hartz is noticeable with us too - they demand total flexibility from all employees. Last year, when sales were down, they cancelled shifts and left them unpaid. For years now, no new people have been hired, not

even to compensate for the turnover, which results in a catastrophic situation of understaffing. When it all goes pear-shaped because of the staff deficit, they hire temporary workers for 5.80 Euros per hour. Everyone can see that they are second-class employees; they even get given different work clothes. If they get ill, the temp agencies sack them immediately".

"We stay in!" - Chronology of events

April 2004

Opel-boss Forster renounces any further employment guarantees of the kind that had previously been given.

Summer 2004

The management announces that new MiniVan (the next generation of Zafira) will partly be produced in Gliwice (Poland) instead of Bochum.

September 2004

Opening of the "battle for production location" between Trollhättan in Sweden and Rüsselsheim about the common platform production of the next generation Opel Vectra and Saab 9.3. The decision is meant to be made at the beginning of 2005. Management and works council negotiate a contract of "production location security". (Employment is guaranteed by slashing bonuses including all Christmas bonuses and a cancellation of wage increases until 2009).

12th of October 2004

The GM-leadership declares "the most radical cost-cutting program in the 80 years history of American car producers in Europe": 500 Million Euros cost reduction and 12,200 jobs cut in Europe. The German newspaper FAZ quotes a GM-manager: "If we take into account all facts, we would have to shut down the plant in Bochum. But of course we can't just go ahead and do something like that." The quarterly report was due to be published on the following Thursday, giving more official information.

Thursday, 14th of October 2004

When the first reports appear in the media, the early shift at Opel Bochum gets together for a 45-minute meeting to consult. The news becomes more concrete: 10,000 jobs are supposed to be cut in Germany, 4,000 of those in Bochum, 3,500 in 2004. The late shift in plant 1 agrees to down tools, plant 2 and 3 follow their example. At 4:32 pm, Bochum is silent and the gates are blocked. Groups of workers take a walk through the plant, the paint and press shop, calling on the few who are still working to stop. Most of the time they succeed. Union and works council warn the workers not to "act rashly" and try to postpone things to the

international day of action on the following Tuesday, 19th of October. Repeatedly they spread rumors that people are back at work. Nevertheless, every shift assembly votes for the continuation of the strike.

Saturday, 16th of October 2004

Foremen and security guards try to smuggle parts out of the factory, but some attentive pickets manage to prevent this. Rumors about a possible lock out of plant 2 and 3 are raising the mood to such an extent that the police in Bochum declare they will not to plan an intervention at this point in time. In front of plant 2 a “family-day” takes place, which becomes an expression of the broad solidarity the strike finds in the local population, with activists from the Monday-Demonstrations and with many delegations of workers from other companies.

At the weekend 16th/17th of October 2004

The IGM-boss Hubert makes clear what the official line of the union is: “Nevertheless, I am expecting that on Monday regular working relations are back on the agenda. If not, we will not be able to effectively negotiate with General Motors...”

Monday, 18th of October

At 6am, the workers in Bochum vote for the continuation of the strike, but the other plants are still working. The management had prepared itself for the strike. There had been stockpiling of goods during the previous few weeks, the managements had ordered extra shifts. During August management and the works council had already agreed to eleven ‘corridor days’ taking place in October in Eisenach, meaning compulsory time off for the workers during the strike. In Rüsselsheim the production workers (except from those in the press shop) are sent home on Thursday, the cancelled working hours are subtracted from the annual work time account. Finally, the late shift in Antwerpen feels the impact of the strike: necessary parts are not delivered. The strike starts to hurt. Still, in Trollhättan and Antwerpen the union’s principle is to defend “their own” plants: they prevent “their workers” from striking. In Ellesmere Port, the union secretary speculates on an advantage for “his plant” and does not inform the workers about the strike. Luckily, the leaflets of some Trotskyist group spread the word in the end.

Tuesday, 19th of October

The production in Antwerpen and Rüsselsheim comes to a halt on Tuesday, Ellesmere Port follows on Tuesday afternoon and Kaiserslautern is expected to stop on Thursday. On the international day of action, the whole European union apparatus is gearing up for action: demonstrations, anti-Americanism, workers

pride, Opel-ideology, but everything that mentions or could relate to the strike is excluded. In Bochum, all bourgeois personalities and institutions are set into motion, the mayor, the priests, the union functionaries, the media, the company management, the minister for finance and economy and his chancellor. Even the parliament meets for an extra session. A united front is supporting the IGM (Metal Union) in order to tame those workers “who had gone wild”. Management and the company works council promise in a joint declaration “to look for a socially acceptable way to adjust the number of employees within the framework of re-structuring”. The same morning, management had already threatened the ‘ring leaders’ of the strike with legal consequences. After the demonstration, the atmosphere at the factory gates is agitated, while the union is already talking about given preconditions for a new negotiation process and is calling for an end to the strike. Nevertheless, the workers assemblies of the early and late shift vote in favour of continued strike action.

Wednesday, 20th of October

The union seems to accept the demands of the activist workers for a general assembly of all three shifts and rents the Ruhr Congress Centre for Wednesday morning. Instead of a rank-and-file democratic assembly people face checks of their company IDs, their pockets and bags are searched, there are no microphones for the assembly, only for the stage, which is blocked by security guards, so no one other than the works council members and IGM-reps are allowed to talk. No discussion, only a secret ballot. The ballot sheet reads: “Should the works council continue the negotiations with the management and work be started again? Yes or No”. The fighting collective of the workers is turned into individual bourgeois voters. Despite this 1769 workers still voted in favour of strike (over a quarter of the assembly), but the majority (4673 workers) voted against.

“This solidarity gives us the hope that we could hold out in an even longer dispute.”

(From an interview with Manfred Strobel, published in “Express, newspaper for socialist work in companies and unions”, 10 November 2004.)

Manfred Strobel is a long-standing member of both Autokoordination, a group of critical car industry workers, and GoG, existing since 1974. He was expelled from the IGM (the metalworkers’ union) in 1984 because he stood as a candidate on an anti-union list for the works council elections.

“People are not like one would like them to be. A lack of consciousness is not a defeat, but is rather linked to the wider political struggle. A lack of consciousness

could also be due to the mistakes of the “left”, the “left co-manager”. You cannot break out of the de-politicisation of the political class, the church, the unions etc in just seven days. Consciousness is not something you can decree, dictate or order. It develops itself through understanding and learning in the confrontation itself and from the point of view of a possible on-going perspective. The critique of the bourgeois economy is one thing, and an important one, the other thing is the development of an at least conceivable post-capitalist vision, but this is thin on the ground. In addition: the strike in Bochum - with aspects of a workplace occupation - was a defensive struggle from the outset, and not one that attacked the system. [...]

[But it was] a small conquest for emancipation: The employees had organized themselves. From Thursday on it was clear, the workforce would discuss and decide together every step and every action. Without any great vote or anything, the gates were occupied in order to stop the HGVs leaving the factory with goods - they could drive away empty. In the works council office there were lists on display that anyone with a suggestion could add too. We quickly managed to wrangle the necessary technical equipment out of them. At regular info-rounds, the actual situation of how things stood was made known and discussed. The mic was open for anyone and everyone - with only one limitation: no party political agitation. That, and other things, worked amazingly well and things did not seem to be that difficult - apart from little to very little sleep that you or someone else had at during this time. The workforce was certainly no homogeneous community, but we had good solidarity; also with lots of different opinions and perceptions. I think, that lots of us had the impression that this was coming from us, and not from above. That was our strength and our power. This is self-organization and that despite the IGM and Co-managers, who piped up at the top of their voice, in public, that they were against this form of confrontation... But what should you expect from these Hubers and Franzens? It was totally our thing!

Loads of people came from Bochum and other places, loads of donations of money and other things. Our material needs were more than taken care of! People opened a bank account for the financial support. This solidarity gives us the hope that we could even win a longer dispute. No one can guess at this point how long it will go on for. When we look at the actual changes that are being threatened, we are discussing a longer continuous confrontation - maybe a few weeks. [...]

Cited from the Contract

§ 6 The Revision Clause

In the event of significant changes to the basic conditions or the economic environment, the following procedures can apply:

6.1 The parties to the collective bargain shall commit to holding a review meeting. It is required that one party requests the review meeting and also that it is not immediately apparent that the company's economic reaction mechanisms can be implemented, or these prove insufficient, such as the reduction of overtime, cutbacks of external labour, the use of mobility and the relocation of production. The aim of this review meeting is a mutual adherence to section 4.

6.2 If an agreement between the parties to the collective bargain cannot be reached, a common arbitration board will be called to arbitrate.

6.3 If this procedure also cannot reach a result, then the existing wage contract can be terminated with three months notice at 30 of June or 31 of December of the year. The wage contract will not be effective after such notice.

6.4 In the case that the wage and conditions contract is terminated, the agreement on the security of the location and the workforce (of 28 September 1995) is correspondingly terminated in its respective version at this point of time.

gm/saab.sweden

From the Swedish „workplace paper“ Motarbetaren #5, September 2004. See <<http://trouble.at/motarbetaren>>

It's all about subsistence - not about competition about jobs and increased exploitation

The explicit General Motors's program in week 2004.36 about the plants in Rüsselsheim (Opel in Germany) and Trollhattan (SAAB in Sweden) and the underbidding when it comes to sending classmates to unemployment, is only about speaking out clearly what is always an imperative with the competition between plants and workers' collectives. A competition that is most fierce within the major companies.

If GM is sincere about closing either one of the present plants and centralize production to the remaining one, then the decision is already made. With this decision, Trollhattan is most probably the loosing part, with its distance from the European chains of production and markets, and its relative smallness. This is so, whether the Swedish Metall (the metal workers' union) is offering lower wages and longer working time or not.

The most certain motive for GM is to let both plants present programmes for future increase in exploitation

of the workers, with increased speed, reorganization of work processes and organization plus longer working time without corresponding increase of wages. With this rationalization planned, and to be accomplished by the local union and plant management, GM will be stronger off, no matter if they will close either of the plants, or not.

The background, apart from the always-overarching motive to get fewer workers to produce more for less payment, is the extremely fierce competition on the automotive market. They talk about an approximately 30 percent over capacity of production for the total automotive capital relative to the world wide demand.

The union strategy - crisis management

The union policy at present is 1) to sign a common protest appeal among the Swedish Metall union, the German IG Metall and the EMF (the European Metalworkers Federation) against GM playing off the two plants against each other; 2) to put their faith in GM considering „strict business economy“, whatever that may be, and that a „Swedish solution“ then is „very well at hand“ (according to the local union official in Trollhattan, Paul Akerlund); and 3) to let plants close and workers get fired, and instead emphasize the need for „restructuring“, with new jobs created with new techniques „on behalf of other jobs“. The price to be paid by the workers is to be balanced off by a good „unemployment insurance and an active labour market policy“ (the Metall union president, Goran Johnsson, in the union paper Dagens Arbete (Labour Today)). Beside this, the same Goran informs us that „those who loose this automobile production most probably will get some other production“.

Goteborg and the transmission plant

The SAAB factory in Goteborg has for a long time been under the same threat, however less explicitly. This threat was even more acute when the transmission plant changed from belonging to SAAB to be part of a GM-Fiat joint venture about gearboxes and motoring. The motive for the joint venture was from the start to play off the 17 factories in action in Europe against each other by stressing that the 17 factories were at least 3 or 4 to many without mentioning which was to be superfluous.

It was obvious from the start that the bosses wanted to increase competition between the plants, that is the workers, by implementing streamlining and rationalizations - in the end to increase the exploitation of the workers, says one worker in Goteborg.

Both the union and the management talk about „we in Sweden this, and we in Sweden that“. „If only we improve quality, write more improvement suggestions (i.e. kaizen, transl. note), reconsider when we are about

to call in sick, etc.“ then the plant will remain. They suggest that if only we are willing, and make some efforts, it will work. But the new gearbox got screwed, the production of that went to Russelsheim (!), despite that they told us that „we“ were cheaper and produced better quality. I mean, how reliable is it when the bosses are appealing to our - yeah, our - willing at the same time as they let in Italian „brass“ (the wankers wearing ties, transl. note) to measure our machines?

A struggle for subsistence, and for better jobs

When GM decides - whether it will be Trollhattan or Russelsheim - it is up to the workers to fight. If they close either plant, to secure what ever there is to secure - that is subsistence. In the end that is what it is all about - as it is said, if they want loyalty, they can buy a dog. Demand, say, 5 years of wages and paid retraining. If GM won't pay, demand it from the state. If the state won't pay, demand it from the union - in the end it is to them we are paying our money every month, year in and year out. If Goran Persson (the Prime Minister of Sweden, transl. note) want to contribute with some billions (SEK, transl. note) for a motor-way project to Trollhattan, that will take longer time than the next threat of closure, then fuck the asphalt, give the money to the workers of Trollhattan.

If they continue production, there is the need to refuse worsening of work conditions and environment. It is no solution to let them have your little finger, since they, like all capitalists, are not satisfied until they get whole your body and soul. You can, just the same, say No today.

If they want to close today or in three years, it doesn't matter how much - or little! - we agree to do. We can just as well approach them today and demand the only thing that counts in society - cash money. They can take their jobs and shove'em, if they only want to get us to work harder for less money. And in the end, they will fire us one after the other, instead of all collectively. Remember the 70 workers (at SAAB in Gothenburg, transl. note) that got fired last spring - with no thank you's what so ever). The day before they were about to leave, some, well selected, of them got the offer to stay until the summer vacation, however not with a permanent contract. The management even got workers from Sodertalje (the SAAB motor factory south of Stockholm, transl. note) to work for the just fired Goteborg workers! In France workers threatened to blow up their closed factory, and got well more money than the legal system allowed them, says the same Goteborg worker.

Five years' wages, that would do a „good unemployment insurance“, to use the words of Goran Johnsson. And keep holding our heads high.

September 24, 2004

From *wildcat* no. 71, autumn 2004

In search of 5000 talented workers to build automobiles

In November 1999, Volkswagen labor director Hartz presented the new project called “5000 x 5000” to the public. 5000 working spaces would be established to produce the new Volkswagen “Touran” model in Wolfsburg (Germany) and Hannover (Germany). The goal would be to bring “work places from abroad” back to Germany. The project wanted to show that even under German (high-wage) conditions it would be possible to create profitable production.

The basic idea of the project was to produce a number of pieces for a fixed wage of 5000 DM (2556 Euro). Furthermore, there were no surcharge payments allotted for overtime, nightshifts or weekend-work, and no Christmas or summer bonuses and no overtime compensation through time off. Working hours were rolling time from 28.8 to 48 hours per week with Saturday as a normal workday. It was a list of wishes.

The wishes were not in agreement with Volkswagen contract with the Volkswagen Workers Union, so Volkswagen founded a subsidiary company, the *Auto 5000 GmbH*. At the end of March 2001, Volkswagen started negotiations with IG Metall. In principle, the IG Metall welcomed the concept, but there were some corrections necessary concerning working hours and wages. On July 28, 2001, a collective Auto 5000 agreement, with a duration of three years, was concluded about the conditions of the production of the *Touran* in Wolfsburg. The results were: 3500 unemployed workers would be hired. They would go through a special application procedure; the application would be processed solely by the Auto 5000 job center. The selected applicant would have to complete a three-month qualification period (paid by the job center), in which they should achieve general suitability for industry. After that, the applicant would have a six-month probation period including: training, more qualification, and building of the efficiency necessary for the demanded quota of the number of pieces. They would get unemployment money and later in the plant, they would get fixed wages of 2045 Euro per month. After completing probation successfully, they would get unlimited employment with a monthly wage of 2300 Euro plus a minimum bonus of 256 Euro, before tax naturally, and an additional personal achievement bonus and a plant-wide production bonus. All of the additional payments would depend on achieving the demanded profit margin. In comparison with the agreement between Volkswagen and its employees in the VW Wolfsburg plant,

Auto 5000 employees would earn 20-40 per cent less.

The Auto 5000 contract “stipulates value creating regular working hours” as 35 hours a week on average per year. They can be expanded to 42 hours a week if necessary. Up to 200 hours can be collected on an overtime account.

Compensation is made through time off or payment with 25 per cent added. The early and late shifts on Saturdays and the start up shifts on Sunday evening count as regular working time. Paid overtime can really only be created by management mistakes. If the number of pieces of the necessary quality is not achieved, it is necessary to do unpaid rework. The responsibility of defects lies with the “team” that produced them. Weekly, employees have to do three hours of qualification, 1 1/2 hours of which are paid. During the first two years of the contract there is a mutual cancellation period, after that the legal requirements are valid.

There are various additional agreements within the collective Auto 5000 agreement, which “set the form of the working organization”. It is full of demand formulations about how “to create human working organizations”, “varied and holistic working matters”, “flat hierarchy”, and “semi-autonomous teams” with “advanced options, dispositions and spaces for decisions”. In an appendix about achievement- an employee rating appears to be based on the criteria of the “biological and social reasonability” of the personal setting.

Additionally, there is a “collective agreement about qualification”: After two years of “continued qualification”, all of the employees of the “Learning Factory” become “accredited Professionals for Automobile Production”. With a contract for “co-management”, the workers council is allowed to determine the goals of production, personnel numbers and bonuses.

The glorification of the Auto 5000 location and the agreements about “holistic working organization” and “co-management” produced a storm of ardor in almost all of the media. Even critical unionists praised the project. IG Metall celebrated this “innovative model” in general and the maintenance of the 35 hour week in particular, certainly after the “dramatic negotiations”, as a “remarkable signal for the labor market”. They even noted as an achievement that all successful employees were to be employed after their probation period.

The production of the *Touran* started in January 2003 (after a delay). By the end of 2004, it should have been completely functioning. Out of 43,000 applicants, 3,780 were chosen for the phase of qualification and finally roughly 3,000 were hired. Almost 90 percent were unemployed before and were better qualified than average. Half of them were from Western Germany and half from Eastern Germany. The composition of the workforce in view of age and gender was typical for

automobile production. The average age of Auto 5000 personnel was 32 years old. 149 of the employees in the probation period were not later employed or signed off by themselves.

However, the start up phase could not have flown smoothly. Auto 5000 management needed to integrate “supporters“, workers with Volkswagen-experience, into the *Auto 5000* project. All in all, 107 people were added, mostly for the lower management. Now there are four hierarchies: management, leader of the assembly section, engineers and “supporters“.

Obviously, there were clashes with self-confident workers. A social science study paid by Volkswagen and IG Metall reflected what was easy to hear, “They think they can do what they want with us former unemployed.“The study captures those experiences on tiptoes stating, The “raised social sensibility of the unemployed“ and the “demand of self-responsible action“ created a “particularly critical sounding board“ for however inevitable conflicts. “The still highly motivated crew gives, just like the representatives of the concept in management and in workers council do, reason for good chances to hold the project on a successful track and contribute to a renaissance of even, enhanced industrial production work in Germany.“ (SOFI Göttingen: interim report about the project 5000x5000)

last note on vw

Capitalists in Germany try to force workers in the West-ern part to accept major pay cuts and longer working hours - a kind of 'downward' adjustment to the conditions in the Eastern part.

The Opel/GM management told workers in their plants in Bochum in January 2005 that they will have to accept the same conditions as workers in the Eisenach plant (Eastern part of Germany). While the negotiations in the public sector are still going on, the workers here can also expect pay cuts and longer working hours - again a 'downward' adjustment to the conditions in the East.

The VW workers are now facing another form of this adjustment. They recently learned that the union IG Metall is now prepared to extend Model Auto 5000 - used in Wolfsburg (West), which has allowed the hiring of unemployed workers outside the company's collective agreement. On January, 31st 2005, the Financial Times Deutschland reported:

The union IG Metall abandons its resistance against an expansion of the alternative employment-scheme ‘Model Auto 5000’ at Volkswagen (VW). The ‘little Touareg’ is pulled up as an example. “We are investigating whether we can adopt certain elements of the model, for example for the production of the ‘little Touareg’ at the Volkswagen plant in Wolfsburg,” said

Hartmut Meine, leader of the IG Metall Niedersachsen and Sachsen-Anhalt in Hannover. Meine gave “the flat hierarchies, the lived teamwork” as examples. At the VW plant in Wolfsburg 3500 employees produce the compact-van Touran using Model Auto 5000. Later, 1500 more are supposed to produce the Microbus based on the van T5 at VW’s commercial vehicle plant in Hannover. Unlike the other VW employees they are not paid according to their working hours, but have to fulfill production and quality targets agreed upon in advance. The needed working time can be up to 42 hours. Moreover, training periods get only paid half.

The Touran is one of the most profitable models

As a result, the Touran is one of the most profitable VW-models. Its production costs lie well above ten per cent under the costs for the Golf which is built in Wolfsburg under the VW company agreement. In Spring 2000 the Model Auto 5000 was introduced, at first against the IG Metall’s rancorous resistance. The union was concerned about a general extension of working hours, and it only agreed because under the model mainly unemployed were hired.

So far the IG Metall has always refused to expand the model, which hasn’t been imitated elsewhere so far, to other parts of the company. Now this position is softening. “The accompanying research showed clearly that employees at Auto 5000 are also only working an average of 35 hours per week” said Meine. 95 percent of the rework to be done due to lack of quality or not producing enough pieces is caused by the company not the workers, says the unionist. And according to the agreement on working hours, it is only in cases where the management is not responsible for any mistakes in the production process, that the workers are obliged to do unpaid overtime.

Questioning rigid structures

According to Meine the production of the little Touareg, an SUV (sport utility vehicle) based on VW Golf offers a good opportunity to take over parts of the Auto 5000 model. “At VW some rigid structures must be questioned.” From 2007 on the compact SUV with the plant code A-SUV is going to be built in Wolfsburg because during the bargaining procedure for a new company agreement the workforce was prepared to make big concessions. Otherwise, the car would have been produced in the Czech Republic or Slovakia. A different organization of work and more flexible working hours are supposed to lower the A-SUV’s production cost by about 1800 Euros.

After weeks of negotiations with the IG Metall, VW had signed a new company agreement in November. According to this agreement newly employed get paid

about the same as the Auto 5000 workers. In exchange the 103,000 VW employees accepted more flexible working hours and lower overtime payments.

VW's rivals in France, Japan and South Korea are using their significantly lower production costs to push their prices down, and to attract customers away from VW. In order to compete with this VW has to lower the labour costs within Germany.

Opel suffers from this problem, too. General Motor's subsidiary in Germany announced that it would only keep its plant in Bochum open, if the production costs decline significantly.

The workforce is supposed to waive a large part of their extra pay above the level of the collective agreements. However, a guarantee for the further existence of the plant at that location is not given: "In today's world it is not possible to give guarantees any more," said Carl-Peter Forster, Vice-president of GM Europe, talking to Opel employees on Friday. Opel currently is cutting 9500 jobs, that is every third job.

Before the last the collective bargaining round VW had also threatened to cut one third of all jobs if the labor costs in the German plants were not going to sink about 30 percent.

welfare/germany

From wildcat no.71, autumn 2004

We were the people!

(Banner on a Monday demonstration in Leipzig - "We are the people" was the main slogan during the demonstrations in 1989)

While the initiatives of the unemployed, the social forums and other alliances were preparing for a hot autumn for months, the Monday demonstrations against the welfare reform disrupted the silence of the mid-summer break in east-German cities. Several thousand people took the streets week after week. What had begun as a small protest in Magdeburg grew as rapidly as it shrank again, after it became clear that the government would only carry out cosmetic adjustments to the so-called Hartz IV reform. Up to now, it is not yet clear if the Monday demonstrations were the prelude of a general movement against the attack on the level of reproduction of the proletariat, or if they will end up in an impasse of a new East German self-identification.

The attack

Hartz IV marks a paradigm shift. The abolishment of the unemployment benefit affects a root of the specific organization of capitalism in Germany, more than any other measure of the government. It wasn't tactically clever that in autumn 2004, Hartz, as a person-

nel manager at VW, was also seen as the force behind the attacks on the standard working conditions in the industry.

With the disappearance of the unemployment benefit, all claimants will be forced on to the same level of income after one year of unemployment. The application of the 'principal of need' or 'means testing' will result in the administration nosing around the living conditions of the unemployed and their relatives. At the same time, the controls by armed customs officials are intensified, in order to punish people doing cash in hand jobs. This is meant to drain the "undeclared resources" which still help a lot of unemployed to make ends meet in a bearable way. The abolishment of the unemployment benefit is supposed to build up sufficient pressure on the unemployed and to save money: they estimate that about 600,000 people will be immediately excluded from drawing benefits. The former minister of social affairs, Blüm, an opponent of Hartz IV, is warning that the reform would damage "ancient understandings of justice". Up to now, after working twenty years or more in the factory an income was guaranteed in the case of unemployment or after reaching a certain age. This income was calculated on the basis of the last wage and was even adjusted to the wage increases of the industry. With the cessation of this guarantee, a pillar of legitimism of the 'Rheinish Capitalism'¹ is destroyed; the social peace in this country was also based on the permanent separation of the core working class from the claimants of social aid.

Hartz IV takes people's dignity. Their income is cut down to basic needs and for some it is cut entirely, meaning that they become permanently financially dependent on their partners. Secondly, using the threat of cutting their income, the personal adviser in the dole office can force any recipient of unemployment money to dress up in cute uniforms to collect rubbish in the park. The recipient will get a pittance of one Euro per hour extra in addition to the dole money. This indignity is cutting deeper than political apathy.

For East-Germany, where fifteen years after the fall of the Wall only a few islands of high productivity are peaking out of a sea of stagnation and unemployment, the reform Hartz IV is a synonym for the end of development: the re-construction is finished, there is not more to expect. Migrate or be unemployed at the lowest level of reproduction.

Who is taking to the streets?

The Monday demonstrations were organized by neither the SPD² nor the unions – in order to support the Social Democratic take over of the government as in 1998 – nor were they financed by the DGB³ – like the demonstrations on 3rd of April 2004. Neither the copyright-claim of some of the former East German

civil rights fighters for the brand 'Monday-Demonstration' nor the insults of the DGB-Boss, who said that the organizer of the demonstrations was a united front of PDS and NPD⁴, could prevent the people from verbally expressing their anger on Mondays. And they expressed themselves rather rudely: "Shoot the bastard [Hartz]!", "Send Clement [Minister of Economy] down the mine, put Schröder at the line – for no more than just a dime!" After 14 years of being put off, the people are fed up: they simply don't believe anything anymore and the demonstrations were a possibility to say it out loud. One angry woman speaking in Leipzig: "We won't vote for the pigs anymore. We are enough ourselves. Next time we gonna vote ourselves!" These are no reps talking. It is not the apparatus of the DGB or the PDS who is the driving force behind the demonstrations in Leipzig, Magdeburg, Senftenberg, or Stralsund but small local social forums, rank-and-file members, groups which have already organized anti-war protests, local union activists or PDS members and people who didn't appear previously at all. Accordingly, the demonstrations were not homogeneous. In the East it was mainly 'normal people' who formed the demonstrations, i.e. They were 'proletarian demonstrations'.

Those who come too late...

In every western-European country during the last few years, the pension system was reformed and the income of the unemployed was cut. One consequence of the Re-unification is the very high and regionally concentrated unemployment in East Germany that prevented these adjustments from being tackled in the 90s. The attacks today are socially imbalanced and economically short-circuited – and they cannot be justified by the promise of creating new jobs. Even conservative theoreticians of economics notice these shortcomings of Hartz IV.

In order to legitimate such drastic cuts, a credible promise of creating full-employment is necessary. Shortly before the national election in 2002, Hartz and Schröder actually announced to the public that their program will halve the unemployment figures! The developments in East Germany refute the assumption that flexibility and low wages would create employment. In the meantime, it became clear that whole generations will find themselves as working poor in so called mini-jobs and compulsory work schemes or will be unemployed until they reach pension age. Even the government retreated from their assumption that Hartz IV would create jobs.

...have to face Monday demonstrations

The erosion of the base of social democracy is in full swing. The 'Election Alternative' mobilizes many people and could become, according to its composi-

tion, the first 'workers party' of the Federal Republic of Germany. In August we could see how worn out the political class in Germany is.

Politicians quarreled within their own political organizations about the right approach towards the demonstrations, the president of Saxony, who voted in favor of the new reform, would have liked nothing more than to join the demonstrations himself while the leadership of the DGB was afraid of calling for everyone to participate in the protest. The nerve ends were exposed and Schröder nearly lost it over some thrown eggs...

The simplest form of critical dialogue – namely the very attempt to make oneself heard – and the democratic formation of opinion were equated with the threat of collapse of order and were defamed as "violence". This shock reaction within the whole 'political class' has encouraged the demonstrations and made them grow. When Schröder met DGB-Boss, Sommer, in September to talk about how to carry out Hartz IV the situation had something grotesque about it. Because Schröder's speech about the Agenda 2010 in spring 2003 has been the conscious rupture with the co-operative model which prevailed up to then: unions and the lower hierarchy of the SPD were excluded from the decision making process with the aim of making sure that they wouldn't water down the attack as usual. The DGB was anxiously concerned about not calling for the Monday demonstrations right until the end ...how could they now channel and control the protest?

Limits...

In August, people took to the streets en masse to express their anger and did not seem to be too impressed by the media's counter-propaganda. The demonstrations were a spontaneous eruption and as such were unpredictable for the politicians. The main weakness of the movement was that not enough self-organized structures were developed by September. This is when the organizers let themselves be pushed into the role of having to make alternative proposals to the reform. Of course Lafontaine didn't mention in his speech in Leipzig that he had wanted to merge unemployment and social aid immediately after he had become minister of finance (in 1998, with the coming to power of the SPD). Instead, he presented an economic critique of Hartz IV: that economically it made no sense to place all the weight onto the shoulders of the workers and unemployed as long as there are no new jobs.

Lafontaine wants the economic boom first and then the compulsory work schemes. And he can link this view to the dominant voice of the protest: "Work instead of Hartz IV" - no critique of capitalism, but the wish that it would function.

One reason for why an unemployed movement in the west of Germany has never existed is that not everyone

wants or at least wanted 'work' and that especially the politically active minority of the 'unemployed' treat the 'state benefits' as a legitimate form of income. In the east however, work is mainly seen as participation in society and unemployment as exclusion from it. What has made possible the big demonstrations in the east is at the same time (still?) their limit. Maybe 600,000 'one-Euro-jobs', created as a reward for the "We want work"-chants, will put an end to these stupid slogans. The protesters will damn the 'one-Euro-job', as not what they wanted after all.

This is the point where the supposed partners of the protesters, the charities, go behind the back of the Hartz IV opponents. After months of criticizing the cuts as far as they concern their clientele (and therefore their income) they discovered the flipside of the reform in the summer: they themselves would be able to employ thousands of people with one- or two-euro-jobs. With the words of the media spokesperson of the Arbeiterwohlfahrt⁵: we have to give Hartz IV a chance, given that it is about creating employment. In the meantime, and in hope of new cheap labour, the Arbeiterwohlfahrt has left the collective wage agreement...

...can be overcome?

The majority of the Monday protesters haven't questioned the need 'to save money' in principle – they just don't agree that the money should be saved from the income of the pensioners and unemployed etc.. With the discussion about fair and unfair ways of saving money the movement against the Hartz reform is running the risk to turn itself into its very opposite. The government program, in its destructive approach lacks a positive proposal, some sort of new social contract, which would be able to give a new legitimacy to the capitalist mode of production and the state.

The critical voices would like to get into a dialogue about such a positive proposal. Within this dialogue, the demands for a guaranteed income of 1,000 Euro or more won't be more than an embellishment of the re-construction of a new model of capitalist valorization. Some cruel and unfair elements of the law will be corrected and with some cosmetic changes, like the unemployment protection clause [Vertrauensschutz] for people over 58, Hartz IV will be carried out...

The slogan stating that there is enough money and that we only have to distribute it differently also only appears radical at first glance, but in effect it uses the protest in order to justify capitalism in alignment with Lafontaine and others. They conceal the essential scandal of capitalist valorization: things are supposed to deteriorate for the working class because its work becomes more productive. This has not much to do with rationality, but with economy. Because we pro-

duce ever more with ever less work, we are supposed to tighten our belts and work even more. All protests demanding "Yes to saving money, but not on our costs", all assumptions of 'fair distribution' are playing into the hands of this mechanism, are declaring it as a law of nature and are helping to set workers in competition with each other on a worldwide scale. If productivity is rising in China, what is supposed to be bad about that? Nice for everyone: less work, more time, better life. This only constitutes a problem in a world where having a share of the social wealth is tied to the disposal of ones own labor force (or the command over the labor force of others). When we are unemployed, it is not work that we are lacking, but the possibilities to do all the things we like to do. To move (public transport), to travel (railway tickets), to go to concerts or the cinema, to use the machines that we would need to "create the world as we would like it to be"... all these things are still tied to money.

And the radical left?

Everyone says; "In August they were queuing up everywhere to get our leaflets, in the demonstrations, in front of the job centers. We could have distributed even more; the people wanted to know stuff".

The fact that tens of thousands of people in the streets can't change anything was perceived by the participants as one of the main limitations of the demonstrations. In other countries, during the 90's we saw that even bigger and more radical mobilizations couldn't fight back the attacks on the welfare system.

This obvious powerlessness de-motivates. It might instigate the hope for the 'strong arm' or awake the wish for political representation, but it could also lead to asking the right questions.

We think that the neo-Nazis are the smaller danger. They can act openly in some cities and they have simple and often more radical answers to the "social question" than those of the left parties. But apart from their symbolic success in Magdeburg, where they were able at one occasion to lead the demonstration, their influence was marginal. In Leipzig, as in other towns, neo-Nazis were verbally kicked out of the demonstrations – without being physically attacked. In a lot of towns the organizers were rather awkward, they didn't know how to handle the situation, they stressed that they themselves are not "political" and that they don't want to "exclude anyone".

Where the neo-Nazis organized Anti-Hartz-Demonstrations themselves (e.g. in Wolgast under the name 'Schöner Wohnen Wolgast', in Herne/Ruhrarea...), the protest was disastrous with very few people taking part and subjected to the mockery of the public. The political journal AK ('Analyse und Kritik' - former 'Arbeiterkampf') hopes that the PDS will be able to get

control over the demonstrations because otherwise ‘we’ (?) would have to face up to long lasting social protests from the right. Such a position is not of the radical left – it is also a false position, given that the bigger problem were the people and organizations of the left, which tried to monopolize the protest.

Well-meaning unionists or the ‘Election Alternative for Work and Social Justice’ accompanied the protests with all sorts of proposals about taxation of the super-rich and companies and an alternative program for a new economical upturn. The MLPD (Marxist-Leninist Party of Germany) first gained influence with their open mics – and then drove the demonstrations into an open division. Also within the social forums there were internal quarrels and power games for which the mass of protesters only existed as an uninformed or unconscious rank and file.

Instead, we should extend the struggles on a local level, encourage and politicize the daily conflicts in the job centers and dole offices, support the process of self-organization from below. The protest will have to find different forms of expression, which go beyond the given framework, it will have to become more imaginative and more direct. We don’t have the time to spend three months preparing for the ‘Agenturschluss’ (introduction of the new unemployment regime). We don’t have to wait, we can occupy the job centers here and now, or organize actions of appropriation in posh shops, organize free public transports or proletarian shopping tours. First of all, we have to put an end to the megalomania, thinking we could topple Hartz IV by organizing some demonstrations. The mobilization for big events like the demonstrations on the 2nd or 3rd of October only play into the hands of those who want to get a seat at the negotiating table. Why don’t we demonstrate in front of the big companies, going to visit the workers at the end of their shifts? There is something like a general social unease; there is anger and hate at work. But up to now everyone plays their roles, as striking students, angry unemployed or workers who fight against wage cuts and extension of the work time. Every now and then, we could see small delegations from different companies at the Monday demonstrations. Permanent workers are interested in the situation of the unemployed, because they might be the next in the queue.

And the general outrage about Hartz IV also contributed to the mobilization of the Daimler workers in July. This is where we should proceed, supporting the process of self-organization and politicization from below. The possibilities haven’t been so vast and so promising for years.

Unfinished and Incomplete Chronology

26th of July

Magdeburg (East): About 200 people demonstrate, the media and the police say 600. Although there was hardly any advertising, apart from a short note in the local newspaper, and the Monday was rather rainy, a lot of people joined the demonstration spontaneously.

2nd of August

Magdeburg: 6,000 people. The mobilization for the demonstration was accomplished by word-of-mouth rather than by posters or leaflets. The demonstration started fine but then about 60 Neo-Nazis took over the head of the demonstration with two banners (“taking the peoples’ anger to the streets”). The organizers announced that everyone who is against Hartz IV is welcome on the demonstration. The appearance of the demonstration was very different from the lefty and unionist demonstrations: no stewards, a lot of self-made banners, no loudspeakers, no rally with speeches. Instead, normal people with bikes, push chairs and working clothes.

9th of August

Germany-wide: Minimum 40,000 people in East German towns – for the first time demonstrations in Hamburg and Cologne as well.

Magdeburg: About 15,000 people. This time with banners against benefit cuts and against the far right. No banners from the right this time. Most banners for employment, some of them rather angry: “Jobs for everyone – if not, we gonna riot”. Chants like “We don’t have time for low wages and work schemes” (this rhymes in German!) were sometimes confronted with disapproval. Nevertheless, there was a lot of frustration and anger around, some discussed the storming of the town hall.

Leipzig (East): 10,000 people take part, unions, religious groups, communist groups, neo-Nazis, anarchists and others. “Down with Hartz IV” is the dominant voice, but everyone seems to go into a different direction after that. More radical leaflets are appreciated with interest, but the general atmosphere is one of a blunt “anti”.

16th of August

Duisburg (West): The first real Monday demonstration in Duisburg. 200 people listened for one and a half hours to a dozen speeches at the ‘open mic’ (which was turned up for the MLPD-members and down for the others). After that, a 10 minute demonstration accompanied by the singing group of the MLPD.

Düsseldorf (West): About 650 to 700 people. MLPD with an open mic, the PDS with their social forum,

ISL⁵, unemployed groups, the anti-fascist group with their own leaflet, and surprisingly many people who haven't been seen on a demonstration for years (apart from the anti Iraq war demos).

Leipzig: Over 20,000, a lot of unemployed and older people, but also a lot of young folk who didn't look like 'demonstrators'. Not many self-made banners, no chants, no loudspeakers... more or less a silent march.

Potsdam (East): About 500 people turned up at the rally, organized by the 'Family Party' and the 'Grey Panthers' (pensioners party). PDS, DKP (German Communist Party) and unemployed organizations were there as well, but no fascists. The guy speaking for the 'Grey Panthers' demanded a 'people's front' against the government and presented a seven-point-plan for the rescue of Germany (fight back of illegal employment of foreigners, German companies should come back to Germany...)

16th and 23rd of August

Magdeburg: In both demonstrations, the neo-Nazis could march behind the demonstration, secured by the cops. The anti-fascist shouted slogans against them being there. The attitude of the majority of the demonstrators towards this problematic didn't seem to have changed. The numbers of participants is shrinking and the atmosphere amongst some of them is getting more aggressive.

23rd of August

Potsdam: Not more people showed up than last time, but more flags, the youth organization of the metal workers and building workers union joined the protest.

6th of September

Eisenach (East): 200 people came to the protest. The 'Alliance against welfare cuts' launched a ballot about the Monday demonstrations principals from Magdeburg: everyone is allowed to join, we distance ourselves from the fascists etc.. Then the demo started: different organizations of the MLPD, a lot of older members of the PDS, about half of the protesters are 'normal' unemployed. The 'Eisenacher Kameraden' (fifteen skinheads aged between 20 and 30) were told to march at the end of the demonstration, escorted by five cops. The 'people' are stuck in between the bureaucratic paternalism of the MLPD and the fascists, and show few initiatives of their own.

9th of September

Erfurt (East): A Monday demonstration on a Thursday: about 600 came, which means that the number of protesters was going down. Speeches from the union, a 'normal' citizen and a lefty guy. People seem to real-

ize that this type of demos don't lead very far. A lot of them are genuinely angry and frustrated about the callousness of the government. They don't expect anything anymore from them.

13th of September

Magdeburg: About 2,000 to 3,000 people. For starters the protest leader Ehrholdt, the social forum and the MLPD had verbal fights on the mic. Ehrholdt started with his usual short and meaningless speech (confirming that he understands himself as part of the "democratic forces" and that he doesn't want a "social change" like the extremists from the left and right). The high point of it all was the speech of a loony, probably a friend of Ehrholdt, who argued against the "billions of wind turbines" in Germany and the "30 percent of interests" which every loaf of bread contains. Quite a few of the demonstrators left the scene shaking their heads.

Senftenberg (East): Still 2,000 to 3,000 people in the streets, no Nazis, no political parties and lefty sectarian groups, but open mic and good atmosphere.

Freiburg (West): About 150 protesters marching for an hour, listening to MLPD, Linksruck (Trots) and unionists. Two weeks before there had been more people and also the composition had been different. More 'unorganized' and more people who weren't part of the political scene. Two weeks before, one also felt a dynamic between the demonstration and the other people in the street. This was lacking this time.

Berlin: Another heterogeneous demonstration, big confusion. Clearly less people than last time. The speech of the main guy of the MLPD was really unpleasant as he presented himself as the representative of the democratic forces ("100,000 for the 3rd of October" - Day of the German re-unification, when one of the nationwide demonstration was planned) and argued against 'Attac' and the planned demo on the 2nd of October. It was a real split including the 'spontaneous' speech of the MLPD after the demonstration (which was held in order to vote for a resolution for the demo on the 3rd of October).

Footnotes:

1 "Rheinischer Kapitalismus" is a term used by the bourgeoisie, meaning a form of Capitalism relying on a social peace and equality rather than conflict and including a formalized negotiation role of the unions in company management structures, and state provision of a social infrastructure (e.g. Health and Education).

2 Social Democratic Party (SPD)

3 Deutscher Gewerkschafts Bund, the head body of all the unions Party of Democratic Socialism – which is the legacy of the SED, leading party of the GDR

4 National Democratic Party of Germany – fascists

5 A charity organization linked to the SPD

6 International Socialist Left, a Trotskyist group

update hartz 4

The Wildcat-article (see above) was written a few months ago to understand the background and purpose of the Hartz IV-reform and the movement against it. Since then the new unemployment benefit (Arbeitslosengeld 2: Alg2) has been introduced and the municipal social security offices and the federal employment agency (Arbeitsagentur) have formed joint offices for managing those getting Alg2. From the start, problems arose. The computer programs, which for the first time combined all cases in one database with all employees theoretically having access, often worked partially or not at all. Many Alg2-notifications sent out were inaccurate, especially those sent to families. Frequently, cases weren't processed in time so people had (and still have) to wait for weeks before getting their money. At the end of December the work agencies sent the wrong account numbers to the some banks so funds weren't transferred in time. New case managers, who in theory should handle about 75 cases each, were trained - but so far most still handle many more.

In the upcoming months, the employment agency might manage to solve most of these problems. But what concerns the government though is that far fewer unemployed could be excluded from benefits as it hoped and predicted. (About 10 percent were cut because their partners earn 'too much' or else because they couldn't conceal their bank savings in time. The government had expected to strike 23 percent off the rolls.) So the whole program is ending up costing more - estimates now range around four billion Euros - and we thus might see more attempts to purge people by different means.

The core of the reform is introducing so-called One-Euro-jobs, mandatory jobs the unemployed have to accept or else face benefit cuts up to 30 percent. The government's goal is to force the unemployed, instead of signing up for unemployment benefits and working on the side, into taking any low-paid job offered to them. For now, the government says these jobs should be 'publicly useful' (Gemeinnützigkeit), that is more or less non-profit. In October the government gave the unemployed an opportunity to start working a One-Euro-job, first voluntarily. People were contracted for three to nine months work assignments in schools, libraries, homes for the elderly etc. But some are also working in workshops producing toys, in the transportation sector (moving services), in street cleaning, security jobs etc. And - as with other public work programs - quite a few 'alternative' projects (culture, child care...) also use this source of cheap-labor to function. The work agencies tried to pressure some unemployed into accepting these jobs; quite a few, tired of sitting

at home bored, did so voluntarily. The income - a 345 Euro benefit plus health insurance, rent and utility subsidies, and an extra 150 Euro for the One-Euro-job - adds up to about 750 or 800 Euro cash in hand. This is almost the same income as an 1100 Euro job (before tax) on the primary labor market. And it's also an income at or above the level of many low-paid jobs like security, cleaning, and fast-food.

Still, it remains to be seen how people having to give up more lucrative under the table work or having to work deadly boring, dirty, and unhealthy One-Euro-jobs will resist. The government still talks about introducing 600.000 One-Euro-jobs nation-wide, meaning that about one in two unemployed will at some point be forced into this kind of work. The new unemployed numbers published in early February show about 5 million registered unemployed. Out of this 5 million, 4 million are getting the reduced Alg2 benefits. One and a half million of these 4 million are getting Alg2 either as a wage supplement or because they have children etc., and the other 2,4 million are looking for work. These remaining 2,4 million could be forced to take One-Euro-jobs. Taking into account that these jobs last from three to nine months, in one year about half of the 2,4 million could be asked to do such work. But so far, this is all hypothetical. On one hand some politicians and bosses talk about further reducing the Alg2-benefit, pushing it below the wage for low-paid service work. They want to economically pressure the unemployed into accepting any shitty job on the 'free' labor market rather than trying to impose forced labor programs which could end up increasing competition for private capital in certain sectors like cleaning. On the other hand other capitalists talk about striking out the current paragraph on the 'public usefulness' (Gemeinnützigkeit) of the One-Euro-job. Instead, they want to include any private or public job, in this way setting up some kind of subsidized forced labor low-wage sector.

Most unemployed, though, are still waiting to see what happens. Of those now getting Alg2, two thirds get about the same money as before, with some getting even more. And, as mentioned before, far fewer than expected were cut off the unemployment rolls. With the One-Euro-jobs, some (for instance, the older unemployed who otherwise have no chance of finding a job) so far don't see the One-Euro-jobs as a threat. That might change soon. On the other side there are reports that temporary agencies are getting more job applications. Many unemployed people are feeling threatened by the Alg2-bureaucracy, the snooping around in peoples' financial affairs, and the One-Euro-jobs.

So far the resistance against the Hartz IV-attack includes growing incidences of violence in the work

agencies, the Monday-demonstrations and a campaign by leftist groups. In the second half of 2004 there were many reports about the unemployed confronting public servants in the work agencies, sometimes verbally, but sometimes also with knives and axes. The work agencies have since increased security. The Monday-demonstrations have died down, although protests still occur in some, mostly East German cities, with a few dozen or a few hundred demonstrating every week. The campaign started by leftists groups still goes on, with most people involved focusing on the feared impoverishment and degrading conditions of the One-Euro-jobs. To create problems for the work agencies, leftist activists at first asked the unemployed not to turn in their applications until the last minute. Most of the unemployed didn't heed this call; the agencies had enough problems anyway and people were anxious to pay their bills. This call for petty sabotage too is a flawed tactic because it keeps actions confined to the individual level. A better and more collective tactic was the attempted 'day of closure' of the work agencies. On the 3rd of January there were demonstrations and blockades in front of work agencies in some German cities, but the participants were mostly political activists (many of them unemployed though) and it was hard to get the 'other' unemployed involved. In some instances the police (and private security forces) prevented people from entering the work agencies to hand out leaflets; in other instances people went in, put up banners, blocked the entrance, etc. After that day of action wasn't as successful as hoped, there are still quite a few attempts to set up struggles against the further implementation of the reform. Most attempts concentrate on 'scandalizing' the reform by highlighting the impoverishment, and the degrading aspects of forced labor. These initiatives want people to use legal means against the work agencies, to rely on lobbying to force the political parties to rescind the reform (in order to get back to the former state of exploitation?) In Berlin some people are trying to focus more directly on the situation of the unemployed instead. They want to establish more links between the One-Euro-workers and other exploited workers with the aim of helping them start fighting against their conditions. Here is one of their reports:

Walks against the One-Euro-Jobs

We have renewed a joyous tradition of the Berlin unemployed and good-for-nothings. Since January 2005 we meet regularly for a collective walk where we do what alone we wouldn't dare do: inspect public offices, canteens and restaurants, visit One-Euro-slaves at work and also stop by the bosses' offices...

We do this to find out where One-Euro-jobs got established, who are forced to work them, and what peo-

ple do about them. That's why we walk to the contractors who are creating these jobs or already have done so for 'volunteers'. In Berlin those are (among others) Caritas, AWO (both charities), Kubus, Lotech (both involved in employment agency job- and training-programs for the unemployed) and Pfefferberg (a cultural project). BSR (state-owned street-cleaning) and BVG (public transport) are also under discussion. We go to these places and distribute our leaflet to make contact with and talk to One-Euro-workers and the other regularly employed.

We ourselves are unemployed - or could be at any time. Therefore, we might soon find ourselves in such a One-Euro-program. That's why we want to discover how we can act against the new attacks on our living conditions - the so-called Hartz IV-reform.

Report from one of the January 2005 walks

When we were about to start walking, two cop-cars were already waiting at the meeting-point... but we left them behind.

We first went to a couple of contractors who place One-Euro-workers. There we met some office-workers with limited work contracts who themselves had been previously unemployed. They assured us that they would only place people in One-Euro-jobs who want to do that work; the others could go home without any hassles. But they didn't want to comment on how they would deal with the new conditions in January 2005 [when people can be forced into taking the jobs]. They didn't like the idea that the industry could profit on all that. They said they couldn't tell us any more ; instead we should go and visit their bosses.

That's exactly what we did. But the women in that office said they were only responsible for placing people on social security in full one-year work contracts. So far they had nothing to do with One-Euro-jobs and they would not be supervising the contractor. So where were the bosses?

Next we went to Caritas which had several times announced they were creating One-Euro-jobs especially set-aside for the younger unemployed under 25 years old. At first we met office-workers in one Caritas welfare center. The women didn't want to give their opinions on the planned One-Euro-jobs and refused to answer our questions, for instance, on what qualifications the One-Euro-workers would need for the care-taking jobs. And they referred us to the Caritas central management...

Earlier, visiting another Caritas facility, we had interesting discussions with 'regularly' employed people from different Caritas projects. Some child care and cleaning workers told us they feared that in the future Caritas could replace their already insecure, partially restricted contracts with One-Euro-jobs. They were in-

terested in our leaflets, saying that they would hand them out to co-workers.

In the end the walk became really interesting when we suddenly walked unannounced into a workshop where about forty people - mostly women and, with one exception, all immigrants - were all sitting at sewing-machines making soft plush toys for kindergardens. Just like you imagine a sweatshop... All workers there were either ABM (another public works program) or One-Euro-workers (about half). Although the supervisor tried to stop us from talking to the workers and handing out our leaflets, we managed to converse with some of the One-Euro-workers. They told us they didn't like the fact that they were denied holidays and that they didn't get the usual sick rate at full pay. Taking 'Blue Mondays' wasn't possible. But otherwise the job was easy and nobody had to work hard.

A group of six women who had known each other before told us how they got One-Euro-jobs. Each woman had received a letter from the employment agency offering this job. They decided as a group to sign up together to avoid getting placed on different jobs.

The One-Euro-workers were delighted that someone was interested in their in part-time, shitty work conditions. While we were talking to them the boss got angry and called the cops. So we left.

For sure, we will stop by that place again on one of our next walks.

Mandatory One-Euro-jobs have only been implemented under the Hartz IV-reform since the beginning of this year. So we assume that enforcement of the new requirement has just started. Only in the next few months will we probably meet One-Euro-workers who - threatened by the benefit-cuts - are being forced to take the jobs. It will remain difficult for us to find out in advance what we can expect at the different job-sites and who we are dealing with there. We want to carry on discussions with One-Euro-workers and the 'regularly' employed. Meanwhile, we should make it clear to the bosses that in the future they will run into problems and that enforcing One-Euro-jobs won't happen without resistance. All in all the walks are great fun. They give you a chance to meet new people and talk and exchange information with them.

This article was published in wildcat no.71/autumn 2004. If you want to read more on this topic try the article "Marx and Makhno meet McDonald's: Casualized workers in Paris win several strikes, honorably lose another with combined union and extra-union, legal and illegal tactics [<http://home.earthlink.net/~lrgoldner/marx-makhno.html>]

The Experience of the Paris Solidarity Collectives - A new Stage

The article was published in the first issue of the new French revue *La Question Sociale - Revue Libertaire de Reflexion et de Combat* (The Social Question - Libertarian Journal for Reflection and Struggle). The following is the part of the text dealing with the strikes at Frog Pub, a strike that was less internationally known than the McDonalds strike. There is a German translation of the whole article on *wildcat-www.de*

After the successful strikes in 2001/2002 the Paris solidarity collectives had already dissolved themselves when new conflicts erupted in 2003. During these struggles, which were not always successful, unexpected contradictions and difficulties emerged, which only contributed to them becoming valuable experiences.

About the strike at Frog Pub

There are several Frog Pubs in Paris, English style beer pubs, whose menus and 'sport events on big screens' are aimed at a young and solvent clientele. Expenses reduced by all means necessary: the kitchen staff work in tiny kitchens (e.g. 12 square meters kitchen for 450 square meters pub area). The wages vary between the minimum wage and 1200 euros for the chef. The working time, the reasons for dismissal etc. are defined by the boss alone. There is no clock to punch in and out, so the boss often 'forgets' the payment of extra hours. The costs for having to take a taxi after closing time of the subway are not refunded, although most of the workers live in the outskirts. The staircase serves as changing room.

The waiters and service staff are mainly British; the kitchen workers are of Tamil origin. Most of them don't speak French. The whole kitchen staff is recruited within the Tamil community by a guy of Tamil origin. He is the only one who speaks good French, he is the middleman of the boss, he organises the work and decides whether a worker gets penalised or not. He is the only channel if someone wants to talk or negotiate with the boss. In this position he also represents the interests of the staff and was later on elected as their delegate. November 2002 the kitchen workers were trying to get

in contact with unionists. In order to protect themselves, initially also against their representative, some of them developed a form of collective resistance and turn to the CNT. The CNT reacted like a union would react and informed the management about the existence of a union representation within their company. The precondition for such a union representation is a minimum number of 50 staff, which the management had tried to prevent up to then, by declaring the single branches as independent companies. The CNT wanted to gain recognition by going to court. First of all the management sacked the elected delegate and recruiting guy. Although he was not their friend, on April the 13th, the rest of the workers voted unanimously for strike. After a confrontation the company dismissed another kitchen worker.

The workers at Frog had no experiences of struggles in France, they were union members for the first time and they were on strike for the first time. They couldn't assess what was possible and what was legal. They also couldn't assess the real power of the union and therefore they had to rely on partly vague and sometimes big-mouthed statements of the CNT, which gave the impression that they could break the resistance of the bosses. The ethnical divisions within the staff, which was consciously implemented by the management, could not be overcome in process of the strike. On the other hand, the ethnical identity of the Tamils ensured a unity for several months.

The targets

On April the 16th, 28 out of 29 kitchen workers of the Frog chain walked out. They demanded: the cessation of dismissals, the annulling of all penalties, the adherence to the conditions prescribed in the work contracts, better health and safety conditions (separate toilettes, showers, dry lockers), payment of the extra hours, if they can not be avoided in the first place, election of delegates in all four branches of the chain in Paris, paid holiday, payment of the travel costs, extra pay for working after midnight, 100 per cent extra pay for nightshifts, an extra months wage at the end of the year, improved work organisation (no divided shifts, e.g. two hours in the morning, four hours in the evening; no end of shift after closing time of the subway), freedom of union activities. The boss refused any negotiations and told them that they could stand in front of the restaurant as long as they want, that he wouldn't give a damn. Obviously he couldn't imagine that a strike of these immigrants - who haven't got a clue about anything - could have an impact on his business. Convinced that he had the law on his side he immediately went to court. There he obtained a legal order declaring that the strikers and the CNT were not allowed to enter or to block the restaurant. The striking

kitchen staff were replaced by British service workers, now on duty in the kitchen.

Soon the strikers realised that mere picketing and leafleting wouldn't be enough, but facing the legal order the CNT didn't want to enter the restaurant. First there were some doubts raised about the actual power of the unions. Now the striking Frog workers contacted the collective who previously had been supporting the strike at McDonalds. The cooperation started with a joint participation of striking Frog and McDonalds workers at the Mayday demonstration and with the rather chaotic occupation of the pub in Bercy by sixty people after the demo. On the 3rd of May, Frog and McDonalds workers, together with a large number of supporters, entered the pub of the Rue Saint Denis, where they clashed with the boss and some of the service workers. Afterwards they blocked the McDonalds restaurant at des Halles. The strikers were in good shape and wanted to continue the action, but the CNT tried to hold them back.

On May the 7th, the pub in Rue Saint Denis was occupied again. The very aggressive boss locked in clients, strikers and supporters until the cops arrived. The cops ordered that the doors be opened, negotiated a smooth retreat of the strikers and pressured the boss to enter the negotiation process. The boss promised to do so, but the very next day he refused to negotiate again.

The striking workers continued pressuring the boss by occupying the restaurant the following day. At this point the internal quarrels within the CNT became ever more obvious. It also became clear that not the workers and their struggle, but the advertising effect of these actions for their union were most important to them and they tried to increase this with banners, stickers and badges. In contrast, the solidarity collective only had the aim of helping the workers win.

It also became clear that only the "tough actions" - as the strikers called them - would be able to force the boss to negotiate: without the occupation the restaurant ran as normal, with the help of scab work by the service staff. At this stage the strikers enforced joint meetings of workers, the solidarity collective and the unions. The CNT had always refused to have this kind of meeting.

The CNT was focussing on a legal arbitration and announced that the legal process would require the suspension of any actions in front of the restaurant. At this point the strikers had planned an occupation that was supposed to last for at least three days. The union secretary brought an end to the occupation on the first evening, and all the CNT members joined him. For the strikers and the supporters there was nothing else left to do but to follow them.

The strikers could no longer assess to what extent the union would support them. The arbitration process

had a demoralising effect. Eventually the actions in and around the bar became less important for the CNT than the legal process. The solidarity collective didn't question the monopoly of the CNT in regard to the legal activities. It confined itself to the struggle on and in front of the pub floor, which the CNT was unable to fight. This division of tasks resulted in the struggle having to submit to the legal confrontation.

In front of the pubs a constant pressure was exercised on the clients. They were asked to show some solidarity and not to enter the pub. The biggest and most profitable pub was our main target. We tried to have pickets every afternoon, whenever possible. Every time the police were called in order to prevent our activities and to make us leave the allegedly private land. Everytime we responded by saying that we are acting as part of a labour dispute (which, in France, forbids the police to intervene). With every action we managed to stay in front of the restaurant and to extend the boundaries of legality. By end of the summer we had managed to make sure that one of the previously most visited pubs of the area was nearly empty. At the end of the arbitration process the boss complained that he had lost about 500,000 euros. Also at the other branches we had a similar success.

The employer finds a weak spot

The boss took a harder stance and only later we understood why. Unlike the CNT he didn't want to solve the conflict in front of the court. At the beginning of the summer he contacted the nationalistic organisation Tamile Tigers, which is dominating the Tamil community. He demanded that the organisation should put pressure on its striking members to return to work. He claimed the strike would harm the reputation of the community in France. In front of the staff he boasted that the head of the organisation had promised to intervene. We only heard about that later, when the striking workers broke the taboo of talking about this question bit by bit. It was only then that we realised the extent of the divisions within the community and the impact which their political past still had, far away from their home country. But now it was too late to counteract this attack, the shit had already hit the fan: the strikers were already divided over this question. We found out that one of the most combative strikers was repetitively threatened. The collective tried to use informal ways to deliver the message to those responsible for the threats, that any attack on the striking workers would have big repercussions within the militant movement and that this would also harm those responsible for the threats considerably. It took a long time before the message arrived, but finally it did.

The employer realised that he had found a weak spot and he made use of it. He urged strikers individually

on the phone to give up their jobs. He offered money. He threatened them with heavy repressions if they turned up at the work place. Some of them cracked, but we only understood that much later, partly due to communication problems and the strikers' fears of being seen in a bad light by their supporters.

By mid September eight out of the 28 strikers had gone back to work, eleven had accepted their dismissal on the level of individual arrangements, and eight were still on strike, of which three had gone to court over their dismissals. This core of workers were determined to fight, but were more and more discouraged.

At the end of September they told us, that they did want to negotiate about leaving the job for money. They thought it was impossible to go back to work facing this tension charged atmosphere. They were convinced that the boss would sack them on the slightest pretext.

We re-assured them of our support and respect, and advised them to stick together in order to achieve the best results. Two of them nevertheless signed individual arrangements and disappeared from the scene.

On Sunday, the 19th of October, the lawyers started the negotiations on the base of the 5,000 euros which the boss had offered as leaving pay and which the striking workers had refused. On November the 3rd, an agreement signed by both parties finished the conflict: the last strikers accepted their dismissals for a leaving pay of 5,000 euros (2,000 euros for the two workers who had been hired at the beginning of the strike) plus payment for the outstanding holidays; the CNT received 10,000 which they handed over to the strikers who distributed the money evenly amongst themselves.

That's how the last striking workers finished the conflict collectively and demonstrated to those who had given up the strike earlier and who had preferred individual arrangements that it pays to stay determined together. The boss who believed that the whole story wouldn't cost him too much underestimated the long term effects which the work of the collective had on his clientele; because his former popular pubs are still half empty...

Some preliminary conclusions

The reason for the eruption of the strikes, their endurance and for some of them having been successful was mainly the tenacity of the striking workers, but also the fact, that they took the organisation of the strike into their own hands. They had defined their aims according to their own demands and to their perception of the power relations - this excluded any falsification by external forces, supporters or political experts. According to the situation the strikers coordinated with other struggles and joined them when possible. The will of

the striking workers was also the decisive factor at these times. Sometimes, as happened during the Frog strike, the workers tried to contact other workers in struggle, because they needed support and they were aware that solidarity is something reciprocal.

Recently some structures have tended to claim openly or indirectly the successes of the struggles, which the solidarity collectives had supported during the last three years. This is most obvious with the strike of the cleaning women of Arcade, which had suffered from a lack of support by external activists. It is often ignored how much work was necessary and how many problems the strike had to confront before it was finally successful. In order to change an unfavourable relation of forces more is necessary than some reports in the media, demonstrated union membership and some mates who turn up on demonstrations every now and then.

strikes/france

Travel report on three struggles in France between August and November 2004

A rather mild autumn in France

We were travelling around France this autumn and along our way were at three very different confrontations. These conflicts have some typical characteristics, and can serve as examples of the various different starting points and conditions of struggle.

- a) A strike by workers at a branch of McDonald's in Paris at the end of August 2004. Most of those on strike were immigrants, the workplace has relatively few workers and "precarious" conditions.
- b) An action day of Nestle workers in Marseille against the closure of the factory there in October 2004. A relatively large factory of a multinational company, with a big workforce, who are being set up in competition with workers in Russia, Romania and Mexico. How much did the high level of organization and the solidarity of the local people help in this situation?
- c) A workplace occupation of Schneider Electric's IT workers in Grenoble, November 2004. Their first real strike and they faced the questions of whether to shut down the computer network of this multinational company and whether to kick out the bailiff.

These struggles take place against the backdrop of the (symbolic) confrontation between the government and the unions. There was the debate about changing the 35-hour labour law, the discussion about the relocation of production outside of France and the changes in the right to strike in the transport sector. After the reports there is a short summary about these issues.

Strike at McDonald's, Place d'Italie in Paris, August 2004

This strike at the McDonald's Place d'Italie branch in Paris did not develop the kind of dynamic as regards the public, as did the 2002/2003 McDonald's strikes. Possibly partly due to the fact that there was no independent solidarity committee. There has been a lot of discussion about the role of these solidarity committees and the real meaning of the series of strikes in fast-food outlets and other small businesses in Paris (Frog Pub, Fnac, Pizza Hut, Arcade). Most of the discussions subsided again fairly quickly [Echanges no. 100/102 - <http://www.mondialisme.org/rubrique.php3?id_rubrique=3> - see also the article about the Frog Pub in this newsletter].

It has been emphasized that the strikes were mostly led by young migrants who had not had strike experience before, and in a sector that had previously been seen as an unlikely place for collective forms of struggle: small workplaces, of a few people dishing out personal services. The solidarity committees have been criticized for outnumbering the strikers at the picket lines and for being more active than them, and that through their media work the strikes' actual meaning was inflated thereby creating further myths.

This particular strike began at the end of August, after a CGT rep who worked in the Place d'Italie branch, was fired. One of the reasons given was that he had eaten at KFC (another fast food chain) round the corner during his break. That was the trigger for the strike, but there were other demands: 12 percent wage increase, bonuses for time with the company, recognition of the right to organise a union, better work conditions and better hygiene standards.

At the picket line there was the following scene: the strikers were only achieving a partial strike - i.e. a few CGT functionaries and a few workers were standing in front of the restaurant, there was quite a few people eating inside - someone at almost every table. Many people passing by stopped for a moment and took a leaflet. 1500 signatures were collected in their petition on the first day. A few security guards and the manager stood at the door and people were not prevented from entering the "restaurant", no one was spoken to offensively. At the next McDonald's branch 5 minutes away, there was no sign of the strike.

On the first Saturday of the strike there was a rally at the branch. About 40 people were there, most of them with draped with the insignia of their organization (LCR, a Trotskyist party, CGT, one of the major French unions, les Alternatifs, green-Trotskyist Alliance). Two Communist Party local councillors came with a sash of the national flag. The door was blocked for about half an hour. A CGT leaflet stated "The hour

at which Paris celebrates its 60th anniversary of liberation and the men and women of the republic honour the role of the unions in the liberation struggle, we should not allow certain multi-national companies to oppress us today, just as the bosses did then with shameless alliances so well known to all of us.”

The other things that the CGT goes on and on about are mostly the democratic “right to the free choice of food”, and the fact that a customer saw a mouse running about in the branch. On the following Monday the strike came to an end - or a “successful conclusion” as the CGT presented it. Results: McDonald’s want to take care of the hygiene and think twice before sacking workers. None of the other demands were fulfilled. Similar conflicts, usually where the sacking of a union rep is the trigger, include the RUC restaurant chain in Paris, where Tamil cooks were on strike in October and at Carrefour (big supermarket chain) in Marseille, after a worker was arrested after a supposed theft.

Action against factory closure by Nestle, Marseille, October 2004

In the following example of a confrontation against factory closure, the workers did not threaten to blow up their factory. However the struggles against company closure are the most significant struggles in France at the moment, in terms of the amount of conflicts and the strength and hardness in how they are fought. Despite this they have not been able to develop a really strong support or interest from others, apart from perhaps the mobilisation of local (politically active) population. As well as the actions around Nestle in Marseille, there are also the examples of the occupations of the spinning factory Vrau in Lille, and at the food factory Lustucru in Arles, and the blockade at Snappon in Chartres and ST Microelectronics in Rennes. Up to now there has been neither clear successes nor a new form of struggle that allow for new hopes.

The Nestle factory in Marseille produces chocolate and instant coffee. Three years ago 800 people worked there, now only 430 are left. The productivity has risen by about 200 percent and according to the union the factory makes a profit of between 8 and 9 percent. In spring it was announced that production would stop in June 2005 i.e. that it would be outsourced to Rumania and Russia. The workers could count on at best 10,000 to 30,000 Euros redundancy pay. The action day in mid October started with the usual human chain around the factory. About 2000 people took part and the CGT functionaries were sure to check that no one blocked the streets and everyone was really holding hands - give some people a walkie-talkie and an armband! After that was a barbecue party, a general assembly, lots of wine and instant coffee and surprisingly good bands. In one tent they were showing a video made by a fork lift

truck driver from Nestle showing lots of visits by Nestle workers to other companies, trouble outside the bosses meetings and at the mayor and an impressive show of the Maori fight against Nestle from a Polynesian colleague. The joint demo with the Lustucru workers in Paris was also included. Copies of the DVDs will be given out to all the colleagues.

We were able to talk to the fork lift truck driver later and we asked him why the bosses had told them about the closure so far in advance, and thereby risked ruining the production for a whole year. He said that in similar situations the workers had spontaneously welded the gates together to stop the bosses taking the materials away. This time the company heads want to show that they are seeking a social solution with their early notice of the closure. He also said that the workers control the production in reality. They are only letting the products out after seeing concrete evidence, i.e. a receipt, because they suspect the management wants to empty the storerooms, thereby making out that production performance is low in order to economically justify the closure. Management points to the example of the factory in Mexico, where instant coffee is produced, as being 15 percent more profitable as in Marseille. The workers say that the higher productivity of the Mexican plant is due to a different chemical process which is used in the instant coffee production and which make worse coffee. As well as that the personnel department has reduced the number of temps from 100-200 to about a dozen. There are only a few immigrants working in the factory and most of them are from Italy and Spain, hardly any from North Africa.

The general assembly was not particularly spectacular. About 400 people took part, of which there were probably a fair percentage of militants from the various politico groups. As well as the main union rep there were speeches from people from the PCF (Communist Party of France) and from some Trotskyist groups. The contributions mirrored the various political tendencies, from the patriotic Stalinism of the PCF to the demands to occupy the factory from Force Ouvrier. Representatives of students and the unemployed also spoke. There was little concrete about the struggle itself, about how it might go forward, apart from declarations of solidarity with workers in similar situations (Lipton, Lustucru, Perrier). One bloke from STMICROELECTRONICS made a good contribution when he said that one has to defend the company mainly as a base of collective power, rather than just focusing on the deterioration of working conditions. And one can’t argue from the perspective of a supposed economic viability because that often blows up in your face. He told of a meeting of STMICROELECTRONICS and Thomson workers who want to build up a network of workers from affected companies (www.le-resistant.com). Unfortunately there were

no concrete reports on struggles in other Nestle factories, on the strike in Germany or the action against factory closure in Poznan. We found out later that people from the Solidarnosc80 in Poznan had already written a letter to the Nestle unions, but it was not distributed due to language and other problems. At the end of the meeting a very respected colleague and CGT rep said that along with the concrete struggle for the factory he wanted to not lose sight of his own struggle for the revolution and that both struggles belonged to each other anyway. Then there were lots more statements about anti-capitalism and the new society. Nothing special perhaps, but on the site of a factory in struggle it sounds different somehow.

Strike and occupation of IT workers for Schneider Electrics, Grenoble, Nov. 2004

The situation at Schneider Electrics seems to us to be the most interesting struggle in France this autumn. Because up to now that have not been many collective and offensive conflicts in the IT sector so every experience is important. Because with the decision to occupy the office building the workers went beyond the limits of the bourgeois law. Because it was clear that they had to use their means of production and their knowledge of production as a means of strength against the company. Because they did not actually have their backs to the wall, it was not about immediate redundancies. Because the strike had a direct international effect. Because the strike and the occupation was initially not controlled by the union, but rather decisions were taken daily at a full assembly. Because the end clearly shows once again what the workers can expect from the union.

Schneider Electrics produce electronic components, from simple switches to complicated junction boxes. About 74,000 people work for Schneider worldwide. The strike was led by the IT workers in Grenoble who play a variety of Admin functions for the company such as the intranet, the PC hotline, computer network maintenance etc. About two thirds of all Schneider's IT workers in France work in Grenoble. The trigger for the strike was the decision by Schneider management to outsource the IT department to the company CapGemini. CapGemini already does some of the Schneider IT work - on both a contract and freelance basis. The decision to occupy the offices, and thereby have control over the actual servers, was also so that those workers could not so easily scab. Schneider Electric had signed a 10-year contract for over 1.6 billion Euros to outsource the whole Schneider European IT department to CapGemini. About 800 Schneider employees would move over to CapGemini, 400 of those in France. 500 people from subsidiary companies would also be affected. Other sources talk about

1,350 Schneider employees being directly affected in Europe.

Since June 2003 the employees that will be affected have waited for the results of the negotiations between management and the unions to find out about what conditions were being put forward for the shift to CapGemini.

Finally the answer came back: no guarantee of continued employment, worse work conditions, no compensation for those for whom the shift would mean extra costs and inconvenience and every worker would have 500 Euros a month less take-home pay. The financial situation of CapGemini also does not look so good: in the first half of 2004 they suffered 135 million Euros losses.

Some of the workers suspect that CapGemini got the contract largely because the executive director is a friend of President Chirac. One of the demands of the strike is to secure the work contracts for the ten years of the contract - something that does not seem to be the case with the deal as it stands.

Faced with this threat the employees decided on November 15th to begin an indefinite strike and occupation of the office building in Grenoble town centre. The unions asserted that about 80 percent of the French IT workers were taking part in the strike. This is a report we wrote at the time, after visiting the building:

"About 250 IT workers are occupying the main centre of the IT department and have shut down the server, in order to stop the work of any strike breaking homework. There is Beaujolais in the morning, the atmosphere seems good, at 2pm every day there is the daily assembly. It is their first real strike and they say that before this they were more individualistic. The offices look out directly onto the World Trade Centre and the various other banks and glass boxes round about. One of the IT workers speaks German and another English. Neither are from the union but describe themselves as workers who struggle because they have to struggle. They say that about 60 percent of Schneider workers in France are on strike, or affected by the strike. They have heard from colleagues in Italy that the strike is also affecting the work there. Some of the production workers have given donations for the IT workers strike fund.

A few people go to the other sites and branches to inform them about the strike. They've got an English translation of their leaflet and probably contact to Schneider sites in other countries. They are also in contact with some unionists at CapGemini who give them information. One guy said he thought management would not give in. The management was demanding an end to the occupation for new negotiations to take place, but the feeling was strong enough to stay in. In the strike kitchen it was discussed that the relocation of

parts of the company to Paris was the first attack that they should have reacted to. They were also discussion what they should do about the bailiff that comes every morning and asks for the names of those within. They compared their situation to the conditions of textile workers in the region, when the textile industry was under attack some decades ago.”

During the strike there was a website discussion between the strikers and IT workers from other companies about the strike. (<http://forums.munci.org/viewtopic.php?t=2026&view=previous&sid=93b1aced066109ed0945277a6aa38779>)

Amongst other things it was reported that the companies internal mail system between Europe and the USA stopped working. Some more possible actions or measures were discussed, but it was also mentioned that the really effective means of struggle were often thwarted by the unionists, because they could be help personally legally responsible for the consequences of sabotage. Others said that sabotage actions were unnecessary because the strike itself was enough to stop the server and the hotline functioning. The company management let it be known in advance of the negotiations that the strike had not had a big technical impact on the running of the business.

The following information is from two articles in the daily newspaper “Liberation”. On 23 November there were further negotiations but without concrete results. The workers ‘gave up’ the building, which was a management demand for the negotiations. In the building were also other companies. The workers occupied a Schneider call centre in a suburb of Grenoble as an alternative place. The management cut off the phone lines.

The official CGT rep said that they are not “Vandals”, that they do not want to destroy the work equipment, that the best weapon is “passivity”. They had the possibility to paralyze the whole network of the company, but they didn’t do it. They simply didn’t work any more, the people could not phone up to find out their PC password when they forgot it, there were no new uploads of the anti-virus program etc. Normally the technical hotline gets about 1,500 calls a day from Schneider employees and customers. One striking worker said: “We don’t like the transfer of Schneider employees to a service society. At Schneider we come under the metal sector collective contract. Service, that sounds like precarianization”. The average age of the IT workers at Schneider is about 45, the average length of employment about 18 years. The people talked about the problem that in the last few years one could take out a mortgage on a house with the wage, but these are not paid off and with the drop in wages it could become difficult to do so.

On 28 November a vote at an assembly to continue

the strike was won by 107 out of 180. And this was despite the CFDT union, who had a majority in the company, announcing in the previous days that they were very “pessimistic” about the strike. The CFDT called for a second vote on the 29 November at which only 60 percent of the people voted to continue. As a consequence the CFDT withdrew their support for the strike, which really broke the strike. The strike ended 15 days after it began without any promises or commitments on the side of the management.

Some points on the general situation in France

Changes to the 35 hour law, production relocation, minimum service in the transport sector... Or at least these were the questions over which most of the confrontations between the government and the official representatives of the workers took place during autumn 2004. All the confrontations up to now have stayed on a symbolic level, and which, apart from single action days, did not lead to a mobilisation of those actually effected. It is mostly a political confrontation about how much influence the unions should have when it comes to future restructuring on a state and company level.

Changes to the 35-hour rule

The conservative government wants to bring in more changes, even after the original 35-hour per week rule was already weakened in January 2003 with for example, the extension of possible overtime per year from 130 hours to 180 hours. The debate takes place under the pressure of propaganda about closures, i.e. actual relocation of production. The unions say the 2003 changes are sufficient, and anyway hardly any companies took them up, showing that the debate is politically, not practically significant. The companies are demanding the right to negotiate directly with the employees over work times, without going through the union, something Bosch, Doux, Sediver and other large companies have already done. The other main issue on the table is lowering the costs of overtime for large firms from 10 - 25 per cent extra to only 10 percent extra and getting rid of the extra breaks in overtime work. With the introduction of unpaid longer working hours at Bosch which was agreed to by the largest union there, employers are seeing a green light for more demands. [You can read more about the 35-hour week and the associated flexibilization at <http://geocities.com/aufheben2/stc_intro>]

Relocations

This year the Unions published a list of 50 companies who have relocated in 2004. Microelectronics mostly moved to eastern Europe and Asia, small pro-

duction such as household appliances and a few call centres moved to Francophone North Africa. Here are a few examples: Sediver, who produce electrical equipment, have said that if the 300 workers don't agree to a 25 percent wage cut the factory will move to Brazil and China saving 150 workplaces in France. Snappon GDX, part of the US Gencorp car part company, who produce for PSA and Renault have moved their factory from Chartres to the Czech Republic. The machinery was moved under protection from riot police after workers had built barricades and chained themselves to the machinery.

An electronic car part manufacturer, Vishay, sacked 300 workers in Colmar and moved production to China and Hungary. Management claim that the factory in Shanghai produce at 60 percent lower costs. In Morocco there are already 60 call centres with 7,000 workers who work for the French market. It is apparently 40 percent cheaper for companies there with an average wage at 400 Euros, compared with 1,100 in France. There have been protests by call centre workers in France, including at Timing and Wanadoo. However, in 2003 only 5 percent of new call centre jobs of French companies were created abroad.

But these examples have been well publicized and are forever being used to push through worse work conditions. There is however strong evidence against this theory that all jobs are being lost abroad. After China, France has the most direct forging investment of any other country. Behind the real redundancies and factory closures there are other figures: despite the protested closure of the STMicroelectronics plant in Rennes the US company has continually increased the number of French employees from 2,400 in 1990 to 10,500 by 2004. Only 5 percent of the whole capital invested is invested abroad.

The minimum service in the case of strikes in the transport sector

There is a question as to whether this is an attack on the backbone of the last big militant sector - the transport workers in the public sector - or whether it is another popular campaign of the right to win votes by doing something against 'the individual interests of a group of workers holding the citizens to ransom'. Despite the government calling it a "minimum service" law, what they want is not so much the guarantee of a minimum service (as they have in Spain, Italy and Portugal) but rather the duty to give prior notice of strikes. This would be an extension of the notice laws introduced by de Gaulle after the miners' strikes in the 60s including details of affected workplaces and number of workers likely to take part.

The CGT are saying, "The best prevention of conflict is dialog", signing "conflict prevention" deals with

management and so forth. On 4 October there was an action day at SNCF for higher wages and against the changes in the right to strike. The running of the trains was not affected. On 25 November the unions mobilized for a demo in Paris with 50,000 railway workers and some strikes about pensions and also against the new "cheap line" iDTGV that is seen as a first step towards privatization of the SNCF.

aviation struggles

Two days with striking aviation workers in London and Bruxelles, Autumn 2004

Belgium Beer, Bangers and Baggage Jammers

Here are two shorter reports about struggles in the aviation sector. We visited a picket line of striking baggage handlers at Gatwick Airport in London and a demonstration of DHL-workers in Bruxelles. We think that the aviation sector in general has got some interesting political characteristics and potentials for future struggles. Just to mention some of them:

1. The aviation sector was one of the main booming sectors in the 90s, partly due to changes in the production and consumption structure. The extension and globalisation of production chains increased the importance of air transport within the productive cycle. Eg material transport within the automotive sector. As a private means of transport flying also became socially widespread in the 90s. In terms of employment the numbers of people employed in the aviation sector in the EU has increased by 20 per cent from 1995 to 1999.

2. Airports are a highly condensed concentration of workers and have a major impact on the regional labourmarket. In airports tens of thousands of people work together or next to each other on a rather small geographical scale, e.g. the airport in Heathrow, London employs about 70,000 people. Where airports are built the whole regional labourmarket and economic structure changes: Capital and workforce are needed for the construction (runways, buildings, access roads) and for the service around the airport (hotels, transport, catering). Job centres open special departments for the new demand, the airport attracts new companies which use the new gateway to the world, the houseprices in the area rise, the region rises in the hierarchy of capitalist investment.

3. The airport workforce covers nearly the whole range of social class composition on a global scale. Within the boundaries of airports you can find all sorts of different work situations: highly paid specialist work and McJobs, office work and manual labour, personal ser-

vices and technical maintenance. A lot of immigrants work at airports, some doing low paid manual work, and some because of their language skills. The structure and work organisation is similar wherever you are in the world. Hundreds of cabin crew workers fly around the globe in and out of various airports everyday.

4. Struggles in the sector tend to have immediate international re-percussions and often refer to each other. In the late 90s we could see various strikes of airline workers which referred to each other and their demands and gains. Depending on the function within the airport complex (e.g. flight controllers, technical staff), struggles have an immediate international impact. In general we could see more struggles in comparison to other sectors, some of them went beyond legal restrictions, e.g. the wildcat strike at AllItalia or Air Olympic.

5. The crisis attack on the workers is much closer intertwined with general global developments than in any other sector: war, terror, oil price. The main attacks on the workforce happened short after the Asian crisis in 1997/98 and after September the 11th 2001, with about 45,000 redundancies in the EU aviation sector since then. Crisis measures in the sector are officially explained by global situations: wars, oil price development, the terrorist threat. State intervention against the workers are also justified in that way: tanks and soldiers at the airport, severe checks and selection processes for newly hired workers, anti-strike laws within the framework of the US-Patriot Act...

6. There are several political movements which attack airports in their function as check points within the migration control and because of their environmental impacts. There are several political struggles targeting airports, e.g. initiatives against the construction of new runways, anti-deportation and anti-detention centre campaigns, actions against the military use of the air transport. In some cases these initiatives were able to create links with the workers within the aviation sector, e.g. pilots and cabin crews refusing to serve on deportation flights.

The following two examples of recent conflicts are in some ways examples of the defensive position that workers find themselves in at the moment. The baggage handlers in London didn't break out of their professional boundaries and the union control, probably also due to the experiences of the last wildcat-strike in 2002, when the struggle was suffocated under the media's anti-strike propaganda and the threat of major legal consequences. The DHL-workers in Bruxelles didn't occupy the runways, they demonstrated in town centre instead, a decision which may also be due to the experience of the Sabena (bankrupt Belgian Airline) workers only three years ago, who were tear-gassed by the cops while trying to get to the runways.

Serviceair baggage handlers strike, Gatwick Airport, UK

(25th of September 2004) Serviceair are an airport company doing baggage handling, maintenance, ticket sales etc. There are four baggage handling companies at Gatwick and Serviceair are the second biggest, handling baggage for Continental Airways, British Midland, Ryanair, Easyjet and many others. British Airways are the only company with their own baggage handlers. The average baggage handlers wage is £15,500 per year and many travel a long way to get to work. Most worked there many years, 15 or more.

I went along to the picket line at Gatwick. I arrived at the airport and asked the Serviceair ticket desk if there was a picket line. "You'll have to talk to the management, I don't know anything at all. Next please". I then asked some guys in yellow jackets at a baggage type place. "That's not us. That's Serviceair on strike. We don't know anything". "Have you noticed any disruption today"? "No. None at all". So I went to the Gatwick Airport official information desk. "Certainly madam. Go down the stairs, turn right and it is a five minute walk by the roundabout". Very helpful.

I arrived and there were about 50 men with their yellow Serviceair jackets. They seemed to be in a chatty, up-beat mood. The vibe was good with lots of people beeping as they went past.

They were at the roundabout because they were banned from the airport building, but had three picket lines around the area. If they were all as big as the one I went to, then there must have been hundreds out on the picket line. I arrived at about 2.30 p m and they said there had been a lot more when the strike started at 7.00 a.m.

It is a 24 hour strike with another one day on Thursday about general work conditions, especially the increased workload leading to health and safety problems, and the re-instatement of a suspended TGWU Union convener. There was a spontaneous ten-minute stoppage a while ago about new 'working practices' and the union convener came along and told them to go back to work. They did and the management then suspended this guy for inciting industrial action. This was a pretext, as there was some important negotiations coming up and they didn't want him there. When he was suspended the workers went on a four-hour stoppage. The management then agreed that he could attend the specific negotiations, but not have his job of convener back. One of their demands it to get him reinstated. They have a lot of trust in him and said he was very sharp and if they didn't have him they would not have anyone to represent them in the negotiations.

But when I asked about the union in general and how they were handling the strike it was a bit more complex. They did think that a longer strike, e.g. two days,

would be more effective, but they dismissed the idea of wildcat strikes as being too risky to their own job security.

“Do you trust the union?”

“Interesting question. No comment” with a laugh.

They all talked about the general situation of the increased workload. Five injuries in one night was one example, because they were ten men short. They are straining their muscles and generally getting over-worked. They do not have extra staff during the summer when there is a lot more work. The management use the excuse that it takes up to 12 weeks to security-check new workers. The flip side of this is that it is much harder for them to quickly get scab labour.

During this strike 100 percent Serviceair baggage handlers and maintenance staff walked out and the work was being done by managers bussed in from around the country, at a high cost.

They said that although all the baggage handlers were facing the same problem, they did not see any chance of the strike spreading. They do chat to the workers of other companies a bit, but the work is quite separate, loading and unloading different companies' aeroplanes. The issue remains very local and specific. Serviceair baggage handlers at other airports were not on strike either. However, the other baggage handling companies are at least not scabbing, i.e. not doing Serviceair work and some came to picket line to show support. The workers I spoke to did not have any contact with the re-fulers who were on strike at Heathrow the day before.

There was a really good feeling on the picket line. Friendly, open and optimistic. They were really happy to talk to me and were not at all suspicious or paranoid. The mood was determined, but not really that hopeful that the work conditions will change.

Short report from DHL-workers demonstration in Bruxelles

On the 21st of October 2004, the DHL management announced to shut the distribution centre at the airport in Bruxelles in 2008. This would cut about 1,700 jobs at the centre. DHL employs about 2,200 people in Bruxelles, about 7,000 jobs would be indirectly affected by the closure, some other studies say that in total 17,500 jobs are directly or indirectly linked to DHLs activities in Bruxelles. The work is supposed to be re-located to Leipzig/Germany or Vary/France, but so far DHL only owns a green field next to Leipzig airport. Until 2011 about 250 Million Euros are announced to be invested in the new central distribution centre, about 3,000 jobs are to be created. The DHL management had asked the government in Belgium to allow an increase in night flights at the Bruxelles Airport, in order to extend the operation of the distribution centre.

The government refused to do that, also being under pressure of some neighbour initiatives against the night flights. The workers reacted with a spontaneous strike on the 22nd of October, demanding job security from DHL. Also the pilots went on strike. The management re-routed the post to other centres. The union rep Vermeersch from the socialist union SETCa (which has the majority at DHL) announced in the newspaper 'Le Soir' that the unions are not responsible for the strike and that „airplanes could land on Monday given that the workers are not forced to be on strike“. On an assembly on Monday, the 25th, the workers decided about a demonstration on the following Friday. It is unclear if the strikes continued, or not. On Thursday everything seemed calm, no picket-line, banners or any other infos. People said that they are not on strike at the moment. DHL aeroplanes left from the runway.

The demo

Different unions of the transport union call for a demonstration at Bruxelles town centre, Friday the 29th. The tram drivers are on strike, workers of other postal delivery companies take part in the march, all in all about 2,000 people. The demonstration is mixed: a lot of young workers, immigrants, women, only few political groups (trots, PTB, Attac). A leaflet, which is signed by 'Workers of B-Cargo' demands the refusal of work in case the management threatens with dismissals or other cuts. The demonstration starts, a lot of bangers and beer cans. Some young blokes have a short occupation of the motorway, no union stewards who would hold them back. The demo continues, we stop on a cross roads, below us the motorway, in front of us the US-ambassy and a building of some sort of administration for the transport sector. Behind a barricade of barbed wire waits a water canon and the riot cops, securing the administration building. A lot of workers immediately try to break the barricade, start to throw bangers and empty beer cans at the cops. Most of them wear their work clothes, bomber-jackets from TNT, warning-vests from DHL and other companies. Some use their union flags as masks. They all seem quite used to that kind of confrontation, may be from football. Some more hefty blows from both sides of the barbed wire, then a little bit of tear gas. The atmosphere is fine, we all seem to have a good time. A big garbage container is rammed against the barricade, a guy jumps on top of it and waves a DHL-flag in front of the faces of the water canon drivers. On the other side a small group blocks the motorway, discussion with the car drivers. If they have a good reason, they can pass. The cops arrive, with a water canon as well, the workers occupy the motorway on the other side of the bridge. In front of the administration the cops had a little go at the workers, we answer with some more bottles and one or two

stones. There is no division over that amongst the protesters. We make friends with a guy working as a parcel delivery driver for DHL since six years, making 60,000 k in Antwerpens town centre every years and being fed up with it. He says that all DHL workers should go on strike now, because otherwise the management will finish them up one department after the other. Meanwhile the union delegation is back, the people gather around the loudspeakers. Only some short announcements, that the negotiation will carry on, that nothing is definite yet. What else can they say in this situation. The demonstration disperses on the way back to the buses and trains. Just when most of the people are out of sight the cops catch some young workers who they might have picked out during the skirmish. A short fight, it smells like revenge and wanting to teach a lesson.

Some history

- * At Bruxelles airport there has been an occupation of workers of the bankrupt airline Sabena in winter 2001, with some fights with the cops.
- * In April 2003 DHL workers in Germany (Hamburg, Dormund, Bremen) walked out for higher wages. In Hamburg 260 people worked for DHL.
- * In May 2003 DHL workers in Belgium struck against the centralisation of parcel service of Belgium, Luxemburg and the Netherlands. 400 people blocked the distribution centre in Ternat/Limburg.
- * In December 2003 the DHL headquarter in the US announced to sack 2,900 people, due to the take-over of the airline Airbone by DHL aviation Astar. About 44,000 people are employed by DHL in the USA.
- * On the 30th of January 2004 DHL announced the losure of the distribution centre in Paris-Garonor, which would have cost 280 jobs. The workers blocked the depot, other depots in Paris, Lyon and Bordeaux are blocked as well. In France about 12,000 people work for DHL, this year about 1,200 jobs have been cut.

construction/britain

Intro: The following article provides a short summary about a strike of building workers in London in autumn 2004. Apart from the more or less self-organised character of the struggle, with workers assemblies in parks and blockage of the site entrances, we think that there were two main interesting aspects of the dispute:

1) The fact that eastern European workers got involved. So far capital has more or less managed to use the eastern European countries as a large pool of labour force which could be mobilised for short term projects like large construction projects or the seasonal work in the harvest. By legal regulations the state also managed to enforce a hier-

archy within this new work force, some workers are able to move more or less freely, because of their EU-status, others can only enter with special temporary contracts or only illegally. During the last month there have been several examples of eastern workers in the 'west', who didn't accept their role as an available/dispensable and cheap commodity of labour. Like any other workers, their potential to fight back depends on their collective power as a workforce. We could see Polish and Romanian workers in the harvest in Germany or Spain who took legal actions against their bosses. We only heard of cases on small farms with few workers, so the decision to take legal action instead of collective struggle might be due to their isolated situation. African building workers in Berlin went a step further. They established contacts with support groups and organised demonstrations in order to claim their wages. In Spain in early 2004, Polish workers working for a sub-contractor in the mining industry demanded the access to the Spanish social security system, although they were officially employed by a Polish company. They threatened a strike and even the Polish embassy got involved to settle the conflict. In the case of the Laing strike in London we only heard that a lot of eastern European workers were working on the same site and partly got involved, but more information would be required to understand the whole process, the difficulties (language...) and divisions (different conditions...) and the way in which they managed to overcome them. Nevertheless, the example shows that these workers don't accept being treated as immigrants by the bosses any longer and that they don't have to be seen as immigrants anymore by their work mates and left supporters.

2) The fact that people from the direct action movement got involved. We are used to solidarity declarations and young Trotskyists collecting money for striking workers. Fair enough. And we are used to more or less ideological debates about the alleged new subject, the precarious worker. Fair enough as well. But we are more interested in practical processes and experiences and their interpretation: what can 'the movement' learn from 'workers struggles' and the other way round, and where do the boundaries (activists/workers) dissolve? The leaflet of the group involved, the Wombles, mentions the social dimension of the construction site, the gentrification of the Kings Cross area and they supported the strike practically by occupying the cranes. Of interest is how they perceived the relationship between them and the strikers and about what they got out of the dispute.

De-constructing the Contricks

Laing O'Rourke is a major construction company in the UK and the main contractor on the Kings Cross Channel Tunnel Rail Link (CTRL), one of the biggest and most significant construction projects in the UK. They are also builder of UK spy-base GCHQ and

many Police renovations. In Autumn 2004 the workers had a series of protests over the new contracts (or con tricks as the Laing workers are calling them) and unfair dismissal. They have been supported by direct action groups.

The Facts

Early October: The UCATT union agree the new contract with management, despite not having seen it in full, and there having been no ballot. Workers are told they have six weeks to sign or face the sack. Small groups are taken in to sign, bullied and threatened. The GMB union advises workers not to sign. Only 14 out of 400 workers signed.

4 October: Steve Hedley, union activist, is sacked and 100 workers walk off work in protest. He was sacked by contractors Westinghouse, which employs casual workers on construction projects, after a shunt box worth £800 piece went missing during his shift. He was immediately dismissed and lost over two week's wages.

8 October: In support for Steve, traffic was brought to a complete standstill in King's Cross as a picket-line halted all deliveries to the CTRL. All vehicles entering and leaving the site were stopped and backed up cars, vans, concrete wagons, steel deliveries and heavy plant caused gridlock in this major London junction from 7am till 8.30am. Hundreds of workers from the site showed solidarity. Since then Steve has been offered £2500 to stop causing trouble. He has refused.

10 October: The workers requested that GMB rep Steve Kelly comes in to negotiate the employment contacts with management. He was thrown out of the CTRL site and all other GMB reps were banned. Tempers flared.

26 October: Lunchtime meeting of hundreds of workers in a park to agree demands and elect representatives. Heathrow Laing workers join them. Workers appoint a stewards' council made up of representatives from dry fixers, crane drivers, groundworkers and steel workers to negotiate the contract.

5 November: Workers at the Channel Tunnel in Kings Cross hold a sit in protest in their canteen to demand the GMB is recognised and allowed onto site. A samba band played outside in encouragement. Managers agree to talk to the GMB after only one hour.

11 November: Public meeting with the workers and supporters. The local residents group and various activists were there.

22 November: Several cranes occupied by direct action people on the Laing O'Rourke Kings Cross Rail Link construction site.

The Con trick

Under the new contract or 'con trick' as it has been renamed by workers many currently 'self-employed' workers become Laing employees, but at a price. The basic pay is drastically reduced to a basic rate of £7.50 per hour (11€), and there is a drop in overtime pay. There is however a 'discretionary bonus' – which the boss decides whether you get or not. Those earning between £90 and £180 a day will see their pay slashed in half. A day off must be planned 40 days in advance and holiday pay could be cut by £20 per day for each worker. Management has told workers they will be sacked if they do not sign. Construction union UCAAT has told workers to sign the contract despite there having been no ballot and no full viewing of the contract itself. The GMB union has been barred off the site, in contravention of construction industry agreements. The enforcement of discretionary bonus payments from management means workers now fear this will be used against people who are trade union activists or anyone regarded as a troublemaker. Some employees have been forced to sign the contract after being threatened with the sack if they refuse. Others, who barely speak English, have been pushed into signing a contract they do not understand. However, in a sign of rising confidence, a group of workers from Eastern Europe refused to accept management's promises until they heard it from the stewards themselves.

The Prol Position

The workers organised their own lunchtime meetings and elected their own shop-floor representatives. It was clear that these people had to be from the actual workforce. In the public meeting held later the workers welcomed support from the community, such as help with leafleting by the anti-capitalist groups and troskists groups, but it was clear that the struggle had to remain in the hands of the workers themselves. Having been so clearly betrayed by UCATT the point now was to negotiate directly. The need for national solidarity and spreading the struggle was also clear. They called for a national ballot of all Laing O'Rourke workers to reject the deal. Their demands are in the leaflet below. Hundreds of workers at the following sites have all refused to sign and potentially face the sack: Channel Tunnel Rail Link, Kings Cross and Kent sites; Canary Wharf redevelopment scheme; Newham Hospital, London; Heathrow Terminal 5; Ascot Racecourse Redevelopment Scheme; Paradise Street Development, Liverpool; Gatwick Airport; John Radcliffe Hospital, Oxford; and construction projects for Police stations & facilities for the Greater Manchester Police Authority. Many of these are huge multi-million-pound building projects. The heathrow workers have been particularly militant

and the 'T5' project is already very controversial with an environmental and residents campaign against it.

The anti-capitalists

After meeting with the workers and asking them what sort of support they wanted, some local anti-capitalist activists wrote and distributed a leaflet, some of which is below. To emphasise their point they occupied two cranes on the CTRL site.

Up to now the anti-capitalist movement in the UK has made only a few meaningful links with grassroots workers struggles. The Liverpool Dockers struggle, which anti-capitalists supported, the links between Reclaim the Streets and the London Underground workers struggles, and the bin men strike in Brighton in 2000 are three previous examples. This new interest partly springs from the new debate around 'precarity' in direct action circles. The groups have since got calls from other sites to do similar actions. They have declined to this because at Kings Cross the crane occupations were part of an on-going struggle organised and led by the workers themselves. Their actions were one part of this and to some extent a catalyst at an awkward stage of the struggle. The requests have come from groups of workers who are not themselves active. The wombles are reluctant to be 'rent an activist' and they understand that the push has to come from the workers themselves, both politically and practically.

Extract from one of the workers' leaflets

Don't fall for the Laing O'Rourke "con-trick"

The tax-man is the driving force behind the new contract. We're all going to end up on the cards whether we like it or not. The question is whether we go on PAYE with a cut in money or with the same take home pay as now. The new contract cuts our basic pay and introduces a complicated bonus system that can be withheld at management discretion. No one denies this - not even the company. The company is trying every trick to con us into accepting the new "con-trick". We are being called into small meetings where UCATT union officials and company managers telling us to sign up to the deal or else we will be down the road. UCATT should be ashamed of themselves - they have become part of the Laing O'Rourke machinery - industrial relations policemen against the workforce.

There should be a national ballot of all Laing O'Rourke workers to accept or reject the deal. If there is going to be a new contract, then we demand:

- * No cut in take home pay
- * No complicated discretionary bonus scheme
- * Full holiday pay (base on average take home)
- * Full sick pay
- * Pension scheme

* Redundancy pay

* Effective start date for everybody should be when they first started working for Laing O'Rourke not when we sign the contract.

Stick together!

We have already had one walk-out and held meetings off site, we are all over the newspapers. Workers on Canary Wharf, Terminal 5 and Ascot are all up in arms. We are already in talks with them. This deal needs to be re-negotiated NOW. They can try their bully-boy tactics all they like but if we stick together across this job and all the other projects, we can get this con-trick overturned.

Extract from a Wombles leaflet

De-construction

If Laing O'Rourke get away with implementing these contracts, it will have huge implications for all construction workers - driving down wages and imposing conditions that put workers at greater risk. They fear that production bonuses and forced overtime will lead to a faster work pace, cut corners and exhaustion, with health and safety likely to suffer.

In recent years, the building industry has been using a huge amount of subcontracted, casual labour. Many construction workers have seen an erosion of rights, job security and benefits as a result. A decline in safety standards has led to more deaths at work, with over a 100 deaths per year in the industry, and managements refusing to take responsibility.

Double-Crossed in Kings Cross?

Local residents recently won a court order forbidding Channel Tunnel Rail development work 24 hours a day due to the noise and disruption it would cause. This is likely to cause a delay in work costing the contractors millions of pounds. Laing O'Rourke intends to claw back their massive profits by cutting workers wages.

However, noise is only one problem faced by local residents. Since the 1980's local people have been resisting the development, fearing the destruction it would cause to their community. The Kings Cross Rail Link has already cost the area social housing - many council and housing association flats were pulled down to make way for the development. There is now a seven-year waiting list for council flats in the area. Most new private housing will be expensive and far beyond the reach of local people. The 20-year construction programme will lead to the area's gentrification. The jobs such 'regeneration' will create are likely to be part-time/temp jobs in shopping malls and other services - poorly-paid casual work for people who will no longer be able to afford to live in the newly desirable area.