

prol-position news



This newsletter is for the exchange of reports on worker's struggles. 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 or contribute something write to: [ppnews@prol-position.net]

Editorial	1
Going East: Investments in Eastern Europe	3
Investments in the Czech Republic: Boom or Fall? ...	5
Migrant Workers in the Czech Republic	8
Strike at Skoda Auto, Mlada Boleslav, Czech Rep.	9
Migration, Industry and Struggles in Poland	11
More Strikes in Poland	14
Romania after the Transition	14
Strike at Michelin (Zalau, Romania)	17
Interview on Solectron (Timisoara, Romania)	18
Wildcat-Preface: Beverly Silver, 'Forces of Labor' ...	20
Strike at ThyssenKrupp in Terni, Italy	21
Striking Olive Harvest Workers in Spain	24
Chat on the Olive Harvest Strike in Spain	28
A new kind of Strikes in France (Citroën etc.)	30
More on the Citroën strike	36
France: Leaflet on 35h-Week	37
Leaflet on hotel workers' strike (Accor, France)	38
Students' Struggles All Over	40
Update: Car-Industry	46

editorial

This issue's main focus is on the class situation in countries in Eastern Europe. The movement of capital and the labor force from the East to the West and vice versa is a decisive element of class re-composition in Europe. Mobilizing a large reserve army of workers from Eastern Europe to supply certain sectors in the West and threatening to re-locate production from Western Europe to the East serve as important levers in intensifying exploitation. The ominous image of 'low wage regions in Eastern Europe' and 'low wage workers' is partly capitalist propaganda; the real picture is much more complicated. Eastern European workers are often hired in sectors of the western labor market (like agriculture and cleaning) where 'local' workers don't work. In early April 2005 German agricultural employers loudly objected to government plans pres-

uring more German unemployed into working in the fields, instead of hiring Polish contract workers. They complained about the German unemployed 'arriving too late to work, leaving too early, and taking sick leave after two days'. At the same time, more workers from eastern Germany are migrating to the Netherlands to find work in greenhouses.

Regarding re-location of production units, the actual re-locations to the East are few compared to new investments in the West itself. Direct investments of western companies mainly consists of buying the formerly state-owned infrastructure or companies in the East, like telecommunications. Other investments are undertaken to supply local markets, meaning that they will not replace production capacities in the West. To unmask the propaganda element in the 'Go East'-hype, we need to organise a deeper inquiry into the actual movements of capital and the class confrontations in Eastern Europe countries. In this newsletter you will find some texts that might serve as a starting point: The article **Going East** summarizes statistical material on the relation between direct investments and the shifts in production by German companies. It concludes that setting-up production units in the East rarely results in closing sections of the same company in the West. Apart from supplying local markets, the bosses are aiming for a situation where they can, with maximum flexibility, play-off certain production sites against each other. **Foreign Investments in the Czech Republic: Boom or Fall** analyzes the re-structuring process of capital and the labor market during the last decade, the impact of this restructuring on the Czech Republic as one of the main regions for direct foreign investments in the former Eastern Bloc, and the threat by capital to move on further east. **Migrant workers in the Czech Republic** sheds light on the situation of Slovakian, Polish and Ukrainian workers in the Czech Republic. The article shows how the European labor market extends far beyond the borders of the EU, setting-off chain reactions of work migration. Czech building workers working in the West, for instance, are replaced by Ukrainians slaving away in Czech cities, having to put up with the Czech state's migration policies and the mafia-like structure of Ukrainian temp agencies.

Skoda Auto: Inspiration from Mlada Boleslav? is an article about the recent strike at Skoda in the Czech Republic. It argues that although it was the biggest struggle at Skoda so far, the workers - under the union's control - didn't really use their power to win. But the situation at Skoda and in other companies might change: Some of the new plants western companies have set up in the Czech Republic can't find enough workers in the region, undermining the lay-off threat. These new plants are often not unionized, leading the authors to conclude that there is "some possibility for an autonomous struggle in which any union structures would be left behind. We shall see where this inspiration from Skoda will lead...". **Behind the Border - Poland** describes the history of class struggle in Poland since the 70s, the role of financial policies and state repression, the context of workers' struggles, and the collapse of the socialist regime of exploitation. It also deals with the structure of the Polish agrarian and industrial sectors today and the question of migration. Attached to this text is an **update on recent struggles in and around Poland**.

Promised Land and Class Struggle: Romania after the Transition examines the development of capital and migration in Romania. The main focus is on the textile industry, pointing out the important role of Italian companies in the restructuring process. We added a short **interview with a worker from Solectron in Timisoara**. Solectron is a US-company producing mobile phones and other electronic equipment for companies like Nokia, Ericsson and Alcatel. Then follows some **news on a recent strike in Romania (Michelin) and Solectron in France**.

After the texts on the class struggle in Eastern Europe, you find the **preface of Beverly Silver's book 'Forces of Labor' written by 'Wildcat' people** who recently published the book in Germany. Silver investigated the last 130 years of workers' struggles on a worldwide scale, using a database she and her colleagues have built up. "The book's particular strength is telling the (hi)story from the perspective of workers in struggle (...) 'Forces of Labor' elaborates on the connection between struggles from below and their effects on ruling class actions and, therefore, capitalism's development as a world system. Workers' struggles chase capital around the globe and from one industrial product to the next. And with every new cycle of hegemonic power, pressure from below had more impact on the shape of the world order." We publish this preface because we think this book can help us in understanding the world-historical development of struggles as well as the course and outcome of certain workers' struggles we want to investigate or take part in ourselves.

Some more reports on struggles follow: The first is a **report on the strike at the ThyssenKrupp steelmill in**

Terni, Italy based on several interviews with workers. There was a strike early last year after the German multinational ThyssenKrupp had threatened to close down a certain section of production in Terni/Italy and shift it to other plants elsewhere. ThyssenKrupp backed down - just to re-announce the closure a few months later. Again, the workers went on strike but without success. The tale of **Striking Day Laborers in the Spanish Olive Harvest** gives an overview on the structure of the Spanish agro-industrial sector and its (migrant) work force, describing the three main front lines on which capital attacks: the changes in unemployment benefit for seasonal workers, the new migration law, and the increasing mechanization. These front lines also defined the reality in a small village near Cordoba/Jaen, where day workers struck for a month in winter of 2005. We added a **Chat on the Olive Harvest Strike**. The article **A new kind of Strikes in France** tries to draw a line between the restructuring of the (car-)industry, the effects on wages and work conditions and the new kinds of strikes that make "visible a new offensive attitude against the conditions of exploitation". The strike at Citroën, Aulnay (near Paris), serves as the main example. **More on Citroën** is another (shorter) comment on the Citroën strike, sent to us by a comrade who has a slightly different viewpoint on that strike.

The **leaflet on the 35-hours law in France** focuses on the French government's late 90s so-called Aubry-law which was praised by the European left as a job creating miracle. The reforms of the right-wing government today are interpreted as a break with the 'workers friendly' legal achievements of the left. The leaflet describes how the much-praised law of the leftist government minister Aubry was a big leap forward to further flexibilisation in working time and a reduction in real wages and that the right-wing government today is only continuing on a path already been paved by the previous left one. The **leaflet for Faty, ex-striker at Accor, France**, is a call for practical international solidarity with striking workers at the French hotel chain. We want to support this initiative because it tries to overcome 'national' and language boundaries. However, we added some critical comments on the campaign's main focus.

We have also summarized some **reports from various students' protests in different parts of Europe** (France, Italy, Germany, Slovakia) over the last few months. The violent attacks against the students' demonstration in Paris by kids from the suburbs raise political questions concerning not only schools and the youth movement, but the whole class situation in large urban areas with entrenched high unemployment and a parallel economy. For an **update on the situation and strikes in the car industry** in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Germany and Italy we took material from several (leftist and non-leftist) newspapers. The struggle at Dräxлмаier in

Bremen/Germany is yet another example of the industrial power post-Fordism puts in workers' hands. Dräxlmeier is one of the main German direct investors in Romania and other Eastern European countries. The (wildcat) strikes at Skoda in the Czech Republic, Citroën in France (see the other articles in this newsletter) and the spontaneous protests at Fiat Mirafiori in Italy contrast with the silence surrounding the Rover car factory's closure in Britain.

going east

From Wildcat no.70, Summer 2004

"Then I will leave and go to the east!" Direct Investments in Eastern Europe

What some decades ago might have been a defiant outcry of disillusioned lefty teachers, under the threat of dismissal due to their CP membership, is now taken up again and realised by the 'class enemy'.

Within the context of the actual extension of the EU eastward, the debate on re-location of production and jobs heated up once more. The famous quote of chancellor Schroeder denouncing the employers as 'anti-patriotic' was meant to convey a sense of urgency to everyone. The debate is everything but new, the phrase 'if you don't work for less money, then I will go east' is part of each employer's standard repertoire. This verse is accompanied melodically by the bosses' blues: the workers here in Germany earn too much compared to global standards, they have more leisure time than anywhere else, they become ever more stupid and uneducated, they don't want to work weekends and at the end of the day let themselves be subsidised by the state. In new German, 'subsidies' do not refer to state's financial presents for employers anymore, but are synonymous with minor tax returns on costs for long journeys to work or on bonuses for night shifts. Funny how all employers sing this blues, be it in the Czech Republic, in Romania, in Italy, or in France...

If all this were really true then there wouldn't be a single smoking chimney left anywhere in Germany. This is not the case and therefore we had a look at which concrete statistics the ruling economists provide concerning re-location of production towards the east. The statistical data serve only as an indication in order to formulate political questions, which we will do in the second part of this article.

The surprising thing about statistics is that even in supposedly easy cases they have difficulties coming to clear conclusions. This is also true for the question of

re-location of production. There are no clear figures about how many jobs were cut in Germany during the last decade, in order to then be re-created in other countries. The figures only serve as parameters from which one can derive indirect conclusions. Such parameters are above all numbers concerning German direct foreign investments, employment statistics referring to the German labour market and to companies with German share-holders in the respective countries and import/export statistics. The kind of conclusions which are finally drawn mainly depends on the intended political statements. Other enquiries are based on representative surveys amongst German entrepreneurs. Direct foreign investments are recorded by the Federal Bank. Its statistics have been used, e.g. by the Eastern Europe Institute in Munich for an analysis in July 2002 ('German direct investment in eastern Europe continue to recede - job re-locations fewer than expected feared'). According to this analysis there was a wave of direct investments in the mid 90s whose peak was reached in 1999. Since then direct investments have been decreasing. This is explained by the privatisation policy of the eastern European countries. When the former state property was sold a lot of German companies made sure that they got a piece of the cake. After the cake was more or less shared out it became clear 'that the catch up process after the opening of the markets at the beginning of the 90s is largely completed and that in future capital will only flow according to the economic potentials of the MOE-countries' (MOE, middle-eastern european). Only a small part of this cake consisted of production units, it was mainly the infrastructures (national grid, telecommunications) that were sold. To put it another way: future direct investments will be aiming at supplying the local markets there, rather than at replacing production here. Additionally the example of the 'most mature economy' of eastern Europe, Hungary, shows that during recent years so much capital has been accumulated that capital is only partly reinvested in Hungary itself, the rest is invested abroad. The influx of capital is now countered by its outflow.

In order to calculate the numbers of created and maintained jobs of German companies, the Eastern Europe Institute uses figures of MOE-countries about employment of companies with German share-holders. Cleared from several factors, the maximum number of export relevant jobs is estimated with 300,000 in MOE and the former Eastern Bloc countries for the year 2000. This supposed maximum loss of jobs would have to be contrasted with the actual development of the numbers of industrial jobs in Germany. In Germany the general statement is that the numbers of jobs in industry is decreasing while they are increasing in the service sector and that in total there are more jobs than ten years ago. One of the most often quoted studies in

management literature, the study 'System Technologies and Innovation Research: foreign production - chance or risk for the production location Germany?' (Systemtechnik und Innovationsforschung) by the Fraunhofer-Institute, estimates that between 1998 and 2000 there were only 10,000 jobs (!) net lost in manufacturing, numbers decreased from 6.267 to 6.257 million. With the aim of investigating the practice of German employers and its consequence for the economy in general, the Fraunhofer Institute undertook a representative survey amongst 1,600 companies in the manufacturing sector.

In the findings the Fraunhofer Institute notes that mostly big companies with 500 employees or more, and those which are engaged in serial production with a high output of numbers of pieces, have production locations abroad. However, for these companies eastern Europe isn't a central location, the western industrial nations and Asia are the focus of attention. Labour intensive production with a high dependency on the knowledge of skilled workers, e.g. in machine construction remains located in Germany. The choice of where to produce is strongly determined by the market they aim to open up. This market is not (yet) in eastern Europe. Eastern Europe is more interesting for capital intensive production which relies on mass output. This is confirmed by another study of the same institute on the policy of German car parts suppliers concerning production abroad[1]. The study says that the so-called 'first tier supplier', the ones that directly cooperate with the assembling automobile companies, tend to follow them, i.e. the suppliers follow the main car plants. Their foreign engagement mainly aims at conquering new markets, whereas the second tier suppliers are less internationally active. If they decide to produce abroad, they mainly do it because of lower costs.

There are several big companies that have developed production capacities in eastern Europe: How does this fit together with the fact that today the car industry in Germany employs about 20 percent more people than ten years ago[2]? Apart from a conjunctural boom this is due to formerly re-located production coming back to Germany. Both studies of the Fraunhofer Institute come to the conclusion that the companies which dispose of global production capacities are able to use them flexibly and therefore also able to play the various site's staff off against each other. The studies claim that so-called 'potentials for modernisation' are still waiting to be used which would help to create and secure jobs in Germany. 'Progresses' in terms of flexibilisation and wage levels have already been achieved which accounts for an increasing number of companies which brought production from their foreign locations back to Germany during the last years. In 2001 about 12 percent of all car suppliers have returned production to Germa-

ny, which is contrasted by 25 percent which re-located it to other countries in the same year. It is obvious that in the MOE-countries costs per work place are on the rise due to increased use of machinery.

In addition to that the study reveals that companies which have created production capacities in Germany as well as abroad have created more jobs in Germany than the average company. In this context they talk about 'refinery effects', meaning that simple work is re-located to foreign countries leading to rising profits of the company which are then used to create higher paid jobs in Germany.

Apart from the lower wages speaking in favour of re-location there are also reasons against such a move. In a survey by the Institute for Economy [Institut für Wirtschaft] in Cologne undertaken for the employers association of the metal sector, the participating companies name as advantages of the German production location: good infrastructure, logistics, professional qualification, safe supply of energy, water etc.[3]. Of course they also whine about the 'welfare mentality', the inflexibility, the workers' deteriorating level of education and the state's bureaucratic nature (labour law, environmental norms, high taxes). All these factors still don't seem to be too troubling for the bosses, at least they don't counterweight the advantages mentioned above.

So much for the statistics. What kind of conclusions can we draw from them? First of all we can say that the equation of 'direct foreign investments' with 're-location of production' is wrong, an essential part of direct investments after the opening of the markets consisted of buying strategic infrastructure. Without a doubt there is a trend towards re-location of production, but this is confined to certain sectors and isn't necessarily on the scale that the general propaganda implies it is. This is contrasted by a trend of re-re-location to Germany, which doesn't mean that companies are completely retreating from the new EU-countries, but rather indicates a flexible use of production capacities on both sides of the former 'iron curtain'. The general statistics only give a limited answer to the question of which sectors actually re-locate jobs on a long term basis. Probably sectors like machine construction are less affected than for example chemical, print and electronic industries. Companies in these sectors where mainly semi-skilled workers are employed, seem to keep on moving, but where to? Further east? Ukraine, Russia, south east Europe, China?

How did the working class in the east European countries react to globalisation and the entering of big multinationals? An answer could be deducted from figures about wage developments, working time, strikes, migration etc.. An increasing expense of constant capital per work place in middle east Europe could be

interpreted as an indication of workers' struggle. [...] The following articles on the class situation in Czech Republic, Poland and Romania are only a first step towards a debate on class struggle from an at least European perspective.

Footnotes

- [1] 'Car part suppliers in a fix. On the splits between strategic alignment and orientation towards abroad'.
- [2] Financial Times Germany, 16th of April 2004.
- [3] IW-Consult, 2004.

czech republic

From Wildcat no.70, Summer 2004

Foreign Investments: Boom or Fall?

Transformation towards private capitalism, which started after 1989, was at the beginning mainly affected by the struggle inside the old-new ruling class for the actual character of this change. Already in 1990 the Czech faction of bourgeoisie led by Vaclav Klaus, who was minister of finance and who later became the prime minister and who is now the present president, got the strongest position. As a head of Obcanska demokraticka strana (ODS), he was, with many others, stressing out so called Czech way of privatisation. This Czech way was mainly based on preference of the home investors, who were, not exceptionally, members of the party nomenklatura of the former regime. In several next years these people seemed to be faction of bourgeoisie that was not interested in productive valorization of capital - hence many of them gained huge property by means of the voucher privatization (project of the Vaclav Klaus's group), and then they tunneled them and transferred their profits to foreign bank accounts.

Remarkable foreign investments appeared later in 1995, when the government sold 27 per cent stake of monopoly telecommunication company SPT Telecom - Czech Telecom how it is called at present - to Swiss-Dutch consortium TelSource (KPN and Swisscom). Although it was one of the first significant foreign investments, it was not the actual redistribution of the production itself, but only taking over already existing apparatus and production. Investment into construction of the new factories did not emerge yet. We should also point out, that these investments were not strictly classical expression of production redistribution connected with the lock outs and firing the employees in the countries, where the capital was coming from. Entrance of the Volkswagen into Skoda Mlada Boleslav car factory in 1991 was about the same char-

acter, likewise mastery of the Czech tobacco industry by Philip Morris, investments of the energetic concern E.ON into South Bohemia energy engineering, and above all, the biggest German capital investment, which was entrance of the energy company RWE into Czech monopoly gas distributor - Transgas (2002). There were also some more investments of the same rank, e.g. mastery of the Czech banking by the foreign capital. Czech banking hit rock bottom after series of bankrupts in 90s, and 95 percent of its control was also taken over by foreign banks, e.g. entrance of French Societe General into Komerčni banka. The real boom of the straight foreign investments to Czech emerged in 1999; a year after Czech social democrats (CSSD) won the election. This new government introduced many advantages and encouragements, which should have attracted new investors. These encouragements involved production the same as services, IT, research and development, and included 10 years long taxation free period for newly established firms, possibility of getting the land estates for very low price, support of infrastructure building, special advantages for investments into high unemployment regions (north of Czech and Moravia). While in 1998 2,64 billion USD flowed into Czech, it was already 4,88 billion USD a year later. Amount of the straight foreign investments reached its top in 2002 with 9,3 billion USD. Czech took the second place behind Poland with the total of investments among the countries of the former eastern block. With 2500 USD per person, Czech was even at the first place in central and Eastern Europe. In order to fully satisfy our survey, let us mention, that in years from 1999 to 2001 foreign investments took 10 percent of Czech GDP.

Most of the biggest investors in Czech are firms residing in Germany (25 percent) and in Japan (20 percent) followed by firms from USA and Netherlands. In general, firms from EU participate on the total amount of investments from three quarters. We should also point out the trend of rising investments of firms from Taiwan or India, that by means of investments in Czech try to reach easier access to EU countries trade after the entrance of Czech to EU. Foreign capital is mostly concentrated on car industry in Czech: 46 percent. Let us mention construction of the new car factory of TPCA consortium (Toyota Peugeot Citroen Automobile) in Kolin for 1,5 billion Euro, where about 300.000 cars should be produced every year. Electrical engineering industry follows with 18 percent proportion of the total of investments. The rise of investments into Research and Development and strategically services appeared in 2003. The biggest amount of capital in this sector entered to Czech when German logistic firm DHL started to build up its European centre of services and information technology in Prague. The world cliental

centre of Air France was also built in Prague and Honeywell Corporation builds up its global development centre in Brno (on the same place where Flextronics used to be settled). We can also see the similar trend in Slovakia, where, besides the biggest investments of VW, PSA and Hyundai/KIA, Samsung is constructing its new factory for digital technology products; it should also contain logistic centre for central Europe. Investments into development centers and strategically services mostly stay limitedly targeted on Prague and Brno. There are both technical colleges and relatively enough of high - qualified labour power in these cities. But the limits of investments into these spheres in Czech are already visible on problems with gaining the proper labour power (mainly in Prague), which capital needs for this type of investments - Czech belongs among countries with the lowest number of university educated people in Europe (12 per cent in Czech, 20 per cent in EU countries). That is why the government tries to get high qualified people from different countries of Eastern Europe (e.g. Ukraine, Byelorussia, and Bulgaria) interested in Czech. Representatives of car and electro technical sectors, to which flows most investments in Czech at all, already asked government to accomplish education system reform, which would provide enough of qualified labour power - they warn, that the present condition could lead to end of further investment flow and could even cause interruption of production, that is already functional. Despite of massive flow of foreign investments into Czech over years from 1999 to 2002 and despite of partial reversal towards strategically services development in 2003, there have been discovered limits of these trends in Czech. Right year 2003 meant radical slump of total amount of investments - its flow was the lowest since 1997. The total amount actually only corresponded to the total of reinvested profits (profits, which firms controlled from abroad, leave in Czech). Even these profits have decreased if compared to the previous year. While the foreign capital left 64,3 billion Czech Crowns in Czech in 2002, it was only 62,2 billion in next year. It was the first decrease at all between two following years. Czech bureau of statistics has to admit, that: "world records in amount of the straight foreign investments held by Czech in several past years are over now." Reinvested profits have decreased for the first time in Czech over the last year. In: <http://www.czso.cz> (Czech bureau of statistics) official institutions claim, that this decrease is caused by two huge transactions - purchase of 49 percent share in mobile phone company Eurotel from American investor to Cesky Telecom, Buying back that share should increase the possibility of selling the total share of the state in Cesky Telecom, this is planned by the government in 2005. The government is expecting regeneration of the global telecommunication sector

and is also hoping, that profits are coming from massively advanced mobile phone trade (nine in ten people in Czech own mobile phone - Eurotel is the most important part of value of Cesky Telecom) and the sale of 27 per cent share of Swiss-Dutch consortium TelSource right in Cesky Telecom to the Czech financial investors. That can be only part of the truth. New study of the German Fraunhofer Institute claims, that many of the German metallurgy and electronics firms, which transferred production from home to east, are now coming back to Germany. Lower wage expenses are not everything for capital - there is much lower productivity of labour in Czech, which compensates advantages of the cheap labour power. It is also the mentioned lack of qualified labour power what causes some problems. While in 1997 it was one in 6,5 firms coming back to Germany, it is one in three at present. Despite of these facts, considering the central and Eastern Europe, the foreign investments made Czech economy being the most connected one with the world in past years. Even the German economy is more enclosed than the Czech one. Czech economy has the tightest relations with Germany - about 40 percent of Czech export is to Germany, and due to statements of the Czech national bank, the one percent point deceleration of German GDP causes half percent point deceleration of the Czech one.

Car industry

As we said, most of investments are going into the car industry, and thanks to this fact, it became the most important sector in Czech. 85 percent of its production is exported, which is 21 percent of the total Czech export. There are 130.000 workers employed in the car industry in Czech. There are regions (Liberec, south Czech), where it makes 75 percent of all investments (91 in 100 invested Czech Crowns goes into car industry in Liberec), which makes them very vulnerable considering possibly rising crises of this sector.

Despite of the importance of this sector, there are no significant struggles in it (as in Czech in general). There were some strike alerts in Skoda Mlada Boleslav (and also in its branches in Moravian Kvasiny and in Vrchlabí) connected with collective unions negotiation, which were promoted and led by union bosses, so that no open strike ever broke out. Several times there was a situation, when workers stopped working for a while because of the high speed of the specific line (in 2001), and workers also refused going to work over irregular night shifts (beginning in 2003). But mainly the later example was rather part of the union strategy during the negotiation, than result of an autonomous workers struggle, as we can say considering reachable information. Breaking out of the open conflict in Skoda is, among others, prevented by effective cushion tactics of

the management and unions. When workers periodically are being fired, the first ones are the ones, who were employed through job agencies - mainly from Slovakia. Also the threat of moving the production to Ukraine is playing its strong role - VW Group has already built factory near Uzhorod (Ukraine), and there are coming not only Volkswagens but also Skodas from its lines.

There was no strike in Tatra Kopřivnice (production of lorries, firm is owned by American Terex Corporation). When huge firing was announced at the beginning of the last year, workers from this factory were affected in very bad way, because of the location - north Moravia, a region with 20 percent unemployment. There was a demonstration, attended by many citizens of Kopřivnice showed their solidarity and even some workers from Skoda, plant near Kvasiny, participated. Workers booed out the union boss, as he was trying to convince them, that firing would improve factory situation. There were even voices calling for more radical action against the management, but the workers' rage did not break out into open fight after all. All these conflicts took place in firms, which were taken over as already existing factories and where the union voice is traditionally stronger - unions always had full control over these events so far. There are mostly no unions in the new car factories. At one respect, that means, that all the potential conflicts taking place in these factories have no publicity and can remain hidden, but, on the other hand, this situation can also mean, that absence of the intermediary institutions provides space for possible autonomous struggles, which would not be caught in its webs.

Electrical engineering industry

Electrical engineering sector is the second biggest one behind the car industry in Czech having the flow of foreign investments (18 percent of the total of investments). This flow began already in 1997, which was both connected to global rise of electrical engineering and IT industry and to fake expectations of capital about this sector in general. It has appeared soon in Czech too - Electronics left Czech for Hungary and China, further investments of Phillips were stopped. Flextronics is an ideal illustration of exaggerated hopes in electronically engineering sector (not only) in Czech. Flextronics came to Brno in 2000, firm gained 10 years long tax - free period, duty advantages, land estates for symbolic 1 Czech Crown, new infrastructure built up by city hall, interests - free loan for prequalification. Flextronics promised to employ 3000 workers in the next five years. Firm invested 400 million Czech Crowns into building new production lines and there were 2400 workers employed in 2001- that was the height of its career in Brno. Summer 2002 -

management announced the end of the factory and its replacement to Hungary and China. Only a tiny design-center remained in Brno. Capital's empty expectations of electronics industry were also demonstrated, when Philips stopped further investments - it had built up a factory for 240 million Euros in Moravian, town Hranice, but canceled it's planned 400 million Euro investments. Philips firstly stated, that it will employ 3250 people, but there are only 1270 people working in the factory now, while Czech government has approved massive advantages for this firm - importing duty-free technologies, 10 years long tax-free period and government has invested thousands of millions Czech Crowns into industrial zone, where the factory lies. Philips still rebuts the imputations of lock out, but the Flextronics experience shows that such a decision might come totally unexpectedly without any previous warning. There was also another similar example, when American battery producer Energizer decided to leave Czech this year. Fears are getting even stronger, if one realise, that, likewise the car industry, also electrical engineering industry caused dependence of some regions on the actual investments, e.g. investments of Panasonic, Matsushita, Celestica or above mentioned Philips. For Example Pilsen belongs among such regions, where 73 percent of all investments are concentrated to electro-techniques.

We do not have any information about important struggles in this sector either. Moreover, there are no old firms taken by new foreign capital in this sector like in the case of the car industry, where the unions have quite strong influence (Skoda, Tatra). Anyway, we will see whether these conditions of institutionalized structures absence will be rather advantage or not.

Boom or fall

Bourgeois media and government are trying to set up a feeling, that last year's decrease of investments was only a temporary deviation and that the leaving of firms like Flextronics or Energizer is only an exception. This impression is also encouraged by statements, that Czech will be one of ten most attractive countries for investments in the next years. If so, that would only mean further "globalization" of the Czech economy. Economy interconnection of itself, is only one part of the problem - it is much more important, that there are such conditions being created, which might provide very special space for potential class struggle with no respect to the state borders.

Migrant Workers: Between Repression and the Mafia

With the re-structuring of capital in the Czech Republic following the revolution of 1989, class composition also changed. A big influx of immigrant workers has been part of this process. Immigrant workers work in all kinds of sectors: in construction for example, in the automobile industry, in retail, in health and cleaning sector, in tourism. Today about 162,000 'legal' immigrant workers live in the Czech Republic[1], at least double that amount stay 'illegally'. It is estimated that there are 480,000 foreign workers in the Czech Republic, or about nine per cent of the total work force. And the total number of immigrant workers has been increasing slowly since 1999. This increase is paralleled by huge inflows of foreign investment[2], which is no coincidence given that nearly 60 per cent of all immigrants work in factories or on construction sites. About 10 per cent of all immigrants live in Prague where construction activities have boomed in the last year. About 74 per cent of the immigrant workers are men aged between 20 and 39 years[3]. Compared to the 'native working class' the immigrants work under even more precarious conditions (short-term contracts, low wages, contracted only as formally self-employed workers, etc.). The immigrant workers are used by capital to put more pressure on the local work force and establish class divisions along the lines of origin, language and ethnical categories.

Escaping Economic Misery in Slovakia

The majority of all foreign workers - over 40 per cent - in the Czech Republic come from Slovakia. Work migration to the Czech Republic is anything but new for Slovaks: this was already common during the so-called First Republic (1918-1938) and didn't change under state capitalism (1948-1989). Their employment in the Czech Republic was considerably facilitated even before the EU extension. Unlike people from countries that are not members of the EU ('non-member countries'), Slovaks are not protected by employment legislation[4]. The employer only has to announce the employment of a Slovak worker to the employment agency, and the agency is then obliged to formally register the worker[5]. Hence Slovak workers are mostly employed legally and not pushed into the arms of the various mafias, like for example the workers from Ukraine are. A lot of Slovaks work for temp agencies, often on construction sites, but also in the car industry (e.g. Skoda, VW), the electronic

industry (e.g. in the former production of Flextronics) or in retail trade (e.g. Tesco, Ahold, Billa). The health sector is another area where a lot of Slovaks are employed, both as middle-ranking medical personnel and as doctors.

In the Net of the 'Clients'

Things are slightly different for migrant workers from Ukraine (and from non-member countries in general). Ukrainian workers account for 25 per cent of all foreign workers in the Czech Republic. They are put under more pressure than the Slovaks as they need a work permit from the employment agency, which is dependent on their work visa. They have to pay health and social insurance, but if they lose their job they have to leave the country within one week and are excluded from all social benefits. These workers are supposed to fulfil their function as a mere labour force without claiming the 'achievements' of the welfare state. Since October 2004 the cops have been allowed to raid construction sites and companies in order to check the legal status of these workers. At the same time, legal changes make it more difficult to get a work visa and the valid time of these visas has been shortened.

About 79 per cent of all Ukrainian workers are men who regularly return to their home country and/or send money to their families back home. Most of them have a working class background, and only a few have a university education. About 60 per cent work in construction, others in agriculture and in the cleaning sector; in a word, everywhere where the term 'unqualified workers' is supposed to justify meagre wages. Usually these workers live in specially built 'asylums', where they sometimes have to share a bed. These are so bad that some Ukrainian workers have built their own settlements in forests near Prague or squat empty buildings. And although they often work a twelve-hour day, they earn less than 10,000 Crowns (about 320 Euros) per month[6]. In the end the real wage of many workers will be only half of that, given that the Ukrainian workers are not only exploited through direct capital relations, but also ripped off via the so-called 'client-system'. In the 'client-system', a client (usually a man from the Ukraine) who has a long-term legal residence permit for the Czech Republic and good connections to the state administrations and various mafias organises work visas for workers, for which the 'client' charges three times the normal fee. If workers haven't got the necessary money, the 'client' gives them credit: for the work visa, but also for travel expenses, accommodation and food. Workers then have to pay the client back through one or two monthly wage cheques. The business of the 'client' is a mafia-like version of a temp agency; they find people jobs and pay out their wages. A third of the wages the client keeps, as 'protection

money'. The client allegedly protects workers against the mafias and administrations, but often workers have to face the mafia's and administrative repression on their own.

From Poland into the Mines, from North Korea behind the Sewing Machines

The third biggest group of migrant workers are the Polish (about five per cent). Unlike people from Slovakia and Ukraine, Polish workers all work in one specific region and sector: the Ostrau region, which is characterised by mining and some steel works. They are also employed by temp agencies, which means that they are the first to go when there are job cuts. In the sensitive sectors like mining and steel industry, this policy unfortunately works rather effectively so far. Workers from Slovakia, Ukraine and Poland are the most important groups of foreign workers in the Czech Republic. We can only guess at the number of immigrants from other countries given that they often only work behind closed factory gates with very little contact with the outside world. This is the case for perhaps hundreds of North Korean workers[7] grafting in the Italian textile company Kreatera, for example, or for the Chinese immigrants in plants producing un-taxed cigarettes.

Regrettably we we have nothing to report on the struggles of migrant workers in the Czech Republic. There aren't any or we haven't heard of them yet. The relation between the absence of struggles in this sector and the general social peace is obvious. That we haven't heard of struggles might also be down to the fact that we are having to rely on media reports, so it would be helpful to establish direct links! There are fears in some circles that open unrest among migrant workers could break out soon. At least that was the stated view published in the Czech newspaper Hospodarske Noviny in September the 30th 2004: 'We are not talking about a dramatic social conflict. This conflict would only break out if the migrant workers stopped working and were only interested in the amount of social benefits.' We are up for it!

Footnotes

- [1] All numbers if not indicated otherwise: <http://www.migraceonline.cz>
- [2] More about re-location of production and foreign investment see: 'Investments in the Czech Republic: Boom or Fall?' (wildcat no. 70/2004; see page 5 in this newsletter).
- [3] About 27.3 per cent are aged between 20 and 29 years, about 32.4 per cent between 30 and 39.
- [4] About 51 per cent of all migrant workers in the Czech Republic come from non-member countries. Most of them are from Ukraine (48 percent) and

from Vietnam (25 percent), who mainly work as small traders.

- [5] Workers from Slovakia account for 89 per cent of all migrant workers from EU-countries in the Czech Republic, the other 11 per cent are from Poland.
- [6] These numbers were raised in an anonymous survey amongst Ukrainian workers in 2001. About 68 per cent answered that they earn less than 10,000 Crowns (320 Euros), about 33 per cent said that they get less than 8,000 Crowns (258 Euros).
- [7] The work regime at Kreatera, which the Korean workers are subjected to, takes on militaristic forms: after they have worked for at least eight hours at the sewing machines they are brought to the nearby workers' asylums where they are under surveillance till the next morning. They are said to earn about 6,000 Crowns (193 Euros).

skoda auto

Written by comrades from Prague. Check out <http://alarm.solidarita.org> (in Czech). (On this strike and others see also the car-update at the end of this newsletter).

Inspiration from Mlada Boleslav?

The biggest class conflict in the history of Skoda Mlada Boleslav took place at the end of March and the beginning of April 2005. It was not that exciting but only one demonstration that was organized and fully controlled by the unions and production was stopped for only three hours in total. It is still worth to pay attention to this particular event as it might mean the beginning of a new round of class struggle in the Czech Republic.

Skoda Mlada Boleslav has reached, unlike its mother corporation Volkswagen, a record total profit of about 3.5 billion Czech Crowns last year [1 Euro = 30 Czech Crowns]. While there was a strike about to happen in the German factories of Volkswagen in autumn 2004 because of massive firing, the atmosphere in Skoda was getting difficult due to different reasons: The enterprise is doing well and the workers want 'their share of the profit.'

Whistles instead of an autonomous struggle

The wage was about 20,000 Crowns (about 667 Euro) so far, which meant that the workers from Skoda were constantly told they have nothing to complain of because their wages were even higher than the average wage (about 18,000 Crowns, 600 Euro) and more than 65 percent of workers can only dream of such an income. The company management had originally offered to increase the wages by three percent, which

would equal inflation. The unions asked for ten percent. Long collective negotiation followed and some started talking about a possible strike. The strike really happened after all but it lasted for only three hours as we have already mentioned. Three shifts took part and 240 cars less were produced. The strike was accompanied by a demonstration that took place in front of the firm's headquarters. About 12,000 workers took part. The union people suffocated their voices with blowing whistles and kept their hands busy with hitting small drums. In advance, they were all said to follow the instructions of the organizers and to leave peacefully after the end of the event. (A few days before the unions had a meeting with townhall people who feared an escalation of the conflict into the streets of town.) During the demonstration the unions also pulled the usual nationalistic strings: Some shouted 'We are not a German colony' and likewise. Demonstrations did take place not only in Mlada Boleslav but also in Kvasiny and Vrchlabi. The meeting in Vrchlabi happened on factory ground and not even the press was allowed in. (We have no information how the demonstration in Kvasiny looked like).

On the other hand, there were some hints showing that the workers' dissatisfaction is not strictly bound to union demands. The most visible fact is that the work rate was far too slow in comparison with Europe's average. Now it is increasing rapidly. Workers will also be under growing pressure because of the competition with a new plant of TPCA in Kolin: While a worker in Skoda produces 18 cars a year, one worker in TPCA should produce 100 cars.

Workers vs. Management 1:0

Soon after the end of the strike unions and management made an agreement on increasing wages by seven percent. Bonus payments will also increase by seven percent. All workers will be given a special payment in April (3,500 Crowns, 117 Euro) and the 13th wage will remain, too. The bonus' for afternoon and night shifts will also increase a bit. The firm will then 'loose' about 1.5 billion Crowns (about 43 million Euro).

The management had to face a difficult situation. On one hand it had reached exceptional profits last year but the goal for this year was to 'save' (in other words: to squeeze out of the workers) about six billion Crowns. There is also a plan to start production of a new model (Roomster) in Kvasiny. However, the car industry in the Czech Republic is in a situation where it has to deal with a lack of qualified workers. (TPCA has started its production in February and had problems with getting enough workers for only one shift even though it had started a massive campaign in the north of Bohemia, Moravia and even in Slovakia where unemployment is extremely high.) The management has lost the advan-

tage it used to have by threatening to lay off workers in the case of a strike: There are simply no workers to substitute the fired ones. Workers could now take advantage of such a situation. The press, being aware of this workers' superiority, gave evidence of that by bitterly complaining about the management's inability to deal with and fuck up the workers as it had been able to many times in the Czech Republic after 1989. The position of workers was much stronger than the one of the employees of Ispat Nova Hut in Ostrava (Mittal Steel at present) who was also threatened with a strike last year. The management of Skoda had only a minimal chance for concessions, so that much more could have been won. If such a situation remains, we might witness much more interesting events than a demonstration controlled by unions.

A Beginning?

As we have said earlier, it was the biggest class conflict in the history of Skoda. Before there were only a few strike alerts connected to the unions and collective negotiations. Everything was fully controlled by the union bosses and it never became an open strike. Production was stopped for a while several times on only one assembly line because of high speed (2001) and some workers refused to go to work for extra night shifts (2003). As far as we can say, the latter was rather the result of a union strategy during collective negotiations than it was a result of an autonomous workers' struggle. The belief in the union does not seem to be weakened so far (60 percent of the workers are members). The question is to what extent the wage increase has satisfied the workers and to what extent their expectations were compatible with the demands of the union. So far it is also not clear whether the conflict line between the workers and the union will be around the question of the work rate, that has not been addressed by the union so far.

The management of Skoda has also an effective strategy of deviding workers into 'stable employees' and 'part time employees'. There were about 24,561 people working in Skoda by the end of last year and 20,897 were 'stable ones'. Always when the management had to fire some workers, the first ones were workers who were employed through 'job agencies', mostly the workers from Slovakia. Unfortunately, there is no information on the attitude of these workers during the last conflict. Did they take part in stopping the production? Are they also included in the wage increase? Or will the inner split become even more drastic?

The threat of moving production to Ukraine also plays its role. VW has already built a factory near Ushorod and its assembly lines produce VWs as well as some Skoda cars. There are also speculations to move production to China and India. But this production

is primarily concentrated in local markets and Mlada Boleslav is a far too crucial part of production to be simply moved somewhere else.

We cannot say whether the workers of Skoda managed to break through the vicious circle that consists of outer (the threats of moving the production) and inner (deviations between employees, union's control) factors if we just look at the result of the last conflict. However, as we mentioned earlier, under the present circumstances it is possible to imagine such a breakthrough.

As soon as this conflict had finished some unease was felt in the press. What if the other workers in new factories like TPCA (Kolin), Bosch (Jihlava), Denso (Liberec), Panasonic (Pilsen), Philips (Hranice na Morave) etc. get inspired? It would destroy the basis on which investments in the Czech Republic take place so far: the absence of class struggle and a politically atomized working class. The fact that there are no unions in these new factories - and if there are, they openly cooperate with employers - may provide some possibility for an autonomous struggle in which any union structures would be left behind. We will see what this inspiration from Skoda will cause and whether it will be able to get over the fence of the Skoda factory. And we will also see where and how this inspiration will have effects on everyday life.

poland

From Wildcat no. 72, January 2005

Behind the Border - Migration, Industry, Struggles

It is only a one hour journey from Berlin to the German-Polish border, the supermarkets in Berlin offer Polish food, immigrants from Poland are part of daily life in the German capital - nevertheless there are not many direct contacts (apart from perhaps the punk scene). The 'iron curtain' is slow to dissolve, due to languages and the geographical location.

Poland is by far the largest of the new EU countries - with 39 million people (about 14 million of them are 'economically active') and a size of 312,680 square kilometres. In the history of this country, the workers' struggles contributed directly to the collapse of 'real socialism'. We begin with a short review of the recent history.

In June 1956, parallel to the uprising in Hungary, demonstrations and strikes emerged which would become known as the 'Polish Summer'. The trigger for

these protests were the state order to raise the official targets for work performance in industry and agriculture, along with an increase in prices. Initially the government suppressed the protests with violence, but in a surprise moment of concession it accepted nearly all the demands, announced an end to the collectivisation of the agriculture and established workers' councils.

In 1968 the international student movement also reached Poland. In order to drive a wedge between workers and students, the government instigated an anti-Semitic campaign against left wing intellectuals. As a consequence about 15,000 Jewish people were forced into emigration. The student protests petered out in isolation, but by 1970 there was already a new strike wave emerging of miners and shipyard workers, in response to another government attempt to increase prices. Again, after initial violent oppression the government accepted most of the demands. In the 70s the government took out huge loans from the west (from Germany amongst other countries) in order to achieve their own ambitious accumulation targets and to satisfy the demands for consumption of the workers. Despite these loans, the real wages decreased. 1976 saw new workers unrest in the Ursus plant in Warsaw and in Radom. Illegal opposition structures were formed, such as strike committees and political groups like the 'Committee to Defend the Workers' (KOR), which was influenced by Trotskyism. The Catholic church also functioned more and more as a mouthpiece to announce social needs.

After another strike wave in 1980, during which the 'Strike Committee' (MSK, a cross company group) was formed, the government did not take violent measures but negotiated with the MSK, which later on became the independent union Solidarnosc. The strikes continued and the economic crisis aggravated. In 1981, under the pressure of the Soviet Union, the government declared a state of marshal law and criminalised the Solidarnosc, which by that point had over 10 Million members. These measures put an end to the strikes but politically they deeply divided the society. The drastic reduction of commodities on offer resulted in empty shelves in the shops and forced the consumption of the working class into small agricultural subsistence and a booming black market.

With a new generation of workers the strikes reappeared in the mining regions in 1988, which were joined by 76,000 people all over the country. The government asked the illegal Solidarnosc to come back to the negotiating table, knowing that the union was the only power capable of getting the situation under control. The famous Round Table lead directly to the participation of Solidarnosc-officials and church-friendly intellectuals in the government. New strikes erupted against the 300-500 percent price increases, but the

political demands were abandoned after the state party PVAP left the government.

The shift in internal politics was accompanied by a change in foreign policy, an opening towards the west. The economic growth slowed down, the foreign debts grew and the lack of confidence in the productivity of Polish workers hampered the attempt to re-orientate foreign trading away from the Soviet Bloc and towards the west. There on increasing problems supplying necessary goods. The wage increases gained through the struggle were eaten up by galloping inflation.

An IMF-dictated 'shock therapy' targeted the wage-price-spiral and was later copied in other countries. The deregulation of all prices resulted in a hyperinflation and therefore effectively wiped out any private savings. The cuts of all state subsidies lead to self-management of the companies ('wild privatisation') and to re-distribution of peasant property. By 1992 the industrial production was half what it had been in 1988. The foreign debts did not shrink - something the shock therapy had allegedly aimed at. By 2001 it had increased by a further 72 billion US-Dollars.

The acceptance of the Solidarnosc prevented large scale workers struggles in the first half of the 90s, which resulted in inflation and decreasing wages pushing people into small trading businesses or black market structures, which appeared in the 80s, and work migration.

Like in all the other eastern bloc countries after 1989, the core of the 'transformation' was the sell-off of state owned companies to western investors. Huge concerns in the metal sector, banks, telecommunication and the state owned airline LOT were on offer for potential buyers. By 1997 the privatisation was more or less completed. Investors were attracted by the state's previous input and tax free development zones. A tax on wage increases was meant to push wage increases in the state owned companies below the inflation rate.

In a first step the mines were squeezed dry (in order to be able to provide cheap energy to the major companies, so that they could be renovated and would appear profitable when they were sold on the market). Then the power of the miners was crushed (by today 300,000 miners of state owned companies have been sacked).

Migration

A hundred years ago a Polish labour force was already being exploited en masse in the mines and factories of western Europe and North America, and the Prussian Junker preferred Polish seasonal workers on their plantations, workers, who were regularly deported by the royal foreign police. Seasonal workers still work in Western Europe, but after 1989 there were also a lot of skilled workers going abroad. At the moment the work

migration in the high skilled sectors is receding again, mainly due to rising wages in Poland, but overall work migration continues. While Polish workers go to work abroad, e.g. on the construction site in Berlin or on the fields in the Pfalz, where nothing would work without them, they are at the same time being substituted by workers from the Ukraine working for even less money on sites and fields in Poland. People from Asia are beginning to enter the small trade market, mainly in the eastern parts of Poland.

Industry

The dead-lock situation of class struggle (from the failed increase of set work standards in 1956 to the side step into foreign debts in the 70s) slowed down the development of productivity, as in other socialist countries; for decades the Polish economy was only able to compete on the world market within certain limitations. Before the fall of the Soviet Bloc, the steels works in Stalowa Wola, Nowa Huta and Warsaw, the mines in Katowice and Jastrzebie, the ship engine factory in Poznan, the Ursus-tractor factory in Warsaw and the ship yards in Gedansk und Szczecin (only to name the biggest), provided the Soviet Bloc with capital intensive and manufactured goods and the west with raw materials and semi-finished products.

Today the main sectors are food production, metal- and machine construction, finance and insurances, media and telecommunication, construction and transport. They mainly supply the EU-market. Similar to the situation in the Ruhr region of German 40 years ago, in the Polish mining region of Upper Silesia the mining- and heavy industries are downsizing and the car industry is expanding. About 100,000 miners serve as a reserve labour force for the automobile industry and its suppliers.

After 1989 the main foreign investments were limited to investments in final assembly plants, in order to evade the import taxes on western cars, for example Deawoo took over the FSO car plant in Warsaw. This strategy seems to have found its limits. Meanwhile, other companies have followed the successful example of FIAT, which since 1992 produced the Panda and the Seicento in Poland for the international market, or of Opel, which have produced the Agila and the Astra in Polish factories since 1998. The FIAT and Opel plants, both situated in the Upper Silesian industrial region are brand new. In the same area near Bielsko-Biala a joint-venture of FIAT and GM produces engines for FIAT, Lancia, Opel and Suzuki.

Opel could select its 1,200 required workers out of 32,000 job applicants. During the late 90s the unemployment rate in Poland increased about 8 percent, today unemployment run to about 20 percent and the average monthly wage is about 500 Euros. The auto-

mobile companies state that the quality and productivity in the Polish plants are comparable to western European standard. The question will be if these plants will remain isolated islands worth 100 million Euros or if capital also manages to establish a compact productive network in Poland, as it has done in the developed in the region around Bratislava, Slovakia, about 30 km from Vienna.

The admittance of Poland into the EU in 2004 did not fundamentally change the conditions for investment, rather cemented the institutional framework and confirmed certain developments that had already been going on for a while. The flux of commodities between the countries shifts gradually. The positive trade balance that Germany could demonstrate in the trade relations with Poland about six or seven years ago, is shrinking at the same pace as the importance of separate markets.

Agriculture

About 60 percent of Polish land is used for agriculture. Like in all the other Soviet Bloc countries the large private estates were redistributed during the land and agricultural reforms after 1945. In Poland the collectivisation into production cooperatives could not be enforced against the will of the small peasants. A small peasantry remained throughout the socialist era. Even in 2004 about a quarter of all employees in Poland are working on one of the 2.1 million farms. These farms are mainly family businesses which work with large varieties of different crop and animals, partly due to the lowest usage of chemicals in Europe. A lot of these farms produce for their own subsistence or the local market. If production for subsistence is taken into account, about half of the Polish population makes a living from agriculture. Due to the large increase in unemployment over the last five or six years, the number of people working in agriculture is actually rising, whereas the number of those who have an additional income independent from farming shrinks. A lot of people only live on what they produce on their small farms.

As well as the big businesses, which have grown bit by bit to sizes of up to 1000 hectares, the number of big companies producing 'organically' is also increasing considerably. With an average land ownership of 45 Hectars they are bigger than the usual Polish farm and they are becoming more and more important for the supermarket chains.

Soon certain mono-cultures could have a devastating effect on the land. The huge size of usable land provides enormous potential for a capitalisation of agriculture.

And not only because half of the German Christmas geese already speak their last words in Polish before ending up in the oven.

Struggles

In the remaining state owned companies and big plants there still exists a combinative tradition and a collective memory of the struggles over the last decades, and the various unions are still present. Nationwide strike waves doesn't happen anymore. In contrast, so far the new and privatised sectors have been practically strike-free. Reports about the conditions in these sectors tell of intensive work, long working hours, unpunctual payment of wages, bullying and arbitrary dismissals. It will be important to see if struggles against these conditions emerge and what kind of practical answers the (young) workers find.

In some of the state owned companies the workers were able enforce, often against the big unions, that instead of the closure of the plant, production continued under their own control. As far as we know, e.g. in the case of companies in Szczecin, Poznan or Lodz, the hierarchical relations within the plants did not seem to have been overcome as, as for example, they did at Zanon in Argentina.

In 2002 we saw a series of waves of protests against the closures of state owned companies, against planned reforms of the labour laws and the welfare system. We don't know much about the organisation of these struggles, if they were organised from below etc. One fact is that the unions and organisations such as the right-wing populist 'peasant organisation' Samoobrona (self-defence) managed to place themselves at the head of the protest. The party in power, the neoliberal orientated social democratic government, reacted with the retreat of some of the reform measures and with massive subsidies for the big companies threatened with closure. Like the former socialist governments their answer to the struggles is to pour money at them and thereby taking the wind out of their sails for the time being. This way of reacting will be difficult to maintain in the future, given that Poland's entry into the EU also means that regulations to limit deficit spending will apply.

Here is an update on recent struggles in and around Poland. More information in English can be found on a website run by the base-unionist 'workers' initiative' from Poland: <http://paspartoo.w.interia.pl/index.htm>

Polish seamen on strike for eleven days in the docklands of Travemünde/Germany

In mid-March 2005 about 40 Polish seamen went on strike after the management of the Norwegian shipping company Barber International had announced to cut their wages by 60 percent, not willing to pay the wages according to the German collective contract. Barber International organises the ferry traffic for the Finnish company Finnline Germany. The Polish workers struck for eleven days until the German industrial tribunal declared the strike as illegal. According to media reports the strikers were sacked after the dispute. The conflict has affected the ferry traffic between Finland and Germany due to the ships of Barber International blocking the container terminal. The dockers of Travemünde refused to unload the ships in solidarity with the Polish seamen. After about one week of industrial action Barber International announced to abandon the demand of wage cuts but refused to sign a Letter of Indemnity which would have guaranteed that no legal and disciplinary measures would be undertaken against the striking workers. After the decision of the German industrial tribunal, the whole issue was resolved by placing the ships under the Finnish flag, and replacing the Polish crews with Finnish seamen. The Finnish Seamen's Union nevertheless denies that it helped break the Polish strike.

Protest at Isuzu Motors Poland

About 150 workers participated in the picket in front of the Isuzu factory in Tychy. On the 4th of February 2005 Isuzu Motors management Poland announced to fire 350 people, which would amount to over one-third of the total staff of the factory.

Polish telecom workers on strike after announcement of mass lay-offs

The management of the Polish telecommunication company TPSA, a subsidiary of France Telecom, announced to sack 3.500 workers, which is around one worker out of ten. Since privatisation nearly 40.000 jobs had been cut. The Polish unions called for a strike on the 11th of April 2005. The base union SUD in France expressed their solidarity in the usual union like fashion: 'SUD PTT Federation brings total support to the Polish colleagues. It asks the management of France Telecom Group to stop redundancies'. TPSA declares

that the planned strike will be illegal and strikers will be fired.

Warning strikes at Polish railways

In January 2005 several warning strikes took place at regional railway companies, protesting against the cuts in subsidies. The regional companies were founded after the dismantling of the state-owned Polish Railways (PKP). The PKP is still one of the biggest railway companies in Europe, only the French SNCF transports more people per year. The result of the re-structuring process is the reduction of tracks and staff, from formerly 300.000 employees to 200.000 today. In 1998 there was an attempt to fight back, but the nationwide strike ended without results.

romania

From Wildcat no.70, Summer 2004

Promised Land and Class Struggle: Romania after the Transition

The restructuring of production and society which happened in Romania also sheds new light on the changes in all the EU-countries. With its new and old forms of work and workers' struggles, Romania is an integral part of wider Europe. The integration of Romania in the European employment system made possible a continuous exchange of experience between Romanian and foreign enterprises, but also between Romanian and foreign workers. This is due to the changes in Romanian companies and changes in migration, which both form part of this integration. Several political and social phenomena have changed Romania in the last few years:

- a) the investment of foreign capital, whose main aim was purely the exploitation of the local labour force,
- b) the steady increase in workers' struggles, some of which were partly connected to the official unions and some of which completely independent of them,
- c) the beginning of free migration, esp. of women,
- d) the increasing impoverishment, which mainly affects elderly people and women.

Ruralisation as an expression of increasing unemployment

The economic and political process of re-structuring since 1990 has intensified the material differences between regions. Especially during the first years the flow of foreign investments was directed towards the regions which could provide the politically most favourable conditions. Partly the influx of foreign capital

enforced already existing models of migration in these regions, which, compared to the past, appear to be freer and more numerous and overcome the previous bureaucratic barriers to internal migration. One of the most remarkable phenomena of the Romanian new development is the increasing migration of people back to the countryside (ruralisation). Reasons for the return back to the countryside are the loss of work places, the increasing living costs, an atmosphere of insecurity and the lack career possibilities. The escape from the cities contradicts the desire of many young people who would prefer the big city lights to country life, but who cannot earn enough to be able to live there. Another reason for the movement back to the countryside are the land privatisation laws of the 90s, which lead to thousands of people receiving small patches of land, practically as a present.[1] In the countryside people survive by working on the fields, by rearing cattle and by exchanging daily necessities.

Initially, the foreign investments in Middle- and East Europe were mainly concentrated around Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland. Only since 1997, after the total sum of investments topped 1.215 billion Dollars[2], has the investment flow become increasingly directed towards Romania. The acceleration of foreign investments continued during the following years. These investments mainly came from the Netherlands (17.3 percent), from France (10.5 percent), from Germany (8.5 percent), from the US (6.7 percent) and Italy (6 percent). Germany and Italy have similar characteristics: a lot of individual investors (nearly 11,000 from Germany, over 14,000 from Italy) and a relatively low volume of investment. Invested was mainly in industry (54.4 percent), in professional services (15.8 percent) and trade (16.6 percent).[3] It was mainly international capital that constructed new green field factories, but also invested in recently privatised former state owned companies.[4] The investments in green field factories were mainly flowing towards areas which up to then were used for agriculture or mining and the investors were making use of the establishment of 'Special Export Zones'. In these zones special rules apply, such as tax breaks for set up costs and the possibility for the company to draw up work contracts with favourable conditions (for them!). At the moment foreign capital mainly flows to the capital Bucharest, to the north-east of the country (Timisoara and Arad) and to its centre (Brasov, Sibiu, Cluj).

Green Field Factories

Production has changed fundamentally, especially in the work intensive sectors with huge investment sums of international capital and strong orientation towards export: Nearly the half of Romania's import and export is controlled by companies in Bucharest or in the re-

gions of Timisoara, Arad, Sibiu and Bihor, companies which are entirely or partly owned by foreign proprietors. In this way the economic integration has de facto already taken place: the main economic partners are Italy, followed by Germany, Russia and France.[5]

In contrast to neighbouring Hungary, the various Romanian governments have mainly supported the outsourcing of parts of the manufacturing process, meaning that in order to evade import taxes, raw material and half manufactured goods are imported and finished products are exported. The customs duty is only paid on the difference between these two values. This lowers production costs both at the time and in the long term, but at the same time the Romanian state's sovereignty over their own territory diminishes.[6]

Production in Romania is essentially based on imported raw materials and machinery from abroad. The medium sized and big international companies raise or lower production according to workers' protests and to what extent the local work force is dependent on a wage.

Due to the intensive re-structuring process of production, the number of wage workers dropped from about 8.3 million in 1989 to about little more than 4.7 million in 1999. This drop was particularly marked in certain sectors such as the industrial sector (from 4 million to 2 million), in construction (from 706,000 to 338,000) and in the transport sector (from 667,000 to 310,000). Within the industrial sector the impact of the re-structuring process varied a lot: the sectors with a high proportion of fixed capital, such as textile industry and machine construction, shrank considerably, whereas the garment industry did not even lose a quarter of its employees during the re-structuring in the mid 90s and today represents the industrial sector with the highest employment numbers. Now the number of those in the industry working for private companies has nearly reached two thirds of all those employed. The big differences between the various sectors also indicate the respective advancement of international capital: the 97 percent private companies in the garment sector and the 80.6 percent in the textile industry are contrasted by 25.3 percent in machine construction and 24.2 percent in the metal industry. Private capital kept away from these sectors.[7]

Workers' Protests

In the 90s workers in Romania were able to stage their protests with less fear than in the previous decades. The different governments tried in various ways to defuse the social confrontations and regulate them in legal terms: now, before an industrial dispute takes place, arbitration proceedings have to be undertaken.[8] The governments use these kind of legal instruments to try to take the sting out of the unions' power. This is neces-

sary partly because the workers seem to be looking for such a unifying factor, e.g. the unions, after having not wanted to deal with unions during the first years after the fall of the regime. At first glance the new labour law which was passed in 2003 seems to be favourable for the working class and the bosses were up in arms against it.[9] The number of union industrial actions increased during the period from 1990 to 1999 by 235 percent to 653 conflicts in 1999, with over one million workers engaged in them. These workers' struggles mainly took place in the public sector (mining, gas, water, refineries, transport, post and telecommunication, health and social care), but the sectors with a strong presence of private and international capital were also partly affected (textile, garment, shoe industry). These struggles increasingly evolved around the issue of wages, work conditions, re-structuring and redundancies, but also around questions such as new shift regulations or an increase in work intensity. The regions where most of the struggles originate are the province Hunedoara in the south, which is characterised by mining and the provinces Sibiu in the centre and Timis in the northwest, where industry and international capital are concentrated. One example is the well-known strike of 60,000 workers of the national brown coal corporation Oltenia. In February 2004 the strike completely shut down the coal extraction for about a week.

Wages and Working Hours

The biggest social conflicts are triggered by the low wage level and by the working conditions in the factories. The minimum wage, which was raised to 2.8 million Lei per month (about 70 Euros) at the beginning of 2004, is regularly adjusted to inflation. In addition to that, there are bonuses and food vouchers, which are widespread in Romania. The average wage is about 100 to 150 Euros, although given the increasingly extreme wage differences it becomes more and more difficult to talk meaningfully about an average at all. The employees in the finance and banking sector, in post and telecommunications and in the public sectors are doing comparably better. The highest wages can be found in the state owned companies, particularly in the mining sector, where wages are about 50 percent above average.[10] It is particularly amongst industrial workers that the differences have become more acute. In the manufacturing sector (textile, garment, shoes, leather and wood) the wages are considerably lower than in mining or the energy sector: in the time from 1990 to 1999 the wage difference increased from 28 percent to 42 percent. Major inequalities can also be seen between the wages of factory workers and those of tradesman like electricians or plumbers. Although there are more union struggles in the state owned sector than in the private one, under international capi-

tal numbers of struggles also increased. At the Italian textile company Radici, production came to a halt for several days after it became known that, due to the bad situation on international markets, the management wanted to sack 200 people. Most widespread is still the silent and individual struggle: absenteeism has risen from about 5 percent to 10 percent and the turnover of staff is accelerating due to people trying to find better paid employment and therefore changing jobs as soon as possible. During the ten years after the transition (1989-1999) about 40 percent of all people employed have changed jobs and/or profession. This mainly applies to the unqualified workers. Of those people in work immediately after the revolution in 1989, about a quarter have become unemployed, about 10 percent have been dismissed due to re-structuring and another 10 percent, especially those who moved, retreated from the job market. In general, job mobility and the process of marginalisation are more marked in towns than on the countryside. The means by which they try to prevent strikes from happen are the same as in former days: disconnecting telephone lines, dis-information, sacking of union leaders.[11]

Factories owned by foreign capital are affected by struggles, not at least because in companies with foreign management work intensity has increased considerably: in a kind of Neo-Taylorism a precise work rhythm is dictated, without leaving the workers any breathing spaces. The introduction of new work methods encounters more intensive resistance in the old Romanian factories, while in green field plants they can be enforced more easily, given that there exists no historical memory or practical alternative. On the other hand the working class in Romania today has to deal with a type of machinery which is not in use any longer in more industrialised countries, machinery which had previously been the battleground for workers - and bosses - from other countries.

The Women Migrate

The young people find it hard to get used to faster work rhythms and low wages, for them it is a good reason to leave the country. The real number of Romanian emigrants is closer to an estimated 1.7 million than the official number of 300,000. Mostly people emigrate to Italy, Spain, Germany, Israel, Hungary, Greece, Belgium and Austria. About 72 percent of them have work permits, but a lot of them also work without papers.[12] Emigration is an answer to investment of foreign capital in work intensive and low wage sectors as well as to increasing impoverishment. The fact that it is mainly women who leave the country indicates that emigration is also an answer to the re-emergence of forms of patriarchy and the de-valuation of female labour in the process of neo-accumulation, which is at

the same time relying on the invisible female labour. The more women are pushed out off public sphere, the more individual emigration increases.

The situation in Romania is very complicated and some of the foreign companies are already preparing to re-locate their production to other countries, e.g. nearby Ukraine where wages are lower and labour laws certainly less strict. Many foreign capitalists think that they can re-locate production to Romania and enforce there what they are not politically able to enforce in their home countries anymore. But nevertheless and despite their difficult wage situation, the working class in Romania doesn't seem willing to play the games of foreign capitalists much longer.

Devi Sacchetto

Footnotes

Unless indicated otherwise all figures are from the Romanian Statistical Yearbook, National Institute of Statistics (2000), Bucharest (CD-Rom).

[1] The law of 1990 initiated the reconveyance of land up to a maximum size of 10 hectares of arable land and 1 hectare of forest land. With the reform of 2000 this maximum size changed to 50 hectare and 10 hectare respectively.

[2] Measured by the share values at the end of year the foreign investments in Romania developed as follows: 1990: 87 million, 1991: 217 million, 1993: 621 million, 1994: 1. 271 billion, 1995: 1.595 billion, 1996: 2.209 billion US-Dollars.

[3] Compared to countries like Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary these are nevertheless comparably little sums.

[4] For example Renault took over Dacia in 1999 and negotiated the purchase directly with the state Administration for Privatisation. 'Renault redécouvre Bilancourt dans les Carpartes', *Le Monde* 13.07.2001.

[5] In 2001 about 67.8 percent of all Romanian exports went to EU-countries: 24.9 percent to Italy, 15.6 percent to Germany, 8.1 percent to France, 5.2 percent to Great Britain, 3.4 percent to the Netherlands and 3 percent to Austria. The exported goods are mainly textile and garment products (26.2 percent) mainly of outward processing, mechanical machinery, electrical machines and devices. With regards to import, the countries are essentially the same (Italy 20 percent, Germany 15.5 percent). The important position of Russia is due to its supply of oil and oil related products; Ice (ed.), *Congiuntura economica* 2001, Bucharest 2002.

[6] The passive refinement can mainly be found in textile, garment, and shoe production, but affects other sectors, too, such as wood industry or machine construction.

[7] Machine construction was the biggest sector, employing 600,000 people. To date, employment num-

bers have practically halved. Textile industry shrank by two thirds and employed about 98,000 workers in 1999.

[8] An investigation undertaken by the Ministry of Work concerning 1507 workers' struggles in the period between 1992 and 1996 and with about 3 million workers involved, came to the conclusion that about 35 percent of these conflicts ended during the arbitration process (the conflicting parties being union reps, representatives of the employers and in some cases the government). *The Settlement of Labour Disputes in Central and Eastern Europe*, ILO-CEET Report Nr. 22, Geneva, 1997, p.17.

[9] Above other things the new labour law abolishes temporary work contracts. Temporary contracts can only be implemented in exceptional cases which are defined by the law. There were protests by the employers about the new regulation of the work contracts, about the protection against dismissal, about the missing flexibility in the negotiation process about new job schemes. The chairman of the Romanian Employers Association (AOAR) stated that "increasingly social security is shifted from the state to the employer". *Il Gazzettino romeno*, n.79 (4th of December 2002) p.11.

[10] OECD (ed.), *Economic Surveys Romania*, OECD, Paris, 1998, p.129.

[11] After protests of the ILO the management of the railways re-hired the dismissed union leaders. There were more protests at the railways in 1998 and 1999 with workers demanding a 70 percent wage rise. The struggles lead to a 25 percent increase in April 2000, 15 percent in September 2000 and 20 percent in June 2001.

[12] Martin P., (2004), *Migration News*, vol. 1, no. 11, (January). www.migration.ucdavis.edu

michelin.romania

Summary of an article in the Romanian newspaper Evenimentul Zilei, February 2005

Thirty per cent more wage! Michelin Workers in Romania on Strike

On the 7th of February, the workers of the Michelin plant Silvana in Zalau, northeast of Romania went on an unlimited strike. They used that method after the management kept on ignoring their demand for 30 per cent more wage, even after a warning strike in the end of January. Roughly, 1400 people are working at the plant; almost the whole staff participated in the strike. The Michelin plant is the most important company in the region. Last year they produced 234.000 tires, this

year they want almost to double the production. The strikers demand an immediate higher payment of 30 per cent related to last years' salaries, whereas the management is willing to pay only 3,5 per cent more, possible would be another 2,5 per cent in May. Depending on the economic situation, they could pay another 11 per cent in installments. If considered, that the workers would have a monthly salary of 10 million Lei (ca. 250 Euros [40000 Lei = 1 Euro]), the managements offer is enough, said the management. According to the press, the strike proceeded peaceful. The workers stayed at their work place und simply stopped working. After a week, the strike expanded. At the factory, some vociferous meetings and manifestations took place. They demanded the withdrawal of the management. A writing of the workers demands were sent to the personnel manager, the Romanian CIO of Michelin and to the highest CIO of the company, Eduard Michelin. After a few days, the strike caused big damages for the company. A number of trucks could not been loaded with extraditable goods, so they were obliged to wait. The daily loss of the company was about some hundred million Lei. After two weeks, at the February 18th, the union, which had supported the strike, signed a record, in which they agreed that the workers would resume to work. At the same time they wanted to go on with negotiations. With it, the strike ended. So far, there are no results of the negotiations.

Additional information:

According to their own website, Michelin produces truck tires in Zalau. There is another plant in Romania, in Victoria, area Brasov. In Victoria, they produce tires for motor cars. Another plant in Eastern Europe is in a polish city called Olszytn, they produce both tires for trucks and motor cars. There are another plants in Germany, France and Spain.

solectron.romania

Summary of a chat with a young guy who works for Solectron in Timisoara, Romania, Summer 2004

About the international free trade zones in Romania

There used to be six free trade zones in Romania, where foreign investors were supposed to invest in low tax paradises. Today only one zone remains <http://freezone.arad.ro>.

About Solectron

The US-based company Solectron is one of the world's biggest electronics firms and produces elec-

tronic goods for different international companies. In Timisoara, Romania, Solectron produces, amongst other things: mobile phones for Alcatel, Ericsson and Nokia; wireless home phones for Phillips; elevator controls for Schneider; and satellite receivers for Pace. The communications giant Lucent has outsourced its entire telecommunications production to Solectron plants. In 2001, crisis kicked in at Solectron: by the end of 2001, 8,200 workers - about 10 per cent of Solectron's global staff - had been sacked.

About Solectron in Timisoara

The company took over its first production unit in Timisoara in 1998, and in 1999 a green-field factory was opened about 10 km out of Timisoara. After each shift, a dozen big buses drive the workers back home into town. Until winter 2001, about 100 workers were hired every month, and then the mobile phone market slumped. In total, about 1,100 workers were sacked. They were offered two and a half month's wages as compensation, which is illegal in Romania. Today, 4,000 workers work at Solectron-Timisoara, divided into four different shifts. In 2002, Solectron got the contract to produce satellite receivers for Pace, and Pace is its main client now. Every month, 40,000 units are produced for the West-European market - devices for which the end consumer will pay about 300 Euros. The company management claims that Pace needs double the amount of units that are currently being produced per month. Solectron-Timisoara lost the contract to produce car GPS systems for the French company Wavcom, and the production was relocated to China. For a while, the Solectron factory had a vice-management boss from Malaysia, who never ceased to tell people that the Solectron workers in Mexico or China are more productive and are only paid 80 US-Dollars per month. He was fired later on, for being in cahoots with a competing company.

About the workers

The average age at Solectron is thirty or younger. For manual assembly, mainly women are employed. Today, only 1,500 workers are permanent, while all the others are temps, mainly from Manpower and Luger & Makler. The temps mainly work in the assembly department, and about 400 work in the offices and administration. It takes a week to train people in the manual assembly work. People only get one- or three-month contracts, and most of them are fired after this period, or they leave. Some who leave are students from smaller towns around Timisoara. The Romanian government passed a law that officially gave temp agencies the legal means to operate within private companies, but the law is very flexible. Some of the temp workers at Solectron have already worked there for two years.

Most of the people at Solectron think that work there is better than in other companies or factories - at least there is air conditioning. Most of them also think that it won't be easy to get another job.

About the wages

Production workers with a permanent contract are paid 150 US-Dollars per month. The wage relates to a 168-hour month. The temp workers get 100 US-Dollars, with no Christmas pay and no compensation for inflation. In the last four years, the net wages have not increased. Just for comparison: 1 Euro is about 40,000 Lei. A teacher earns about 4 Million Lei per month, and the minimum wage is 3 Million Lei.

About working time

People work six days in a row, then they have two days off. That way, the company doesn't have to pay them overtime bonuses. There is more work mainly in spring and summer, because they are producing for the Christmas business. In spring 2003, they worked 12-hour shifts. In addition to the fixed 168 hours, there is a maximum of 32 hours overtime per month.

About the organisation of work

Every 'client' has its own production line. With twelve lines, Pace has the biggest production capacity. Sometimes the different lines are separated by partition walls, mainly when the client's managers come to visit. The production lines of the different clients are often changed around, according to the amount of work and workers needed. Most of the workers work in manual assembly - they put in the batteries, stick labels on, and put together the mobile phone shells. The machine operators also move from machine to machine, according to their level of experience. They solve small problems themselves; otherwise, there are maintenance workers. Single machines are used for different products, e.g. mobile phone parts for different brands. The machines that assemble and solder the circuit boards are also used for different products, e.g. satellite receivers and GPS systems. The raw circuit boards come from Taiwan or China. The workers don't identify with a single product or brand, even if they are working on the Nokia line, for example, for a while. Some sections of the assembly department are equipped with conveyor belts; in others, transport is done manually. There are a lot of time-keeping creeps running around, and one supervisor per line keeps watch on the pace. Sometimes the management announces that a specific amount of units have to be finished for the next day, and that the lorries to Hungary are waiting.

About the unions

There are two unions at Solectron, neither of which is doing anything. The first union, the 'free union of Solectron', is still involved in a legal process to gain its recognition. The main guy is probably friends with the management by now; in any case, the 'free union' is more or less invisible on the shop floor. As a reaction to the 'free union', the company management founded a yellow union, first called the 'communication committee', then 'Universe'. It now organises the official majority of the workers, and the spokesman of 'Universe' on the shop floor has been promoted, and is now a supervisor. At the end of 2000, a small group of workers tried to organise an independent union group, and they were all fired. Some of them managed to force their re-employment later on. The company's reaction was very repressive, and they used all kind of measures to scare people. Their security manager is a known ex-cop.

The future

There are hardly any open conflicts. People are discontented, mainly concerning the wages, but the company's strategy of using a lot of temp workers in order to increase the pressure on the whole work force seems to work.

Additional information:

A short note concerning the situation of Solectron in France from: Liberation, 15 January 2005

Sixth social plan at Solectron: 220 jobs and working time at risk

Solectron France, the US-American subcontractor for electronics, is preparing the sixth social plan in three and a half years. After slashing 5,000 jobs since 2001 the company has announced the cutting of another 227 at the last remaining plant in Canejan. In addition to the redundancies the company wants to revise the collective contract on working time signed in 1999. The weekly working time in production is supposed to be increased from 30 hours to 35 hours without wage compensation. The site in Canejan employed up to 2,000 permanent staff and as many temp workers. For the time being there remain only 1080 people working and the new redundancy plan would drop this down to less than 900. According to Bernard Piron, union rep of the CFTC, the announcement is not supposed to be official before the next meeting of the works council, but the workers are already expressing their anger at the unions. 'The fuse of the powderkeg is lit, we have to find a solution to put it out'. [Source: <http://social-aquitaine.forumactif.com/viewtopic.forum?t=1847>]

forces of labor

Comrades from Wildcat have just published the German translation of Beverly Silver's book 'Forces of Labor'. The book analyzes the development of workers' struggles on a world-wide scale in the past 140 years, its relation to the expansion and re-location of industries, the political intervention of states and war, and develops concepts for a better understanding of struggles, e.g. the material basis of workers' power in certain industries and the political impact on capitalist strategies. So if you haven't read the book yet, get a copy and join the discussion! [Beverly J. Silver, Forces of Labor. Worker's movements and Globalization since 1870, Cambridge University Press, 2002]

Why we have translated 'Forces of Labor' ...

When the book was published in summer 2003 we emphasized its importance in a first enthusiastic review saying that it "provides a new basis for the discussions about the future of historical capitalism" (wildcat 67, October 2003). We knew that a translation into German could promote the debate on the book's theses. The book's "grand narrative" and its many small narratives are excitingly written workers' and world history that will produce interest far beyond academic circles. At the same time this new vision on history provides new impetus for the - in the past few years newly inflamed - debates on war, globalization, capitalism and class struggle.

The book's particular strength is telling the (hi)story from the perspective of workers in struggle. Not literally because the description and summary of 150 years of global (working) class history inevitably relies on a bird's eye view. But Forces of Labor elaborates on the connection between struggles from below and their effects on ruling class actions and, therefore, capitalism's development as a world system. Workers' struggles chase capital around the globe and from one industrial product to the next. And with every new cycle of hegemonial power, pressure from below had more impact on the shape of the world order (Beverly J. Silver presented this long-term finding in Chaos and Governance in the Modern World System, a book she published together with Giovanni Arrighi in 1999).

This approach in Forces of Labor shows many parallels with an unorthodox Marxist current in Italy that later became known as "operaism" (workerism). Its early texts strongly influenced the formation of our own theory. The label "operaism" gained some new fame through the political bestseller "Empire" by Hardt and Negri but this theoretical renewal of the sixties has already become ideology again. The early sixties' texts and inquiries written and conducted from around the

magazine "Quaderni Rossi" were a critique of bourgeois industrial sociology and to the same extent, a critique of an orthodox Marxism that had lost sight of the workers.[1] Their aim was to renew Marx's critique, long forgotten within Marxism, of the despotism of capitalist production by starting concrete projects of inquiry.

Instead of using a schematic and identity-based concept of working class, "Quaderni Rossi" focused on certain forms of production and how they lead to historically specific forms of "class composition" and associated "forms of rebellion". The organization of production and technology was decoded as "petrified class struggle", as the reactions of capital to open and often hidden resistance against work (Silver calls that *fixes*). At the same time they worked out the dialectic of capital encountering workers' resistance only by a further socialization of labor through division of work and new machinery - sooner or later the basis of new workers' power.

In Forces of Labor we find again what Mario Tronti at that time had called a "strategic turn" within Marxism: Instead of assuming a "determination by inner laws" of capital, capital's new movements are understood as a constant confrontation with class struggle. Instead of mystifying capital as a thing or the world system as a predetermined structure, the driving force is seen in society's contradictions: the "endemic" class relations, the insurmountable antagonism in the sphere of production. Tronti called this the "workers' standpoint".

On a microcosmic as well as a macrocosmic level Forces of Labor provides us with important impetuses for a renewal of the "operaist" perspective - or in Steve Wright's terms let's call it the "school of class composition" to avoid confusions with the ideological "multitude-operaism". In Forces of Labor the way in which some capitalist sectors are investigated in order to grasp their importance for workers' power sharply contrasts with the reckless triumphalism Hardt, Negri and others show while conjuring new subjects out of a hat.

Silver does not use new capitalist ideologies like the "information society" and its "immaterial labor" but critically and carefully examines the several new "post-fordisms" and takes a close look at the production process and the changes within. She does not come up with definite answers on the presumable development of workers' power - and in a world-historical turning-point phase like today that is probably not possible either. As long as new central sectors and workers' figures fail to show up either within the accumulation of capital or within the class struggles, any choice of "new" sectors carries a certain arbitrariness. But Silver shows us how further inquiries can be developed, what they have to look for, which comprehensive connections

have to be taken into account. The book gives plenty of detailed hints and suggestions, asking for more collective efforts.

The macrocosmic suggestions for an expanding and updating of the workers' position are apparent: the historical extension to here 150 years, in 'Chaos and Governance' even 500 years and an associated world-historical perspective. That this approach and the consideration of class struggle and workers' subjectivity in history just originates in the "world-system school" might surprise some people, for this school has legitimately been criticized for its structuralism. In the first chapter Silver discusses this problem, arguing that the whole research-project emerged from a critique of a certain world-system school "steamroller"-structuralism.

This emergence of the project has the great advantage in that from the very beginning the relation between workers' struggles and the world-system of capitalist and state power is taken into account. In many discussions about "imperialism" the social antagonisms between the classes and the political-military antagonisms between states are being treated as exclusionary perspectives - the "anti-imperialist position sacrifices social emancipation for "national liberation", the "social-revolutionary" position vice versa tends to ignore the antagonisms within the global system of states. In Forces of Labor the connections and inter-relation of both levels are analyzed. War and, above all, world wars are seen as integral parts of the - on a world-scale politically effective - class antagonism of capitalism.

This constitutes the book's distinctiveness. The view over several centuries allows identification of the general character as well as the historical novelty of the situation we find ourselves in today. The question is not what happens again and again but what kind of shifts occur during historical cycles. Where does the systems' development leave previous, apparently established pathways, where are they blown apart? This concerns the dialectic of war and class struggle in particular: Will it be possible once again to cover up - at least temporarily - the social contradictions through world-war or a world-wide "war against terror" and block emancipatory struggles? Or does the world-wide power of the proletarianized - for the first time in history - open up a new possibility. Can it already influence the decay of the prevailing world-order in a way preventing another decades-long period of war and mass murder - characteristic of any global change in governance and hegemony so far? Forces of Labor is a stimulus and an invitation to tackle these topics theoretically and practically.

wildcat & friends - March 2005

[1] On the history of this current see "*Renaissance des Operaismus*" in Wildcat no. 64, 1995 (see the website www.wildcat-www.de [English translation of that article available soon]) and more detailed in: Steve Wright. *Storming Heaven. Class composition and struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism*. 2002. London/Sterling: Pluto Press. [German translation: Steve Wright. *Den Himmel stürmen. Eine Theoriegeschichte des Operaismus*. 2005. Berlin: Assoziation A.]

thyssenkrupp.italy

There are plenty of conflicts and strikes in Italy these days. Many workers are fighting against the continuing attacks on and the deterioration in their conditions. Like the struggle of the bus drivers, who since late 2003 have also organized wildcat-strikes, workers regularly turn against the unions, too, which help organize and manage the deterioration. The struggles are sparked by low wages and flexible work contracts, like for instance, the mobilization of social service workers right now in Rome. Other struggles resist the tearing-down and re-locating of (parts of) enterprises, like the struggle at the ThyssenKrupp-plant in Terni/Umbria. But despite the high number of struggles on the company level - and the mobilization against "precarity" - the struggles rarely grow beyond the individual company or sector. To better understand the background and development of the struggle in Terni a comrade went and interviewed a group of workers there. This is the report:

Released into freedom

On February 27th, 2005 the struggle of the ThyssenKrupp workers in Terni ended. It all started in January 2004 when the multinational trust announced the re-location of the factory's production of electrical steel to Germany. The workers reacted with week-long strikes and blockades of the company gates. After 22 days a preliminary contract was signed. ThyssenKrupp promised to keep producing electrical steel there. In return for continued investment, the company asked the regional government for cheap electricity and infrastructure improvements. Without an explicit industrial plan it would not sign any final contract. Different plans were presented, but no contract was signed. So in December 2004 the workers found themselves in the same situation as at the beginning of the year. ThyssenKrupp stayed away from the negotiations and announced: "The production of electrical steel will be re-located, the 360 workers in the department will be put on the Cassa Integrazione[1] - no more negotiations."

After ThyssenKrupp refused any further negotiations with the union, on February 2nd, the 360 workers from the electrical steel-department went on indefinite strike. They blocked not only the railroad and highway but also the company gates, thus preventing the delivery of products for more than two weeks. ThyssenKrupp talked about combined losses of around 25 million Euros that workers had inflicted on the company since the start of the year. Co-workers from other departments started a solidarity strike and were sent on mandatory vacation or “released into freedom” - as it is euphemistically called when workers are locked out without pay. One worker told me that in the course of the conflict the number of lay-offs and lock outs grew to about 1300.

Terni is an industrial city in Umbria, one hundred kilometers north of Rome. Here is Italy’s oldest steel mill, founded 1885 as the country’s munitions plant. The men worked in the steel mill, the women in the textile factories. Later the fascist state also built factories for electrical and chemical goods.

Those employed by ThyssenKrupp nowadays are fourth generation metal workers. Previously their great-grandfathers had worked in the mill. For over a century there have been workers’ struggles in Terni. In 1953, with the start of a wave of lay-offs, the workers brought out weapons hidden in their basements from Resistance days and visited the bosses at home. In 1974 they occupied the factories. Sixty years ago 40000 people worked in steel production in Terni; now there are only about 4000 steelworkers. Until 1993 the steel mills were state-owned. The state then sold the mills to three Italian companies which later sold them to ThyssenKrupp for twice the price. Since 1994 ThyssenKrupp has been the biggest employer in Terni. Eight to nine thousand workers work for smaller companies in the whole region that supply ThyssenKrupp with services and spare parts. The ThyssenKrupp-plant produces stainless and electrical steels in different departments and supplies the automobile industry among others.

The Trip to Terni

On February 21st, 2005 other comrades and I drive to a demonstration in Terni so we can talk to striking workers. Ten thousand people are in the street protesting the closure of the electrical steel department, among them many students and workers from other factories in the region.

The mayor and other dignitaries from the city are present, so the slogans are not aimed against the “padroni” (bosses) but against “the Germans”. Many feel thrown back to the times of partisan struggle and make those kind of allusions. The most shouted slogan is: “The mother of the Germans is a whore!” Asked why these (racist) slogans have replaced the class struggle

ones, the workers point to the arrogance the German management has shown during their operations here. Besides leaving the negotiating table without responding to the union’s propositions, the management distributed leaflets in English and German asking the workers to stop the strike because it would harm the company, provoking further lay-offs. For years the company has published similar requests in their company-bulletin “Focus”. “It’s as if we were under military occupation,” says Tiziano, a representative of the Fiom[2] union who has been working for ThyssenKrupp since 1997. Simone, member of Cisl[3] tells us: “During the negotiations Herr Henning from the company’s management assured us: ‘Believe me, I have already laid off 80.000 workers in my life.’” The nicest banner on the demo says: “Now you just need to release the people from Sabiona into freedom too!” (Sabiona is the local prison.)

Many young people work for ThyssenKrupp, all with precarious or training contracts[4] or through temporary work agencies. Until two weeks ago, Manuele also had a training contract in producing electrical steel. He started off working through a temporary work agency, then had short-term labor contracts, for one, two, sometimes four months. His supervisors used that against him: “Pay attention what you are doing! You don’t have a fixed labor contract, you can be sacked any time...!” With last year’s struggles, the workers won the right for limited contracts to change into unlimited ones. Manuele had never intended to work in the factory, but three years ago he couldn’t find a job as an architectural draftsman. The steel industry seemed to offer the only possibility for a regular, secure job in Terni. Already his grandfather had told him: “Nobody will sack you from the steel mill!” At first he couldn’t make his way around the factory: “It is like a city inside. My cousin and other colleagues helped me. At first, I wasn’t interested in politics and union activity and many other young people weren’t either, but now we are among the most active. The struggles over the last few weeks have changed us a lot.” He traveled to Strassburg with his small group of ThyssenKrupp-workers to protest in front of the European parliament. They call themselves “Movimento spontaneo operaio” (spontaneous workers’ movement), organizing themselves independently from the union. The money for the trip was collected during the demonstration and the soccer team provided the bus. He is active in the Fiom but thinks it’s important to have an independent organization outside the union.

His buddy Simone works in the bar instead. He is the only one at the table who has a fixed labor contract. He is pissed off with the workers from ThyssenKrupp: “You’re always struggling as if you were employed by a state-owned company. You allow the mayor to lull you

in his paternalistic way by saying: 'We will deal with that for you!' You think it's enough to have a union membership card to protect yourself against lay-offs. When will you understand that you're working for a multinational company and that you need to change your strategy of struggle?! Globalization, that is a powerful factor. Come on, Manuele, you still haven't caught on?!" Manuele shrugs his shoulders: "So what? Now I should struggle against globalization, or what?" I ask him if during the blockades he had the impression that the workers have power and can change things, or instead whether he had hoped that in the end the government would deal with the conflict. "Yes, I felt that we have power. By blocking the delivery of goods we really hurt Thyssen, but in the end the government will have the decisive role." He hopes that the conflicts at ThyssenKrupp might be the beginning of a regulation of the multinationals.

We drive to the pipe mill. The workers there have been blocking deliveries since 200 colleagues got a letter saying that their work wasn't needed because of the blockades and strikes. ThyssenKrupp tried playing the workers off against each other by treating them differently. Some were locked out, others forced into vacation or put on the Cassa Integrazione. It didn't work out. The pipe mill workers block the gates while solidarity strikes take place in other departments. The atmosphere outside the strike tent is tense: "This year nobody is interested in our struggle. What is happening here in Terni is an expression of the crisis of industry all over Italy. The government stays quiet because it doesn't know how to get the situation under control." "We have occupied the highway, the railway line. What else shall we do? Kidnap someone?" a worker shouts.

They talk about last year's storming of a collective bargaining meeting by some Thyssen-workers in which the cops only in the last moment prevented the workers from beating up the managing directors. "The struggle has its good side," says Tiziano, "we finally have a class consciousness again. Or maybe I should call it a workers' consciousness because not all in here are comrades. We are conscious of the fact that we keep the country running and that we should be treated with respect." He and his colleagues don't agree that they would be nothing but a drop in the ocean. "We aren't powerless. Our company supplies 35 percent of the exhaust pipes for the European car industry." He thinks that in the end ThyssenKrupp will shift the whole production from Terni to China[5] and India.

Already ThyssenKrupp has some plants, for instance, in Nashik (India) with a production of 200.000 tons of steel per year, three quarters of which is electrical steel.[6] Asked what they will do next they answer, laughing: "Drop our lovers. We don't have any money anymore!" One tells us that he is really worried: "I have

two kids, my wife doesn't work... in these weeks on strike alone, I've lost a whole months wage."

ThyssenKrupp isn't the only company re-locating its production. A young worker working in the chemical department of the Alcantara textile factory, (a Japanese multinational) comes and talks to us. For many months, he and his colleagues have already on the Cassa Integrazione. Nobody talks about that. One reason is that there were no reactions from the side of his colleagues after the lay-offs. "That is the shocking thing: Nobody protested!" Half of the workers in his company are young people, the others have already worked there for twenty to thirty years. They often had problems. "The old ones told us youngsters we wouldn't have any say because we had no experience. Many had this scab-mentality..." He isn't in the union. He thinks there should be a base union in Terni. In the manufacturing industry the Cobas[7] aren't that strong; in Terni they're non-existent. The fact that he isn't a union-member has often brought him disadvantages. "When you start an argument with them the union gives you a hard time."

Two days later, on February 23rd, during a big assembly outside the company-gates the workers decide to keep the blockades up. The union leadership stands behind the striking workers; the government expresses its sympathy for ThyssenKrupp. Four days later ThyssenKrupp and the unions negotiate a contract saying that the production of electrical steel will definitely be shifted from Terni to Germany and France. The 360 workers will be sent to different other departments; employment levels will be kept the same till 2009. Manuele now works in the department where the steel is shipped. His colleagues are all over the place. It seems that in the end the company wanted to exercise its power by deliberately sending people to departments where they didn't want to work.

During an assembly, thirty percent of the workers vote against the contract. Some weeks later, Manuele tells me about the last days of the conflict. "I ask myself: Where have these 690 workers been who voted against the contract during the last few days? Sometimes we had to keep up the blockade with five people during the night, and, while the negotiations went on, there were just 350 outside protesting. And after several hours only ten people were left." During the vote he abstained: "I could see that we weren't strong enough anymore. If we had continued we would have lost anyway. In the end the workers were exhausted. ThyssenKrupp had counted on that. Even now most workers shrug their shoulders." But the whole conflict has completely changed him. "When it became clear that ThyssenKrupp would close the electrical steel department I expected an outbreak of protest. I expected the workers would realize that this was only the open-

ing shot, that soon maybe everything would close here. But my colleagues didn't look ahead that far. They were afraid that through the strike they would loose even more money. They wanted a deal." There haven't been any strikes at ThyssenKrupp in Terni for ten years and many had counted on the support of the government. But there was no such support, nor from the (Social Democratic) opposition either. Manuele still doubts that if majority of his co-workers have really understood that the times have changed and that they are dealing with a multinational company now.

"They union has made mistakes too," says Manuele, "because there were moments when hundreds of workers came together to occupy the railway lines. And the union blocked that saying strategically that it wouldn't be the right thing to do." Much energy was wasted. The small group of workers from the "Movimento spontaneo operaio" are drawing the lessons from these experiences. They are discussing how in the future they - as an independent group - can confront the expected further attacks by ThyssenKrupp, together with their work mates. For they know that the company's promises to maintain current employment levels till 2009 can't be trusted and more attempts to aggravate conditions can be expected. And in the Centro Sociale[8] in Terni they are talking with workers from other sectors and work places about how they can stay active despite threats by union officials.

Footnotes

- [1] Cassa Integrazione: A state-run program that compensates for the wage payments; big companies can ask for short-time work with zero hours and the state pays for a limited time a part of the wage.
- [2] FIOM: Federazione impiegati operai metallurgici, metal workers union, part of the biggest union federation CGIL, Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro, that stands near the social democrats.
- [3] CISL: Confederazione Italiana Sindacati dei Lavoratori, another smaller social democratic union federation.
- [4] Training contracts: CFL, Contratti di Formazione Lavoro, allow the temporary hiring of young workers for low wages. In most cases the "training" just happens on paper. Some workers have worked with successive CFLs for the same company for up to 10 years.
- [5] The plant in Shanghai is still in construction, with the participation of workers from Terni. Allegedly in one and a half years it will produce 320.000 tons of steel per year.
- [6] An article in the Italian newspaper "Il Manifesto" from March, 22nd, 2005 describes the conditions in the ThyssenKrupp-plant in the district of Nashik in the state of Maharashtra/India. There is only a com-

parably small steel mill with just one computerized and automated production line. The plant was built in the mid-nineties and produces about 200.000 tons of steel, two thirds of which is electrical steel. It employs 720 people, 320 production workers and 280 technicians. Ninety per cent of the workforce are from the region. The average wage is about 9500 Rupies (about 175 Euros). Most workers come from peasant families and still have their lot for growing food. Many workers have working in the plant for years because the wage is relatively high for the region and they have the chance to get a pension when they are old.

- [7] Cobas: Confederazione dei Comitati di Base, one of the associations of the Italian base unions.
- [8] Centro Sociale: In Italy the name for independent centers, where groups from the left hold meetings, organize events etc.

spanish harvest

Olive Vibrators, Road Blocks and Striking Gypsies

January 2005. It has been five years since the racist uprisings against the Moroccan workers in the harvest in El Ejido. Since then there has been loads of stuff written about the shitty working and living conditions of the immigrant work force in the food industry in south Spain. In this article therefore, there is only a short overview of the situation today, in order to then report on how one village in the olive region was shaken by a month long strike of day labourers in January 2005. This year many more immigrants have come to this region to work, even though the harvest has been smaller compared to previous years due to the colder weather. At the same time there has been confrontations and strikes by the permanently resident workers because of the increased use of harvest machinery, that undermines their piece work rate and puts their seasonal workplaces in danger. Unions, the state and the bosses try to make these conflicts merely economic, e.g. by getting in writing a minimum price for one kilo harvested using machines in the work contract. At the same time two laws are planned which would change the conditions for the workers: the agricultural subsidies will be reformed, which would also affect the unemployment benefits of the seasonal workers, and the immigration laws will be reformed and only some of the migrants had been promised leave to remain, thereby creating a new level of hierarchy within the labour market. At the end of January there were some large demonstrations by migrants against these reforms.

The Industrial Agricultural Production

The two main sectors in south Spain that characterise the whole society are tourism and agriculture. The distribution of the sparse water reserves, the planned water restrictions and diversions are the basis of a great number of conflicts. In the 2004/05 olive harvest it was clear that the sector itself was a drain on the water supply; the harvest dropped by about a quarter due to the water shortage. The agricultural production is a driving factor in the rapid urbanisation of the land. In the last ten years the amount of land concreted or tarred over has risen by 20 percent - more than double as fast as in the rest of Europe, made up of the hotels and holiday complexes and above all the migration to the cities.

What agriculture there is becoming increasingly mono-cultural. In the region around Jaen one cannot see the ground for all the olive trees, about 50 million of them supply 20 percent of the world's olive oil. The Region around Huelva is, after the USA, the second largest strawberry producer in the world and in 2001 employed about 55,000 people, amongst them about 10,000 immigrant workers. The sector is strongly monopolised, about 95 percent of the companies belong to the group 'Freshhuelva'. The Andalusian branch of the agricultural workers union, the SOC, claims that half the total farmed land belongs to about two percent of the land owners and they refer to conditions similar to those in Latin American. As well as the production, the trade is also very monopolised: about three quarters of the harvest is traded by the European large traders; the seedlings come mostly from the Californian agricultural industry; pesticides and the plastic sheets are supplied by a few large firms. One also finds the tendency towards relocation and outsourcing in the agricultural industry: about 80 percent of the 800 strawberry plantations in Morocco are owned by companies from Huelva. In the region around Huelva the size of land taken up with strawberries has shrunk by around 30 percent in the last five years, which does not mean that 30 percent less strawberries were harvested. One main reason for this shift in location are the wage costs; in the strawberry harvest this counts for about 70 percent of the costs.

The plastic sheeting of the green houses or poly tunnels stretch over hundreds of square kilometres, interrupted here and there by factories for packing and further preparation, by workshops for the farming machinery and by the large distribution stations of the freight transport. The olive trees are planted in rows for the use of harvest tractors and vibrating machines, every ten kilometres there are large building complexes of the olive presses. As in every industry the use of machines is dependant on the product, but even more than this on the price of the labour force. But we can

say that in the olive harvest the use of harvest machines (the so-called vibrators) is increasing and putting the workers under pressure.

The Immigrants

The last olive harvest would not have been possible with the work of about 8000 migrants. The Spanish officials are constantly playing this off against the fact that there are 22,000 Spanish people registered as unemployed in this region and using this as a reason for Agrarian reform (see below). It is hard to say how many migrants really work in the Spanish agricultural sector. Many are working without official contracts, the CC.OO union says about 30 percent. The figures usually only refer to a specific harvest, but the workers often move with the harvests. The composition has changed in the last two or three years. After the conflicts and strikes by the workers from Maghreb there have been more people employed from eastern Europe. According to the figures published by the SOC for the Huelva region (strawberries) there were 7000 people from eastern Europe working with contracts in 2002 and by 2004 this figure had risen to 20,000. The SOC talk of an average of 15 paid work days every month. Because of this the queues at the NGO food distribution centres grow ever longer. The SOC also registers that fact that the many migrants in the area have lead to an acute rise in the prices of daily necessities and rent, which also affects the permanently resident population. The bosses get around the law forbidding piece work contracts by, for example, setting 200 kg of strawberries per day as a standard amount and threatening dismissal for those who drop below this. The Rumanian workers tell of random harassment: during the hiring process the boss selected 200 of the 500 applicants, took away all their papers (work permits, visas, medical certificates), which they had paid about 300 Euros for, mostly on credit, forbid contact between men and women on the farm, controlled the alcohol and regulated bedtimes.

By the beginning of December 2004, i.e. before the beginning of the olive harvest, there were about 5000 migrants in the region. Many were homeless, living in derelict houses or on the street. The hostels were only permitted to open at the beginning of the harvest, so as to avoid strengthening the 'attraction effect'. Under pressure by the charity organisations and the unions they began to take people in during December. But there were in any case only 650 places. In the press there were reports of many evictions of 'illegal flats [settlements]' of Romanian workers.

Many of those looking for work came from Sub-Saharan African countries such as Ghana and Senegal. Even if they do get the minimum wage they can only

hope for two months work, about 6 or 7 hours a day, 39 Euros a day. The SOC reports many cases of 12 hour days for 20 Euros a day.

The Immigrant Laws

On particular statistic published in January 2005 shows the growing significance of migrants, not only in agriculture, but in the whole Spanish labour market: around 34 percent of all new workplaces in the first nine months of 2003 were filled by migrants, in total they make up 4.9 percent of the total workforce. Most of these workplaces were temporary and/or through employment agencies. The migrants mainly come from Morocco and Latin America. Since the 'regulation of residency' in January 2005, those who were registered with the authorities before August 2004 and can produce a work contract of over six months become legalised. In the agriculture, gastronomy and hotel sectors a three month contract is more normal. The workers do not apply for their own work and residents permits, the companies do it for them. The government starts from a figure of about 800,000 migrants whose residency could be 'legalised' - from a figure of a total of 1.1 million 'irregular' residences (which does not include the illegal immigrants). On the 17 January the press published pictures of 'thousands of migrants' who slept outside the consulate to apply for the necessary papers (including the criminal record register). On the 7 February 2005, the first day of the 'regulation', the companies had submitted requests for residents permits for about 1500 migrants, most of which were disallowed due to missing documents, in Malaga 80 percent!

On the 23 of January there was an amazing demonstration in Almeria against the rehashed migrant laws and for papers for everyone. About 3000 to 4000 people were at the demo, two thirds of them sub-Saharan African (and a handful of Spanish), the rest from north Africa, about 99.9 percent young men. There was an umbrella organisation 'for unity', the SOC and the CGT, but apart from usual sticker and placard distribution there did not really have anything to say. The demand was clear and was presented in various slogans and chants: 'papers for everyone, without limitations or preconditions!'. The demo passed without incident, there was a lot of emphasis on forming chains, and every two hundred meters we sat down on the road. One precondition for the papers seemed to remain, or at least there was the slogan that a passport should be sufficient.

The Agrarian Reforms

The agrarian reforms operate within the subsidies rules of the EU and attempt to solve an astounding contradiction: The rural population is declining, the

number of registered unemployed agricultural workers is growing rapidly, at the same time it is getting harder to find Spanish workers for the harvest. Additionally, the period of payments of unemployment benefits is supposed to be linked to the number of days worked per year (previously one received six months money regardless of whether one had worked 35 days or 180 days in the year).

Under the Conservative government, the Socialist Party had taken part in the protests in 2002 against the reform, possibly because many of their strongholds had lost their subsidies. Then in January 2003 the CC.OO and the UGT joined with the government with a proposal that made the preconditions for receiving unemployment benefits even stricter and made it almost impossible for workers under 25 to actually receive it.

The Socialist Party, who came to power in March 2004, only made a few negligible changes to the reforms and did not retract the entire reform, as they had promised. According to SOC the young workers have the most problems to get the number of required work days together and so are often reliant on social aid. At the moment this lies somewhere between 75 and 100 percent of the minimum wage, about 400 to 500 Euros per month. The companies estimate the number of people receiving this social aid at about 120,000 in Andalusia. The SOC says it is 65,000, of whom about 40,000 work in other regions during the harvest.

Although SOC is seen as 'immigrant friendly' compared to the 'anti-immigrant-approach' of the majority unions (CC.OO and UGT), their official politics looks a bit different. In November 2004 the SOC general secretary suggested the establishment of a so-called 'local employment commission' that would then regulate the work force requirements. In this only registered workers would be able to get work, which would exclude thousands of illegal proletarians. He also explained himself clearly as being in agreement that "a worker who refused an offer of work in his region would lose his unemployment benefit". (from: ABC Sevilla, 25/11/2004). Who ever promises to protect their members from having their work conditions undermined by migrants, of course has to also insure that these members will go to work for those same bad work conditions. Furthermore is the open threat against the many southern Spaniards who work in the harvests and the industries of the north, while claiming unemployment benefit in the South! On the other hand the SOC are giving the call-out for the action on the 28 January 2005 against the reform...

The Strike

Bujalance is a village with 8000 inhabitants on the county road between Jaen and Cordoba. There is no tourism, no sight-seeing attractions, but there are a

great many olives. In the main square hang two banners; one saying "keep going, Manolo! Bujalance loves you!". The day labourers of the olive harvest are on strike, Manolo is the local boss of the CC.OO union and at the moment on hunger strike. The other banner is from the companies and calls for the protection of the only source of tax revenue of the village, the olives. Since 21 December 2004 there have been about 600 to 1000 strikers meeting daily in order to get up to date with the current situation and decide on further courses of action. They are on strike for two main reasons: the increasing mechanisations is destroying their piece work rate and because 200 of them have been sacked due to new subcontracting rules. According to the work contract the rate for a hand picked kilo of olives should be more than the rate for a kilo shaken off by a vibrator, but in practice that is seldom adhered to. The CC.OO demand in writing a minimum price for the vibrator harvested olives. The fact that they are striking in the middle of a world market oil production region, that they are the target of one of the EU wide agricultural reforms and that according to the media are surrounded by thousands of roaming and job-seeking migrants does not seem to be making a big impression on the striking Bujalancers.

Chronology

21 December 2004: The strike began after a gathering of about 600 seasonal workers, which was called for by the CC.OO and the UGT. The bosses declared the strike illegal, because the work contract was still valid until January 2005.

8 January 2005: The press report an increasingly heated atmosphere in the village. The CC.OO threaten a general strike in Bujalance. About 800 Seasonal workers take part in an assembly.

12 January 2005: There is a general strike in Bujalance. The bosses say that 20 percent took part, the CC.OO say 40 percent and some newspapers say 70 percent. The CC.OO emphasised the participation of the construction sector, particularly the bricklayers. Many of the supermarkets stayed open, teachers went to school, but only half the school children. At this point the companies declared that only 10 percent of the harvest would be gathered in Bujalance.

15 January 2005: Manolo Ramirez starts his hunger strike.

16 January 2005: In many fields, about 50 percent of the harvest was already going off. The trees were not pruned, which would also reduce the total for the following harvest. According to El Pais about 700 bosses, owners of large olive farms and business people demonstrated. The local press puts the count at 400. The claim that they have been threatened by the strikers, that those willing to work are being stopped from do-

ing so, etc. Where there is work going on the olive trees are being ripped out of the ground and the local small firms and businesses have to fear boycotts if they open their businesses. The unionists deny, but some strikers confirm, that they would take their children out of school, if the companies do not give in. The newspapers report that there were leaflets circulated after the general strike in the village denouncing the strike-breaking shops.

17 January 2005: About 100 to 150 young striking Bujalancers occupy the church and churchyard night and day, with the agreement of the priest, in solidarity with the hunger striking unionist.

18 January 2005: The amount of Guardia Civil (military police) in the village has increased three-fold. They protect the small farmers who have decided to continue working on the fields. They leave the village together from the largest co-operative Jesus Nazarero. The large employers declare that they are looking for workers from other regions where the harvest has already ended, The mayor however, demands that they should look for their labour force from within the region, as it states in the work contracts. The union leader threatens intensified actions if a workforce is drafted in from outside.

19 January 2005: About 1000 strikers come to the assembly, where there was no voting or debate. Ramirez declared the end of the church occupation and called for an assembly the next day to be held at the market place, rather than outside the strike breaking co-operative. After the assembly the nearby county road was occupied for about an hour.

21 January 2005: Manolo Ramirez lets it be known that the CC.OO has negotiated a contract: "This is a positive conclusion, not the one that we wanted, but one that can end this conflict". Part of this contract is a minimum price for the use of the shaking machine of 13 or 14 cents per kilo. He also emphasised the common work contract, in which the labour force should be employed from the village where possible. Manolo called for the workers to vote for the end to the strike, "so that there is once again peace in the village".

22 January 2005: About 1000 day labourers vote for the end of the strike. There are still some unqualified questions about the contract and it is not stated whether the 200 sacked workers will be reinstated.

Personal Impressions from the 19 and 20 January 2005

On the country roads for a 15 km stretch around Bujalance one sees only one tractor and four people working on the fields. Apart from that one sees quite a few small trucks with three or four passengers inside - seeming to be on the lookout. Actually one does not need to keep an eye out for scabs in all the fields, it

is enough to watch the olive presses, industrial plants for the production of olive oil. The work begins and ends there. Of the six presses that I saw in the region, only the smallest was operating. The largest was being watched by the Guardia Civil. It was from here that the small farmers left for work on the 18 January.

In the evening around 1000 people, all Spanish or Gitanos (Spanish Gypsies), many older people and pushchairs, about as many women as men, they seemed to be rather subproletarian than small farmers, many tracksuit bottoms and body warmers, amazingly small people, the atmosphere is familiar and neighbourly. One bloke explained to me that the work contract, i.e. the piece work rate agreement was only valid for this district, in Cordoba, 20 km away there is a different contract. Then Manolo, the hunger striking CC.OO functionary, spoke. He spoke from the first floor of the town hall and you could not see him. Perhaps this was for some technical reason, but in any case it was a bit weird. First of all he thanked the young people for their role in holding out in the church and churchyard for a few days and nights. The young people themselves came out and received applause. In his second sentence he declared the church action over, but it is not clear why and how it was decided. He thanked everyone for the disciplined and pacifist behaviour during the protests and emphasised, three times, that it should stay pacifist. He said that he would go to Cordoba the next day to negotiate, and he hoped there would be a resolution, although he felt weak because of the hunger strike. As a sign of his willingness to negotiate he also changed the location of the next morning's assembly: not in front of the large co-operative from where the scabs have been leaving for work, as planned, but in front of the town hall again. There was no reaction to this news. At the end his voice became once again militant and forceful and he called on us to hold a demo with him to the main country road and block it. He came out of the town hall and spoke with the only two Guardia Civil police there. On the way to the main road there were no police in sight. All 1000 people went onto the road and every HGV stuck in the resulting traffic jam got an 'Olé'. This went on for about an hour, nothing really remarkable happened, it got louder at one point when a tractor and trailer appeared at the end of the traffic jam. On the following morning the people met as decreed, not in front of the scabbing Co-operative, but in front of the town hall. So in from the Co-operative loads of jeeps and tractors drove away unhindered, while about 500 people stood around in the cold outside the town hall at nine am, even though the negotiations in Cordoba were not due to start until ten o'clock. Most of them passed the time by reading the paper, there was a double page spread about the street blockade of the day before. There was nothing new in

the article, apart from the information that the bosses were convinced that the demo would be going to the Co-operative and had themselves gathered on the site of the oil presses. One bloke said that although it was officially about the piece work rate, actually the real problem was the use of machines, eventually half of the workforce would be disbanded. Along with this came the migrant question. In Bujalance there were hardly any migrants working, in Jaen or Cordoba however, there are quite a lot, and for half the wages. By eleven there was still no statement or news from Cordoba and the first people began to leave.

I found it interesting that 'Spaniards' and 'Gypsies' had gone on strike together. Otherwise and under different circumstances the situation is quite tense: On the 16 January 2005, i.e. during the strike, there was a demo in Cortagana (5000 inhabitants, further south-west into Andalusia) 'for security', after the arrest of two gypsies accused of the murder of a disabled person. About 2000 people took part. At the end of the Demo about 1000 people marched to the gypsy quarter of the town and smashed up cars and houses and threatened people.

Note:

More reports on violence during strikes in Spain from January 2005:

- * The public prosecutor demands a total of eight years prison for four bus drivers who in March 2003 in the Vizcaya region shot with catapults at busses that were empty except for the driver during a strike.
- * Despite the sentencing of a few Basque bus drivers for damage to property they continued with their acts of sabotage: The large company Arriva stated that during a strike near Corunia about 25 busses could not drive due to flat tires.
- * At the beginning of February the roadside recovery services for abandoned or crashed vehicles were on strike. In Valencia a scabbing tow crane was dismantled.

update.chat

Right from the first day of the conflict several dozen farmers and employers from Bujalance discussed the different aspects of the strike online. They complained about the red tape of the Socialist Party, which they accused of buying votes by securing splendid dole money for the mob. They ranted on about the lack of restraint of the seasonal workers, who don't cling on to the olive trees like themselves. They moaned about the lack of solidarity shown by other landowners, about the technological backwardness of Bujalance and about the communist/fascist terror of the

union. The following is a summary of their debate. The original can be found on: <http://www.infolivo.com/cgi-bin/mina.cgi?mina=c7596R35>

Kulak Chat-Room

- * I have about 800 olive trees and there is no way that I could bring in the harvest. What does this CC.OO guy think that he is doing? Leaving the workers without a wage for a year? Who will bother to contract them after the strike?
- * I often find myself amused by this village which exists for about 40 years now separated from civilisation under the rule of the PSOE. I will bring in the harvest, even if it is side by side with the Guardia Civil, that I swear.
- * This is what fucking annoys me in this web-forum, a lot of creeds, but what about the strike? No bloody clue? You buggers from Bujalance, I know that you still don't use olive vibrators, but you must at least have computers. Just tell us what's happening. I was told on the phone that trees which are ripe for the harvest can be picked, is that true?
- * I feel shame for this village. Where are the balls that it used to have? Why do we allow such a son of a bitch to ruin the village, how long are we supposed to be trapped in the past? All the villages in the region are developing, only Bujalance isn't. Let's kick Manolo out of the village and his followers will go with him as well.
- * Fascist!
- * Red Bastard!
- * Long live the strike! Hey you, who just said that you will bring in your harvest, we will cut your damned two little olives!
- * Today I was trapped three quarters of an hour in the traffic jam, simply because of the fucking road block of the day labourers. They should block the fucking roads of their whore mothers.
- * Manolo has a tidy wage from the CC.OO, he wants to enter politics, if he succeeds he won't give a damn about the day labourers.
- * That's right, there are the regional CC.OO elections soon.
- * How is it possible that this fascist and his four followers are able to force a whole village to its knees? Because of the pickets and their threats. Anyone who goes to work will get his face smashed, the car demolished, the trees cut or the tractor burned. Fascism in its purest form.
- * I know Mr. Ramirez [Manolo] personally, he even defends violent Basques.
- * I would really like to invent an automatic harvest machine and send them all to hell.
- * What about the collective contract? Did they agree yet? I don't know what to do with my gang, they already picked in Montoro und they are supposed to go to Bujalance tomorrow.
- * Most of the workers aren't even members of the CC.OO. These are the only two month that they have to work anyway and now they use the opportunity and go on strike.
- * Even the bigger companies seem to get nervous, the strike is dragging on despite their threat not to hire people for the whole rest of the year.
- * They don't get nervous. They won't hire anyone from Bujalance for the next ten years, then you will see who will get nervous. They will eat stones with eggs.
- * Today Manolo started his hunger strike, now he wants to turn himself into a victim. Also today some small peasants went to work on the fields. We have to support them.
- * Manolo cannot go on hunger strike, he is diabetic.
- * Bloody fascists, your whore mothers went to the fields, as well, but at night time and that's why you came into the world. Leave Manolo alone!
- * Shut up, the 40s are over.
- * Who of you in this forum has got a Cirafelli? Is this machine any good? I think of getting myself one. Thanks.
- * History repeats itself. In 1975 the olives from Bujalance achieved the highest prices, that was before Manolo's friend became mayor. He brought in all gypsies from the region and everything went down the drain. In the oldern days about 24,000 people lived here, now only 8,000.
- * Also Mr. Ramirez knows very well how to get the gypsies behind him and the gypsies are allowed to do what ever they want.
- * The Romanians should come to Bujalance, then the day labourers in Bujalance wouldn't be spoilt with wages like 15,000 to 20,000 Pesetas a day anymore.
- * On all strike days, even during the general strike, most of the workers from Bujalance went working in other villages and we are not allowed to harvest our four olive trees which bear the income of the whole year. They should be ashamed.
- * Exactly. And by the way, do you know how many of your workers have cash-in-hand jobs on construction sites while still cashing dole money?!
- * And Ghandi Manolo Ramirez asks workers to renovate his house without having a planning permission. Who is talking about workers' rights?!
- * I don't understand why you all get so wound up, here in Bujalance nothing happens at all, no one starves to death, everyone stuffs their bellies with bread and beer, with the latter in particular, most of the strikers only work two month and the rest of the year they live on the four or five unemployment benefits coming in for each family.

- * That's how they have always lived, of olives and on the dole. This year they will only have the dole money.
- * The second mayor of Bujalance, Mrs. Antonia Cabanillas proposes a 'restructuring of Bujalances agricultur', she demands we should undertake 'an effort like the one of the shipyard workers of Izar', but what the hell do we know of ship-building? Phantastic ideas, qualification programs, new industries and all, but how are we supposed to make a living today and tomorrow?
- * Cheers, I am 40 years old, a real Bujalancero and I still cannot understand how fucking daft one can be in this village.

Towards the end things got nastier, a lot of gypsy and communist blood was supposed to be shed, some wanted to pass the head around for a professional killer in order to shoot Manolo from the town hall's balcony, others made appointments for duels or wanted to re-use the mass graves of the Civil War.

strikes in france

This text was sent by a comrade from 'Echanges et Mouvement', Paris. Check out the Echanges-website: [http://www.mondialisme.org/rubrique.php3?id_rubrique=3]

Citroën factory strike and others

The world car market - and, of course, the European market - is saturated. It is one of the main economic activities of the modern capitalist world, closely connected to the oil world market. Its fluctuations have for ages influenced the national economies and the social conflicts but have also involved a fierce competition in the conquest of new markets. The result is twofold; on one hand a concentration of the car companies and the disappearance of the weakest ones (the closure of the Rover factory in the UK or the difficulties of Fiat in Italy are among the most recent examples), on the other hand, the internal restructuring. This restructuring can take the brutal form of heavy staff cuts (looking at the recent past we could produce a long list of these collective dismissals in either definite factory closures as in Renault Vilvorde-Belgium in 1997 or as in downsizing, also fairly important as we could see recently in Germany with the Opel-General Motors factories). But recently we have also seen this restructuring take the form of sub-contracting important parts of the production process or of the management (often owned by the main company) with or without the transfer of workers, but without the benefits and guarantees of the main company.

Change in Work Organisation

All these transformations have been taking place for years, along with radical transformations in the work organisation of the production process, connected to what is called 'just in time' production, which means the total elimination of stocks i.e. of any immobilisation of capital. What was new in the extent of these new methods was that they were implemented not only on the assembly line of the main factory (they were previously often reduced to this line) but to all the sub contractors. These sub contractors not only had to provide the required parts at a regular pace 'in time', but also had to assemble complex sets of parts, to do the research concerning this production and to deal with the logistics concerning their production. Practically, this included being obliged to settle close to the main assembly factory, often inside the factory. From the point of view of the class struggle, the fact that most of the workers participating in this puzzle were divided in small units of production, each having a distinct legal status and different conditions of work, creates independent fragments, even if the total workforce involved in this production was effectively submitted to the pace of the assembly line i.e. to the market imperatives.

As the concept of the division of work and/or the assembly line had produced the ideological and social concept of 'fordism' which meant a global vision of the workers life (with a certain level of consumption) linked to the organisation of work inside the factory (aiming at a mass production for a generalised minimal consumption), the various restructurings of the car industry we have just explained have considerably modified the living conditions of the car workers, inside and outside of the factory. On one hand, redundancies and the transfer to the subcontractors with the loss of all the guarantees of collective contracts have created a total insecurity about job employment and wages, on the other hand the new methods of production have imposed on the workers the same constraints imposed on the production of parts and raw material to be assembled on the line in a finished product: everything that had the social aims of providing mass consumption goods is still working, but is now increasingly in total contradiction with the increasing pressure on the workers to extract more and more surplus value from their work.

Zero stock of parts and raw material, zero stock of the work force. Following the example of many other industries, the cost of production has to be reduced as much as possible, not only through the classic pressure on wages but also through a perfect matching of the working time and of the market fluctuations (so as to avoid repeatedly building up stocks of finished

cars and thereby the immobilisation of capital and to answer as quickly as possible to the flexibility of the customers orders for a large range of models imposed by the competition). The consequence for the workforce was the development, over the past twenty years, of a wide range of various 'models' of working contracts: temporary work through agencies, short time contracts and also a practice of what was called 'technical temporary unemployment'. In a certain way all car contractors need a core of permanent trained professionals and this temporary technical lay off solved the problem of adapting as tightly as possible the required production to the need for the workers to be working without 'dead time'. In a certain way, the balance of struggle obliged the companies to pay for these temporary days not worked but at a reduced rate. Doing so, they avoided social conflicts, got what they wanted (no stock of cars) and got a labour force ready to work with full competence and at full speed when required. Renault and PSA in France had such a system and recently these two car companies have planned such days off from March 2005, up to 2007 to reduce the cars stocks.

We could find such systems in all the industrialised countries but France had gone for another system for productivity per worker and per hour by implementing what was called the 'Aubry laws' (from the name of the then social democrat ministry of labour [see also the leaflet on this in this newsletter]). This is a collection of complex measures known here with the name 'Reduction du Temps de Travail' - RTT (reduction of the working time) or with the other name 'the 35 hours' (weekly). Behind the ideological propaganda of the '35 hours of work' these laws were profitable for the French capitalist economy because it allows all branches of the economy to adapt perfectly the effective work to the production needs, meaning an almost total flexibility of the effective working time (the average weekly working time was calculated on the year and the management had the possibility to extend or to reduce the weekly time according to its needs). The actual aim of the reform was effectively achieved, as it was recognised that French capital can be glorified to have the highest productivity per worker per hour. The 'RTT' was a very useful complement to the 'technical lay off' days. Every factory could use a wide range of different measures concerning the working time which means a high degree of flexibility in the exploitation of work in such a way as to practically eliminate the 'dead time'. One can agree that it is this wide range of possible flexible time which, in the recent period allowed the French car companies to escape the difficulties and social conflicts having plagued their European competitors, German, Italian and British.

The Problem of Wages

But another question was connected to this question of flexibility and was part of the high rate of productivity: wages. The management had gained both ways: after some strikes and collective agreements about the '35 hours', not only wages had been frozen for several years and with the annualisation of the working time, overtime had been eliminated in most cases. But, on the other hand this freezing of wages was part of a general offensive of capital to use the economic crisis and the threat of unemployment to impose a progressive decline of the standard of living. The slow but constant rise of wages ended in 1977 but the effects on the living conditions were only felt in 1982 with the rise of unemployment and a reform of the unemployment benefit system which made unemployment far less attractive than before. Furthermore, over these twenty years, the gap between gross and net wages had not stopped increasing and evidently it was the low and middle level wage earners who were the most affected: the rate of this levy on wages has gone up from 6 percent in 1950 up to 21,1 percent in 2000 (and even more today). Considering only the period 1984-1996, official figures show a 58 percent rise of prices and only a 7.2 percent rise of the average wage (according to some union figures these rates were even more apart, a rise of 94 percent for the prices and a decline of 12.4 percent for the wages). The freeze of the wages mentioned above for the recent period 1996-2004 has only increased this gap between wages and prices, as a consequence of the 'Aubry laws', of the steady rise of unemployment and of illegal immigration (and legal migration too inside the EU).

Considering this matter of wages and prices, the pressure of unemployment to calm the eventual claims about wages, and the fact that the wages are presently just enough to cope for a minimal living, any measure aiming at lowering the monthly wage was somewhat explosive. Even in branches such as the car industry, where these problems had been apparently settled. It is not by chance that the most active in the Citroën strike were young workers: they are the most severely hit by financial problems, especially when looking for accommodation, considering the intense speculation in this matter. Only a small decline of a monthly more or less stable income will break the fragile balance of the family budget. Then, it will not be a direct claim for wage rises, but the warning that on this matter a kind of bottom limit has been reached and that in a certain way, workers have been driven into struggle.

Strike at Citroën plant

The Peugeot-Citroën factory in Aulnay-sous-Bois (a north-east Paris suburb) now is the only car factory in

Paris or a close suburb, but does not have the same symbolic value the now disappeared Renault factory in Billancourt (also close to Paris) had. In this factory out of 5,000 workers 3,800 worked on the production of the models C2 and C3, together with 500 temporary workers. The average monthly wage for a worker is between 1,100 and 1,000 Euros, not that much more than the compulsory minimum wage (SMIC [Salaire minimum interprofessionnel de croissance]). The usual quota of production has been recently modified from 6,000 cars per week, or 1,200 a day in 5 working days. Management asked for 1,500 cars on 4 days with a technical day off the Friday, which means extra work for each post on the line. The company interest was evident: as it turned out, for a Friday off just 60 percent of the normal day wage are being paid, so the same production is achieved but with one day 40 percent less payment.

In 2004, the world and European car market has not improved at all. The sales of the two French car builders PSA and Renault dropped by 3.3 percent and 1.1 percent respectively. Figures already estimated that the European car factories were running at 77 percent of their capacity of production in 2003 (Renault and PSA were amongst the best, running at 83 percent and 89 percent of their capacity respectively). It is impossible in such an article to analyse the strategy and tactics of these multinationals of the car industry, which could play on quite a lot of various factors never completely disclosed (for instance what will be the function of the factory built by PSA in Slovakia or the possible transfer of the production of the C3 to the Madrid factory). All these facts could be considered to explain the decision of the management of the Aulnay-sous-Bois factory to impose 30 'technical days off' in 2005, 8 in March, 4 in April, 8 in May, and more during the year and some others in 2006. As we have said above, the pay for these days off is 60 percent of the normal wage up to 150 hours and 65 percent beyond. For a worker earning a monthly average of 1.200 Euros the loss of wage, for March alone, would be 175 Euros for a day shift and 250 Euros for a night shift, which means a cut of wages between 15 and 20 percent.

The Aulnay factory, as most of the big car factories, has been organised in such a way that most of the subcontractors are producing close to the assembly line in order to provide a constant delivery of parts. Around this factory we can find quite a lot of these subcontractors, most of them owned by PSA but legally apart: Trigo (control of the parts), Valeo (electrical connections), Energie (fuel tanks), Harvin (exhaust pipes), Gifco (logistics), Magneto (drop forge), ENCI (cleaning), Tais (collecting metal refuse), Avenance (meals in the canteen), etc..

These subcontractors have to follow the same organi-

sation of work as the assembly line factory but they do not have to give their workers the advantages of the collective contract of PSA. They are also under pressure to reduce their costs because their client (the main factory) gives its orders to the best offer. Because of this pressure, the subcontractors' workers have to work under worse conditions for lower wages.

In the recent period quite a lot of conflicts have taken place at most of these subcontractors. In 2004-2005 we can quote:

- * a strike on the 24th of May 2004 at ENCI which lasted five days, with demonstrations at the gates; the strikers got a 13th wage/year and the strike days paid (they work solely at night for 1,200 Euros a month);
- * a strike at Trigo on the 7th of June 2004, and at the same time at Valeo and Avenance for wages;
- * a strike at Tais on the 22th of February 2005 where 30 workers got a bonus for quality raised from 20 up to 70 Euros a month, 100 percent for the 'technical days off' and for the strike days;
- * on the other hand there is an on-going conflict over a declaration of the management at the end of February 2005, that 268 professional workers would have to go, as there were still 500 temporary workers in the factory. More recently a group of 27 old Moroccan workers were denied the right to take early retirement and they have to go to the court to have their fate fixed.

There is no doubt that these conflicts and their result had some influence on what happened next. As soon as the plan for the 'technical days off' was unveiled at a factory committee on the Wednesday morning, 2nd of March, a bunch of 17 young workers (some sources say only six) started the strike. The different sources of information do not give many clues about the beginning of the strike. Some say it started on Wednesday afternoon, others the following day, Thursday, 3rd of March. They also name different locations or workshop where the strike started to spread to other departments. Some say on the line making seats, others on some section of the assembly line. What is sure anyway is that the strike started spontaneously over a claim to get full pay for the 'technical days off' imposed by the management. What is also sure is that they succeeded in extending their strike at first to the 250 workers of their department (out of 350), but that they failed to spread the strike to the other departments of the factory. Anyway, the changes of shift (afternoon and night) did not change the situation: within its limits, the strike was still strong. The top manager asked for a meeting with delegates of this department on strike, the strikers asked him to come and to discuss openly with all of them, what he refused to do.

Friday, 4th of March, was a day off (a managerial

trick, as we have explained above). Perhaps the management hoped that the strike would be over after the long week-end. But on Monday, 7th of March, the strikers were even more numerous, even if it is difficult to give an exact number: between 400 and 700, some sources claiming up to 1,000, most of them in the same departments. It was evident that the strike was a selective strike aiming at creating a bottleneck paralysing the assembly line. Hence, there was a battle around the figures of finished cars. During the night Thursday to Friday only 50 cars may have been produced instead of the 310 planned; the management produced figures pretending that on Thursday 1,127 left the line instead of 1,530. A leaflet signed 'Workers on strike' dated 9th of March, said that 'since the 3rd of March the production of the factory was at a standstill'. Even after the end of the strike it is difficult to know the actual effect of the strike as the management can use the flexibility and recuperate the loss.

On Monday, 7th of March, between 400 and 700 strikers try to demonstrate all over the factory and to push the other workers to strike. They did not succeed, even though they were welcomed with sympathy. As soon as the strike broke out, all the unions tried to jump on the band-waggon. We will further analyse the attitude of the CGT union: It could not openly take a position against this wildcat strike, but did not do anything to call for its spreading and showed a very conciliatory approach towards the management. As the strike went on and threatened to stop the production, the management started some discussions with the unions and, what is more important as a kind of recognition of the autonomy of the strike, with delegates from the strikers as early as Monday, 7th of March. The strikers then added to the original claims the full payment of the days of strike. These discussions did not produce any result. Tuesday, 8th of March, another meeting with the same people brought an agreement with full payment for the days of 'technical unemployment' but imposing a condition on the strikers: they have to work 12 days more during the year to repay the days of strike. This agreement was signed by four unions: SIA/GSEA (which is the remains of a boss's more or less fascist union), CGC (a managers union not at all concerned with the strike), CFTC and FO. Three other unions, the most important ones, SUD, CFDT and CGT refused to sign. But more important, the strikers assembly refused the agreement and the strike went on.

For weeks the main unions had organised a national 'day of action' on Thursday, 10th of March, against the government's social policy with demonstrations in the main towns and a big one in Paris. Numerous strikers of Aulnay were there behind a banner claiming support for the strike and distributing leaflets about their strike

(signed 'workers on strike'). 50 workers of the subcontractor GEFCO working in the factory had been on strike since the 3rd of March for claims similar to the Citroën workers' ones (at the end of the day the 50 workers got what they wanted after having spread the strike to other sites of the subcontractor).

On Monday, 14th of March, at 6 a.m., the day shift was welcomed by three hundred management staff all dressed in Citroën uniform who tried to stop the strikers going into their work department (the management tried to restart the assembly line with scabs - temporary workers). The managers then followed the workers as they went to demonstrate inside the factory in order to produce pressure on and to threaten the non-striking workers.

The same morning, a new meeting with the management, the unions SUD, CFDT, CGT and the delegates of the strikers did not improve anything. But at a new meeting in the afternoon, the management yielded: full pay for the 'technical days off', transport benefit paid; for the days of strike, they will be paid fully but the workers will have to give some days of RTT, 2 days will be considered as days of retraining and they will have to work three more days in April (these days were planned as days off). We can see this change of mind by the management as a result of the fact that the strike was still strong even after the pressures of the morning and that the risk of a line-stoppage was increasing, perhaps also of an expansion of the strike. The strikers assembly voted to accept the deal and to resume work on Monday, 14th of March. The night shift worked normally. The general atmosphere in the factory is that the strike was worth while.

The Political and Social Context

Even though this strike could be seen as a minor one and did not attract much media coverage we have to place it within the general political and social context in France.

* The present intense propaganda around the referendum on the European Constitution is more and more designed as a political fight that covers up a social problem. Most of the groups and parties advocating the rejection of the European Constitution - in particular the left of the Socialist Party, the Trotskyists, the Communist Party and the very confused neo-reformist 'altermondialism' (Attac) - use the deep social discontent to build their opposition. But they do not want to push too far the various current strikes: quite a lot of strikes would have a negative effect on their political ambitions. That could explain the attitude of the leftist groups during the Citroën strike.

* In this respect, the attitude of the Trotskyist group 'Lutte Ouvrière' is very significant. The fall of the USSR and of the French Communist Party and the

the decline of their influence on the CGT union and of all unions in general has allowed all these oppositional political groups, formerly systematically evicted and barred from entering the union apparatus, to take functions in this union bureaucracy at the low and medium level. Willingly or not, tactically or not, they have to respect the union policy in order to climb the ladder because what is more important for them is not class struggle in itself but the conquest of political power using this union activity as a step in this respect. The rank and file militants however tend to act quite differently. Maybe initially attracted by the political and social offers of these competing organisations, these militants have a tendency to act more according to their immediate class interests than to the interests of the organisation. As often, concerning this relation between union apparatus and rank and file, it is difficult to know the actual dialectical process between the CGT Citroën (controlled by Lutte Ouvrière) and the rank and file action (even if the leaflets were anonymously signed by 'workers on strike' they could still have been inspired by Lutte Ouvrière, which did not dare to put the organisation's name in the context of the strike).

What is more important than all these 'diversions' related to the present political situation, the Citroën strike has to be placed in the French context of class struggle, in what we consider the start of a new turn of class struggle.

As we have said at the beginning of this article, the 'Aubry laws' and the RTT have not only modified the work organisation and produced a freeze of wages, but have increased the weight of labour with the removal of any constraints (legal or illegal), changed the pace of work and greatly disturbed the workers' daily life. The time to rest has not at all been able to make up for the new kind of physical and mental exhaustion linked to the stress (anxiety, depression, psychological and physical diseases). The new forms of work organisation apparently give workers more autonomy but at the same time impose a stronger control on them. According to some official figures the removal of the 'grey time' [temps gris] (working time allowing the worker to choose his own pace of work, to stop to work from time to time) produces "urgency" and forces everyone to hurry up. Even on the taylorised assembly lines the organisation of work was modified in such a way that each 'operator' (worker) is constantly has a work-load up to his/her capacity, while he/she is also liable for the imposed productivity. At the same time this method of work organisation has been widely introduced, even in the service industry. In some call centres for instance, even the language is regulated. It is forbidden to use certain words such as 'delay' for instance. Workers in

these centres have to follow various illogical orders, for instance to smile when they are answering, to end certain calls and to stop calls which are too long, while on the other hand they are required to keep a call going in order to please the customer or to sell them some products (thereby they have the feeling that they are not performing 'good work').

Some research shows all the disorders connected to this new organisation of work. Taylorism has not at all disappeared but, on the contrary, has invaded all industries. Instead of being imposed by the levels of management, the responsibility for the work organisation is put on the shoulders of the workers themselves, and this is particularly difficult to cope with for any worker. The only question for the workers is how to respond to these new forms of exploitation. The reactions can be individual (sabotage, absenteeism, etc..) or collective. But they can take the form of claims which are not directly linked to the original problems of conditions of work (the recent strikes in the call centres are an example). Often they take forms of resistance buried in the day to day life of exploitation and not very well known. But they are evidently part of the general discontent we can currently observe in France.

General Discontent in France

Till recently, most of the strikes in France were about the resistance against the consequences of the restructuring and of re-location of factories. The strongest often violent ones were about definite closures and were demanding not the repeal of the closure but better benefits for unemployment (the best example was the Cel-latex factory strike in the North of France which for some time was a model for quite a lot of similar strikes). They were defensive strikes which did not question the competition between capitalist companies looking for the best profitable conditions of exploitation. These rather defensive struggles have not ceased, neither did the restructuring. But recently other kinds of strikes have emerged, making visible a new offensive attitude against the conditions of exploitation, wages and/or working conditions. These new conflicts about wages and working conditions appear in a situation where the 35 hour-laws (Aubry laws), the threat of re-location of production and the fear of unemployment has forced workers to accept a wage freeze.

One of the most interesting of these conflicts erupted last December within the Swedish textile company H&M, exploiting 3,000 workers in 63 shops all over France. The delivery for these shops was concentrated in a big warehouse located at Le Bourget (northern suburb of Paris). The 300 workers of this warehouse have to handle heavy parcels and are being harassed by the management for a gross wage of 1.180 Euros a month (reduced for different reasons for many of them

down to 600 to 750 Euros). Numerous claims for a wage increase were pushed aside and the workers considered this attitude of the management as a kind of provocation.

On the 13th of December all these workers decided to strike. This date was well chosen because the end of the year is a very profitable period for the company. The strike was very efficient because the warehouse was blocked by a picket-line which prevented any car or lorry from entering and leaving the building. H&M did not try to break the picket-line, but to organise another distribution centre with scabs, which later on proved to be particularly inefficient. Then the management put forward a complaint at the local court in order to get a legal decision for the removal of the picket and against the strikers, forbidding the blockade of the warehouse gates.

On the 28th of December, the cops managed to dissolve the picket (this date coincided with the beginning of the sales and the need for big supplies for the shops). At the same time the management proposed a wage rise of 6.2 percent, back-dated to 2002, but it tied the wage rise to such preconditions (e.g. of seniority) that 80 percent of the workforce would not get anything. The reason is that the staff has a very considerable turnover because of the poor working conditions. The strike was continued but without the strength of the blockade. In order to compensate for that the strikers tried to spread the strike to the most important shops, mainly in Paris and the suburbs. They failed because of very different conditions of work in the shops, because of a serious turnover with limited contracts and the intervention of the cops. New proposals: wage increase of 7 percent for people who started working before the 1st of January 2002, 4 percent for others and 1,8 percent for 2005 for all of them - and a after a ballot the strikers resumed work on February, the 7th.

More recently, different strikes all over France have patchwork-like disturbed all sectors of distribution - hypermarkets and supermarkets. Often the workers used strategies similar to the ones at H&M, blocking the warehouses which supply the centres of distribution. Most of these strikes were about wages, some of them are still going on. Considering these strikes and other recent less known but similar struggles, we can again observe a new offensive character of these class conflicts. Of course, it is too early to draw a definite conclusion even if we can underline their size and potential. It is for sure that as early as last year the managers who are connected to the political world were aware of these upcoming new offensive claims. On the background of these struggles for higher wages we can understand last year's various government attempts to have 'voluntary' cuts in the prices of goods sold in supermarkets and the announcement to allow workers

to get money from special accounts of frozen benefits. On the other hand various reforms of social, juridical and repressive matters aimed for the reinforcement of control over possible social conflicts. We can also reconsider this fuss about the constitutional referendum and see it as a diversion of the social conflict, which is supposed to be contained in the political 'democratic' fight.

We think that another proof of a general discontent was given by two wildcat conflicts connected not to wages but to the working conditions. On the 1st of February 2005 at the Orly airport (one of the major Paris airports, south east of Paris) the death of a stewardess who fell off an unprotected gangway brought to light the consequences of the pressure of productivity on the security at the airports. But, of course, the driver of the lorry carrying the gangway was immediately penalised and threatened to be sacked. His immediate lay-off started an immediate wildcat strike of all the people working on the runways of the airport and the traffic was heavily disturbed for two days. Another strike happened between the 18th and 22nd of March when a disciplinary committee was supposed to meet.

A similar conflict happened at the end of January with the ticket-controllers of the SNCF [French Railways] involved. On the 15th of January in the evening a woman controller was raped by a traveller in a regional train around Toulouse (south-west of France). When this aggression became known to the public in the morning of the 26th, a wildcat strike started in the Toulouse region and quickly expanded all over France. It put the whole rail network to a standstill. Some 9,000 controllers refused to work (for security reasons a train cannot run without a controller). Immediately the top manager started negotiations with the unions about some measures to guarantee more security for the controllers. But the traffic was still deeply disturbed for the following days because most of the controllers were not that pleased with what was proposed by bosses and unions.

Apart from the fact that these wildcat strikes are expressions of a big discontent which breaks loose in such sudden actions about some 'minor' incident, it is remarkable that nobody cares about the compulsory notice before starting the strike, in the railways as in the airports. The political discussions about a law imposing this notice and the obligation of a 'minimal service' were totally swept away by the strikes.

more on citroën

This is another (shorter) comment on the Citroën strike, sent to us by a comrade from 'Mouvement Communiste' (see also their leaflet on the 35-hour-week below).

Strike at Citroën Aulnay

An assembly plant, 15 km in the north-east suburbs of Paris, France, 3rd of March 2005. In the factory 4,500 people are employed (plus 500 temp workers). Their average monthly wage is about 1,200 Euros. The management tried with various measures to cut extra-payment and reduce break-time, which is made easier for them by the legal changes (see leaflet on the 35-hours law in this newsletter). The strike kicked off when the management announced not to pay the days off which were imposed by the management itself. For 2005 40 days off were planned, the eight days in March would mean a wage loss of 177 Euros. The struggle started on the shop-floor level.

On Wednesday, 2nd of March, during an information meeting the management announced that the year 2005 will include 40 days off, some of which will not be paid. At the beginning of the afternoon, 17 workers from the ,sellerie' department [saddlery], where the car interior is equipped with seats etc., put down their tools and demanded a 100 percent payment for the days in question. (This department is due to hard work conditions mainly composed of young, low-qualified workers). These workers went around the department getting other colleagues to come out on strike. At the change of shifts (1:00 p.m.) about 150 strikers welcomed the next shift.

Later on 250 workers were engaged in the conflict and when the night shift arrived (8:00 p.m.), production in the ,sellerie' department had been brought to a stand-still. However, due to the production process and the stocks available, not the whole factory was blocked. The following Thursday (3rd of March) the three shifts of the ,sellerie' (250 out of 350 workers) were on strike and tried to spread the strike to the ,Talerie' (car bodies making [forging press department]) but without clear success. Surprised at the beginning, the unions quickly arrived (the CGT is lead by Trotskyist members of Lutte Ouvrière and some of them were among those who initiated the strike) and tried to cool down things. As Friday, 4th of March, was already a day off, everybody was looking to the following Monday, 7th of March.

On the 7th of March somewhere between 400 and 700 workers marched through the factory (we do not exactly know which part of the factory was crossed by the demo) in order to convince others to stop working. But all they received was some sympathy, and not an

all out strike. The management was forced to negotiate on one hand, but on the other hand they reorganized the production in the ,sellerie' by regrouping workers as follows: one shift completely on strike, one completely at work and the third half and half.

A first agreement signed by the unions on Wednesday 9th (except by the CGT, for the above mentioned reasons) did not result in the end of strike at the ,sellerie', but the strikers remained isolated. The production of cars was not blocked (to be more accurate we are looking for production figures for March to see what really was the percentage of drop in the production, but management seems not to be eager to display them openly). Tuesday 10th was a national day of action called by the unions. There were no banners from the strikers of Aulnay, but alongside the demo the workers distributed a short leaflet (signed ,striking workers from Aulnay' and inspired by Lutte Ouvrière explaining the strike reasons and objectives).

After that, the strike slowly decreased. The management proposed that 30 days off will be paid during 2005, the 20 remaining during 2006 and even possibly 2007, plus some compensations for transport costs and shifting of some bonus delivery in order to reduce the cost of the strike for the strikers. Isolation of the strikers, adamant management and a not so bad agreement lead the remaining strikers to cease their movement on the 14th of March. As far as we know, striking workers do not have the feeling that the movement was defeated. Perhaps a first step in a longer fight.

Additional comment (sent later)

What we have heard about the strike: 1) Before the strike broke out on Wednesday, Lutte Ouvrière militants with other fellow workers had created a committee for the strike organization. During the strike it was this committee which was promoted as the organizer of the strike by all those in struggle. 2) The workers of the ,sellerie' remained isolated not because of the union's strategy, but because other workers did not want to go on strike. 3) Nevertheless the strikers remained united and perceived their strike as being successful and the mood was high. After trying to continue the strike as long as possible they organised a big ,fiesta" to celebrate their strike.

Leaflet from 'Mouvement Communiste' - France, February 2005. This is their comment:

France saw an early spring of various mobilisations: the school student protests, the big demonstrations of public workers on the 10th of March, various smaller strikes such as the one at Citroen. All these mobilisations happen on the background of a general populist campagne of the left-wing of socialdemocracy which promotes the 'No' to the European constitution, trying to canalise the general feeling of discontent. At the same time in Germany a so-called 'capitalism-debate' is launched by the left wing of the SPD, criticizing the anti-patriotism of multinational corporations and the greed of the high management. We think the following leaflet shows quite clearly how the left in France prepared the legal ground for the reforms of the right under Raffarin.

35 hours: the Right unmask the Aubry laws

The government of Raffarin is carrying out painful changes to the Aubry law on work time reduction. Do we have to understand this as a radical questioning of the work time reductions which were introduced by the Socialist Party?

Not at all. The "reforms" of the right-wing government only change some particular points of the Aubry laws, which were seen as restrictive by certain factions of the French employers. The "reform" stands in clear continuity with the Socialist Parties' law which provided companies applying the law with a legal framework for wage decreases, acute flexibilisation of working time and the hunting down of idle time at work. But let's go back to the Aubry laws. What are they about?

There was never a strike demanding this working time reduction, instead there was a government pleading for our approval. That was suspicious. Any conscious worker understood what was going on very quickly:

- * The law laid down the legal working time of 35 hours per week, but on the basis of an annual average. In this way working time became more flexible, given the shift to an annual rather than weekly calculation.
- * Breaks were not counted as work time anymore.
- * Different minimum wages (SMIC) were introduced.
- * The employers got even more freedom to negotiate specific agreements.
- * The hours previously counted and paid as overtime diminished.
- * The employers were now allowed to allocate holiday time according to the needs of production.

Credited by the more optimistic with having created 350,000 jobs, the reality is that the two Aubry laws of

1998 and 2000 didn't even lower the unemployment rate, which is still around 10% of the active population. Behind the myth created by the bourgeois left, the 35 hours law served above all to submit the work force even more to the imperatives of capital, and at lower costs.

If the representatives of the left-wing of capital trumpeted all these measures from the start, some unions (not the CFDT which was one of the prime movers behind the law) found it hard to remain so passive in the face of workers' concerns. In reply the unions put forward the only positive argument, the reduction of time actually spent in the work place, and had an easy time of it. In addition the law multiplied their opportunities for negotiation (their true *raison d'être*) and the extension of their presence within the companies.

That's why there hasn't been a general movement against these laws, but rather struggles on a company level for its "better implementation". A multitude of agreements have been signed by the unions. The CFDT has come out the winner, followed closely by the CGT and FO, almost neck-and-neck.

On the employer's side only the small traders and small and medium-sized companies dragged their feet, successfully as it turned out. In these sectors the Aubry 35 hours were never put into practice.

As soon as they understood the spirit and words of the law and the wonderful advantages it offered them on a silver plate, the management of the big companies (except for Edouard Michelin, worthy son of his father) rushed to sign company agreements. The state subsidies and the possibility of passing the costs of the eventual cut in hours onto the workers added the proverbial icing on the cake.

While the right is starting to whinge about the 35 hours again, the majority of big companies that count in this country, such as Renault and Peugeot, say that the measures put in place by existing company agreements are more than enough. Proof that the law is anything but favourable for the workers...

Many big companies have introduced a wide range of work schedules and reintegrated Saturday working into the normal hours, like at Citroen and Renault. Over all, after a close look, it becomes clear that in most cases the effective weekly working hours are higher than before the introduction of the law signed by Aubry. The more tiring and repetitive the work is, the more we can see the negative impact of this legal regulation. According to surveys, factory workers are more discontented with the work time reduction than office workers, technicians and managers.

New gifts for the small and medium-sized companies...

The right-wing government now wants to cash in the meagre advantages of the law using the moronic sophism: "You have to work more to earn more". As if in capitalist society those who have the most dosh are the ones who work the most! Now the unions and left-wing parties play their institutional role as His Majesty's Loyal Opposition by intervening and shouting like fools, but quickly forgetting that it was they who initially worked out and approved this attack on the conditions of the workers.

What are the changes enforced by the right-wing government?

- * On a "voluntary" basis, the employees are allowed to work longer than the quota of extra hours. But what does "voluntary" mean for a worker? On top of that the bonuses for these hours are regulated on two different levels, according to the company or sectoral collective contract. This results in different bonus levels varying from company to company and depending on the particular balance of forces.
- * Now it is possible for a worker to give up holidays and days off due to work time reduction in exchange for additional payments. The amount is not defined, it has to be negotiated with the unions. Also there is no legal limit to the number of days that can be given up per year, as long as it's within the European law (four weeks of paid holidays per year).
- * The clause that small and medium sized companies only have to pay a minimum of 10% extra for overtime, instead of 25%, is extended for three years. In this category of companies days off due to work time reduction can be bought back without having to negotiate with the unions. A so-called voluntary agreement between an individual employee and the boss is sufficient.

With these changes only the negative aspects of the law are left for the workers, namely the relaxation of the Labour Code and flexibility. All this is a perfect-demonstration of how the left and right wings of capital divide up the task of worsening the conditions of exploitation.

With the Aubry law the left has created the best legal and regulatory conditions for reinforcing the regime of exploitation in this country. Their specific approach was to worsen the conditions for the workers by means of the application their traditional ideological ointment. Today the unions, including the ones who kept quiet about the introduction of this anti-worker law, mobilise "for the defence of this social gain against the attacks of the right". But the right wing come-back has only taken some of the rouge off the Aubry law's cheeks.

Those who believed and still believe that capitalists would fulfil the demands of workers, even the most elementary ones, without being put under pressure by autonomous workers' struggles, are dangerously naive. In this case they share responsibility for opening up the path which has been taken by the right.

*Mouvement Communiste
Brussels-Paris, 5 February 2005*

*Contact (without mentioning the name):
BP 1666, Centre Monnaie 1000, Bruxelles 1, Belgium.*

france.accor

We publish the following leaflet "The collective for solidarity with Faty Mayant and workers for Accor" because of its aim of dealing with the Accor struggle on an international and practical level. We disagree with its analysis of 'subcontracting' which describes it as the main tool in the hands of the bosses to increase exploitation, and as the main target which we are supposed to fight against. Of course the legal level of contracts play a certain part in disputes, but from the bosses' as well as the workers' perspective there are more concrete and material issues which really count: it is not the subcontract as such which divides workers, but their spatial isolation, the small working units, the actual division of labour, the strategy of hiring people with different language backgrounds. It is not a contract with the main company that ensures higher wages, better conditions, less work, but the actual relations of power. In each single conflict we have to discuss and practically attack these material problems instead of hoping that the demand for the abolition of 'subcontracts' will resolve it for us.

Support Faty - Fight subcontracting. Her fight concerns us all

Subcontracting has become the number one weapon of companies in their offensive against workers. They use it to impose both an intensification of work and substantial wage cuts, by avoiding the strong resistance these would probably have produced if they had

been introduced within the big company. By playing on competition between subcontractors and choosing the “best offer” (necessarily the “lowest offer” from the workers’ standpoint), the heads of the companies that control the market encourage over-exploitation and slave-driver-like practices, and at the same time they claim not to be responsible as employers.

But subcontracting also means a radical transformation of the power relations between bosses and workers, to the profit of the bosses, who can destroy the ties of solidarity built up over time by people who work together in a same place, by dividing workers into distinct units. Workers doing the same kind of job (and often working side by side) find themselves with different bosses, which makes it much more difficult for them to fight collectively for their demands.

It’s not surprising, then, that subcontracting is spreading to all sectors, including public services. It has become the main vector in the cut-back race that working people throughout the developed world are experiencing, and a way of importing third-world type working conditions into activities that capitalism can’t relocate. Subcontracting is the key to the brutal offensive by big business that the Bolkenstein directive would make possible on the European level

Fighting the very principle of subcontracting by supporting the struggles of workers in subcontracting businesses: that’s the idea behind the work of the solidarity committee that supported the long, ultimately successful struggle, in 2002-2003, of the cleaning women working for the Arcade company (a subcontractor for Accor, a multinational hotel consortium). It is now supporting Faty Mayant, the women’s union representative, fired by her slave-driving bosses a year after their victory (with the highly political consent of the ministry of Labor). By demanding that Faty be directly hired by Accor, and that the human resources department of Accor keep its promise to put an end to the outsourcing of hotel room cleaning, the collective continues to call for the application of one clear rule: bosses have to directly hire the women and men who work for them. What is at stake in our support for Faty, then, is the fight against subcontracting.

The fight is a long one, and we have already scored some points (a non-compulsory “charter” document defining the conditions under which Accor may resort to subcontracting was written up at the end of the Arcade strike, and cleaning has actually been re-insourced in some hotels since then). But now we have to go on to win completely: to have Faty hired directly by Accor, to make all Accor hotels put a real end to subcontracting.

How can we do that? As a major hotel consortium, Accor has to maintain its image and seduce its custom-

ers. That’s why it claims to sell smiles and hospitality (paid for by intense policing of its workers), and also respect for the environment and sustainable development, along with hotel rooms at a wide range of prices. And yet, it continues to impose inhuman working conditions on its cleaning women, via subcontracting. That is what must be denounced.

Accor has built hotels everywhere in Europe and across the world (its other names are Sofitel, Novotel, Mercure, Ibis, Suite Hôtel, Etap and Formule 1 in Europe and Asia, and Red Roof and Motel G in America). So groups everywhere can get together, go into a hotel, settle in the lobby and distribute leaflets, inform customers, talk with the workers, being even more hospitable than they are if possible (that’s what we have been doing for some months now, by picnicking once a week in an Accor hotel, a different one each time). There’s no need to cause a fight. Our battle is a simple one, a battle of convictions, that has to be won over the long term. If all those who feel concerned make a contribution in their own place, we can win.

*The collective for solidarity with
Faty Mayant and workers for Accor
Contact: fatysolidarite@hotmail.com.*

*Our leaflets on Accor, in French and English, as well as
information bulletins on our activities, are posted on:
http://www.ac.eu.org/article.php3?id_article=782*

student protests

We have summarised some reports from various student protests in different parts of Europe during the last few months. The violent attacks against the student demonstration in Paris by kids from the suburbs raise political questions that concern not only schools and the youth movement, but the whole class situation in the big urban areas with an established level of unemployment and parallel economy.

School occupations and attacks on student demonstration in Paris

Spring 2005. On the 8th of March 2005 nationwide demonstrations of school students and teachers took place, against the reform of the education sector by Minister Fillon. In Paris the students were attacked and robbed by kids from the suburbs, mainly of African and Arabic background. It had happened on previous occasions that the so-called “casseurs” [hooligans - literally, “smashers”] not only ransacked shops and destroyed property, but also robbed protesters. Previously these incidents had a rather spontaneous and sporadic character. This time the attacks were solely targeted against the demonstration and it seemed rather planned beforehand. About 700 to 1000 kids mingled in groups with the 8000 students and attacked single victims, beat them and took their mobile phones, digital cameras and other possessions. A lot of the victims were skaters, punks and Goths, and female. According to reports from the media several hundred attacks took place and dozens of students were injured. The cops, although present in large numbers, didn't intervene. In the media some kids from the banlieus said that they wanted to take “revenge on the whites”, that they wanted to have a go at “the little French” and “other victims” (“bolos”), who “don't have gangs”. A group of ten kids boasted that they managed to rob 50 mobile phones justifying it with the statement that “the Parisians have enough of them anyway”. In other cities with a high rate of immigrant population, such as Lyon or Marseille, there were fights with the cops, but no inter-youth violence like in Paris. The immediate reactions after the attacks varied between moaning that the cops didn't intervene and calls for self-defence. The opinions within the students' organisations seemed to be divided, some Trotskyist groups talked quite abstractly about the kids as victims who have to be put on the right track again. Other comments interpreted the general division between protesting students and the thugs as follows: one part of the youth hopes that due to their social background by collective actions they are able to find a place within society and perhaps even change it for the better; the other part feels that even by

following a professional career there is still no chance to achieve a desirable position in society anyway, meaning that in consequence it makes no sense to demand better education, the alternative is the ghetto economy. A comment in the daily newspaper *Le Monde* criticises the left and the radical left for not taking a stand on the matter or of falsely interpreting it as an expression of the conflict between “bourgeois and proletarian” backgrounds. The same comment states that most of the students are not from a bourgeois background and that the attitude of the kids rather expresses their exclusion from the proletariat. The headline of the comment is accordingly “The New Lumpen-Proletariat”. A comrade from Paris wrote that one reason for the recent developments is founded on the short-comings of the anti-racist movement in the 80s (SOS Racisme etc.) which failed to address the class content of racism and merely acted on the level of legal equality. Quite obvious is the strategic passiveness of the cops. One consequence of the attacks is the participation of union security guards on the following demonstration on the 15th of March, which might turn out to be “another brick in the wall” for the rebellious part of the students. The fact that so far the demonstrations did not seem to bother the government too much and the threat of further attacks might have provoked a change within the students movement: instead of trying to take the streets they took their schools. By the end of March about 170 schools all over France were occupied, in total there are about 2300 schools of that type in France. This is even more impressive given that officially the educational reform is already legally settled by the government. On the 25th of March the ‘Liberation’ wrote:

“This new form of action was a surprise. ‘Those schools which have hardly done anything since the beginning of the movement are now blocked’, assured Leon, 16 years old. ‘The demonstrations did not seem to have an impact, so we paralyse the system by blocking it’. Next to him another student explains: ‘The arrival of new forms of protest has reawakened the enthusiasm of those who were shocked by the attacks of the casseurs’. The minister of education on the contrary expects that ‘only the hard-liners will keep up the struggle’ and that ‘the occupations will peter out bit by bit’. But seemingly he does not want to rely on the self-dissolution of the movement: a lot of directors lock the students out and some schools were evicted by the riot-squad CRS. In April some conflicts between A' level students and occupying students occurred given that the A' level exams will take place in June and students who will have to pass them are afraid of the negative impact of the protests. In total we can say that the movement is kept up by a hard core of activists who occupy government buildings, have partly violent demonstrations

with hardly more than 1.000 participants and that the repressive reactions of the police causes a solidarity effect amongst other students and teachers. Some of the teachers' unions act openly against the occupations and violent protests, namely the FO and the SNDPEN. The most important teachers' union FSU officially supports the students, but there have been cases where FSU reps tried to actively break the blockade of schools. On April the 11th one of the occupied schools in Paris, the Lycee Montaigne, was supposed to be reopened. The head teacher arrived with a big group of cops which tried to search students who wanted to enter. The reactions of 200-300 student was to block the school again. Teachers' unions call for a strike on the 14th of April against planned job redundancies. Fillon's reaction to the unexpected tenacity of the movement is the proposal to negotiate about 'democratic spaces' within the schools. People interpret this as an offer to the students' unions FIDL and UNL to play a greater (institutionalised) role. The conservative daily 'Le Figaro' states that these two unions are 'surpassed by the radical wing of the students' movement' and that they have lost the control over the protest. In Paris and Saint-Denis, councils, as they call themselves, were formed where the activities of the various occupied schools are coordinated and information is exchanged. People say that this wave of occupation is the first one of that size since the 70s.

A leaflet distributed in Paris

Call, 22nd of March 2005: Since 6 p.m. the gymnasium of the Balzac school in the 17th district of Paris has been occupied by the students in order to get the administration to negotiate. This resistance is not an isolated case: since days several schools in Paris are peacefully occupied. The media reports the end of the movement, but all over France more and more schools are taken over by the students! What is at stake is the reform of minister Fillon itself which intends to sabotage the schools by adjusting education to the needs of industry. The reform wants to turn the students into industrial robots and bans all knowledge and necessary means for a critical mind and self-development from the schools. In general and for a long time now schools are reduced to institutions of social control and their inner hierarchies leave no space for real life. It is obvious that neither the teachers nor the students want to work in these institutions. The reform of Fillon concerns us all and it is up to us to discuss here and now about the kind of school we want and how to put it into practice. Let's continue the occupation! Let's take the schoolyards and workshops and use them according to the social reality and to our desires. Open and necessary assembly at 12 a.m!"

Angers - a radical experience of an autonomous lycéen movement

Report from indymedia: Over the last two weeks in Angers, the lycée [secondary school, students from 14 to 18] movement has shown a singular radicality and an exemplary experience of autonomy.

Thursday, 24th of March- The official demo got diverted: no unions (just 3 kids from Sud who were using their 2 little flags as hats to shelter them from the rain...), no teachers, no demo stewards. The demo began with 3000 lycéens.

The route seemed too official for some: round about 300 lycéens (the most motivated ones who are at the head of the demo) rushed towards the barrier of cops and pushed their way through onto the bypass (which is in the town), blocking all the traffic. What a monstrous mess! The older demonstrators climbed over the barriers and joined up with their comrades on the motorway. And the demo made its own way...

The day before (Wednesday evening) the biggest secondary school in Angers was occupied by 300 school students; the same happened after the demo on Thursday; and yesterday evening also (and always with several hundred students), though yesterday people had the idea of occupying another secondary school, but I think it came to nothing.

Friday 25th of March - This time there was a wild-cat demo. In the morning, enormous groups of school students left different schools to meet up at the occupied school. From between about 1500 and 3000 youngsters were grouped in front of the "J. du Bellay" school which is a kind of general meeting point for the movement. Confronted by attempts by the head teacher and his deputy to intimidate them, these two were thumped by the jubilant crowd (and it was mentioned in the regional paper) and the canteen was wrecked. But the majority of young people who mobilised were not too keen on the violence and the groups (several hundred young people per group - two or three thousand in total) opted to stroll from school to school so as to get them to come out on strike.

It seems that the schools in favour of striking are seriously hotting up after the events of yesterday. How the kids organise: Everything is based on spontaneity and the speed with which information circulates. The youth of Angers have created their own Assembly of Assemblies (Council) which works very well: direct democracy in all its beauty; unions and parties totally flattened. It is truly an autonomous and effective co-ordination. There are three or four clowns from the LCR, CGT and unions. Their intervention is limited to one proposal: as demonstration stewards. As one can imagine, they were loudly shouted down and humiliated so that they stopped speaking and were made to feel

small. All militant organisations have lost all credibility in the eyes of these thousands of young people, who are clearly hostile towards them.

A letter from a friend in Paris

I went to the three big demonstrations in Paris but, before giving some facts I have observed and my opinion about this movement, I think useful to underline some specific points. If you talk about “student” you have to tell that the people involved were not university students but “students” from part of the secondary schools (we don’t use the word “student” for these young but “collégiens” for these pupils of the “collège” (from 11 up to 15) and “lycéens” for these pupils of the “lycée” (from 16 up to 18) (among these last schools there is a big separation between the “lycées” providing a general education and the “lycées” providing a professional education; and even between all these schools there is huge differences between schools located in posh districts or providing quality professional teaching and schools located in poor and often “ghettos” districts of the suburbs.

Three “organisations” pretended to “organising” the movement: the FIDL close to the teachers union FSU connected to the communist party, l’UNL more neutral politically but more conformist and the “collectif” apparently self proclaimed as more “democratic” and “autonomous”; FDL and UNL are the only ones “recognised” by the government and discussing with the education ministry. Of course, behind these “organisations” you could see a background of bog parties or small leftist political groups who could find an easy ground for their political activism there.

Even if it is difficult to bring the proof of direct political connection of the movement with the present political debate about the constitutional European referendum, the movement is certainly not free of any manipulation from the political organisation aiming at a rejection of the project of the European constitution. Even if it is not actually true, the present reform could be easily related to the European general unification of education.

You have to consider also a frequent fact observed in the past about this secondary pupils demonstrations: they could be strong around the Easter holidays and fade away after because for most of these pupils the last school term end with exams which open the doors to the universities or to other high schools. If they are not strong enough to force the government to yield they will unavoidably fail. Not because of the temporisation of the unions (they are very weak even if they have a “legal” existence but they effectively can push for a decline already started) but because the coming of the holidays and of the after-holidays and because of the failure of the various vanguardist minority attempts to

radicalise the movement. The essential fact in this kind of movement is that it has actually no social basis and no economical mean of pressure; so as I have just said, their action is only disturbing their present social activity (their studies) and has no direct consequence on the functioning of the system. To be efficient, this movement has to go on demonstrations and/or to some kind of blockades, picketing or occupations, all things which could be performed by tiny decided minorities (I have heard this morning that in a lycée in a close suburb east of Paris with 1.000 pupils, 15, not all of them from this school, tried to picket the entrance but failed to prevent anything without any intervention from the cops). But you have to consider on the other hand that there is actually in France a general discontent about quite a lot of problems (which political parties try to channel on a “no vote”) and that all the youth tried to express their own way according the social status of their parents.

Another point has to be underlined: all over France, at the hight of the movement, the demonstrations brought about 200,000 in the street (most of them were young people because though “supporting” the movement, very few teachers actively participated in these actions). Considering that this category of “students” amounts to almost 3 million kids, it gives some idea of the relative size of this movement. And the last recent actions still going on sporadically are even less important.

Back now to the incidents between the suburbs’ youths and the big core of the demonstrators. What I will tell is general considerations as well as what I observed in the three main demonstrations in Paris.

What the suburbs youth did in these demonstrations is no more no less what they are doing in their local district (where for some material reasons they are more or less compulsorily contained, vandalising their environment (not by chance but often as a revenge against the cops or other repressive attempts), against members of their own community (racketing for instance with some violence in the schools or outside and where we can detect some social revenge as well). In these demonstrations they simply saw the opportunity to extend the local ground of their profitable activity in this “hide and seek” game with any kind of repression (they don’t care at all about the education reform, as they despise school). They were redoutable because they were trained, organised in gangs and fighting collectively in lightning raids. If we can see in these incidents a social background, it is no more and no less than the unfortunately usual social background, usually contained as “suburbs disturbances”. The repressive forces either the cops and /or the union security guards (mainly adult strong men from the CGT/PC) were not ready to answer such actions because they were prisoners, (in the

first demonstrations) in rigid traditional tactics but they learned because in the last demonstration these union security guards managed to deliver these young disturbers promptly to the cops (this close collaboration between the unions and the police was evident all along these demonstrations, I could tell you far more about it). Such activities and incidents both from the young people and unions/police cops in “students” demonstrations are not at all a rare phenomenon: the same thing already occurred years ago at several demonstrations of the same category of young and the same kind of repressive forces. In one of them, the extent of the violence and vandalism/ personal attacks was far more important than all what we could have seen this year.

But the difference remains, this time, in the use, by the government, of these incidents against the movement. On one hand they have the experience of the previous demonstrations years ago (all of them against conservative governments) where they were obliged to yield and to conceal their projects of reform; this time they were decided to go ahead (with the failure of the resistance against their previous reforms mainly in 2003, certainly giving them encouragement). On the other hand, they were always very cautious of how to cope with a student movement more difficult to control (and to spy on) than any other movement (specific milieu, practically no union organisation, etc.). This explain why all the demonstrations in Paris saw a unusual deployment of unions/police cops (I rarely saw such a deployment with even the use of “special forces”). As I have said above, because of the clumsy use of these repressive forces, they failed to contain the demonstrations when they went an unforeseen way. So, in order to prevent the spread of the movement they tried (and succeeded somewhat) to shame it with the mediatisation of what has happened (you have to be very careful about the interview of suburbs young people very proud to be questioned by journalists and over-exaggerating what they have done and not at all controlling their language). Anyway, the collapse of the demonstrations because of this media propaganda has not had the effect of killing the movement itself: it moved towards actions located in each school and/or some education offices. If it appeared more radical with actions blocking the functioning of the education system (and eventually the violence of the cops called to maintain public order) it became an even more minority movement more exacerbated as it became more inefficient . And, as I have said above, contrary to the demonstrations which were not harmful to the studies, this new character posed to these young people the problem of their own exam success, which most of them are not ready to give up on even if they feel concerned by the reform“.

Another letter from France

On the recent school kids protests in France: In a first phase the student movement was very broad and wide spread. It started against a new ‘reform’ of education (every government has done or at least tried one...), which is basically seen as one introducing more elitist selection in the schools. This explains why the suburban schools, where lower class families are concentrated, are more concerned and present even though there is also strong solidarity by the pupils in the schools of the middle class or bourgeois areas.

The main event was the very tough fights which broke out in the big demonstrations in Paris, between the students and groups of kids who came from the banlieus to attack the students and steal their mobile phones, money, etc. The police did not intervene. It was very violent and lots of kids were injured. Many of the kids attacked were themselves from the suburban schools. Several discussions took place after that to analyse what happened. Did the police let things happen, why this hate amongst the kids, does it have a symbolic class sense?, etc. A good text which discusses all these questions, “Pourquoi j’irais encore manifester avec les lycéens”, can be found in on the web site http://paris.indymedia.org/envoyer_auteur.php3?id_article=33728.

During this first period, two schools unions emerged, more or less related to the traditional left (socialist, communists) and which got a lot of media support and even government recognition, and who tried to channel and direct the movement. But after these events, which created a lot of fear and disturbed many kids (even if they understood what happened), the movement subsided.

Soon after this a second period started, with a strong radicalisation of a strong minority organised around local committees, and with a broad base of ‘coordination’. The unions lost all control and practically disappeared from the picture. The students moved from the street demonstrations to other actions: occupation of schools and more and more occupation of official buildings. Since then school life has been very disturbed in many schools all over the country. The people active became very political in a few days. The “school demands” were related to the general state of society and the social crisis. They have the support of the most radical teachers and a timid support from the teachers unions.

The government refuses to deal with this active political movement and is using increasingly repressive methods, hundreds of arrests each time. Before the last demonstration, they arrested the majority of the coordination members in Paris, but that has not changed anything in the mood of the movement and in the actions. The girls are very active in the movement, probably more than the boys and, of course, besides the Trotskyists groups, the anarchists and anarcho-syn-

dicalist tendencies have developed fast in this milieu in a few weeks. In short, this movement expresses the general current tendencies of the struggle in French society: large social discontent and anger and, facing it, a refusal to negotiate from the capitalists and the State.

The present stage of capitalism and the European situation gives no margin for this negotiation. The movements became very political in an offensive direction: going beyond corporate issues and raising general questions about the social conditions, which deteriorate day by day. The traditional institutions, such as the unions, created on the basis of the negotiation process have no space and cannot play a role in such movements. The movements remain isolated one from the other, but they express common goals and a common content. The solidarity feelings became strong, expressing this feeling.

University Occupation in Nanterre and Website on Autonomous Student Struggles

End of last year there were several actions and occupations against the lack of cheap accommodation for students at the university of Nanterre and against the increasing control and surveillance within the university area. A new website in French about 'autonomous struggles' at universities was set up recently: <http://trashfac.freesevers.com>

School Occupation, Oldenburg, Germany

15th of March 2005 (indymedia). "Today school students from several schools in Oldenburg occupied the IGS Helene Lang School in order to protest against the current educational policy of the CDU/FDP regional government. Instead of the usual chalk and talk of class teaching, self-organised learning was on the agenda. Several topics were covered by about 50 workshops: theatre, drumming, juggling, various sports, games and dances were accompanied by work-shops on environmental care, educational politics and social selection, antiracism and migration politics, communism and marxist critique of capitalism, drug politics and self-organisation of students. Several documentaries and political movies were shown in two cinema rooms. Nearly all work-shops reported a lively engagement and discussion. For the surprised and partly disapproving teachers there was a work-shop, too, which unfortunately wasn't very well attended".

School Strike in Munich, Germany

18th of March (indymedia) In March school students in Munich went on strike against having to pay for school books and tuition fees. Based on a report from Indymedia. [<http://de.indymedia.org/2005/03/109957.shtml>]

In the early morning of the 18th of March several pickets of school and university students gathered in front of grammar, vocational and secondary schools in order to start the strike. The reaction of the headmasters varied from passivity, locking in students, calling the cops to announcing threats via loudspeakers (warnings and actual threats to kick students out of school if they take part in the protest). The demonstrations which started from various schools met at 9 o'clock at Bonner Platz. There were speeches of the SDAJ (Socialist Workers' Youth of Germany), the FAU (Anarcho-Syndicalists), and lefty students from the university. At Scheidplatz the demonstration of over a thousand students (the daily newspaper SZ reported of 2.500 participants) left the official route in order to occupy the Willi Graf Grammar School. The protesters didn't manage to enter the building quick enough, so the head master was able to lock the school gates. Some students climbed over the fences or tried to get in through alternative entrances. In this situation the aggressive attitude of the teachers has to be mentioned. In two cases we saw teachers hitting students and one protester was handed over to the plainclothes cops and charged with assault. At the same moment the cops who were called for enforcement arrived and blocked the entrances with drawn batons. The slogans sprayed within the school area underlined the demands of the students: 'Everything for Everyone', 'Education for Everyone' and 'One Solution - Revolution'.

The demonstration after the failed occupation

The demo headed towards Münchner Freiheit and the cops were eager to prevent the students from passing another school. There were a lot of black-and-red flags and a band was playing on the truck of the FAU, the atmosphere was good, although the USK (nasty Bavarian riot squad) appeared and accompanied the demo. Later on about one hundred students walked to the Max Grammar School in order to liberate the students who were still locked in. In front of the grammar school riot cops chased some of the arriving students. We don't know if there were any arrests. After that about 500 people gathered in a spontaneous demo and joined the student demo at the Geschwister-Scholl Platz.

Conclusions

School occupations are an extension of possible activities and have been successfully put into practice in other places (link to school occupation report from Oldenburg [see above]). In future we need better preparation. Compared to the following demo, the school strike had a clear anti-capitalist and left-wing character, also the atmosphere was better. For more information: <http://www.kostenlose-bildung.de/>

Canada: Students blocked the Port of Montréal

16th of March. Between 60,000 and 100,000 militant students marched in Montréal on March 16, 2005. Thousands more marched in Québec City, Sherbrooke, Trois-Rivière, and just about every other Québec locality with a CEGEP (somewhat similar to U.S. community colleges) or University. Students blocked the Port of Montréal, closed down the lucrative Montréal casino, blocked Federal Highway 40, and occupied various government and Liberal party offices in Québec City and Montréal - often for days at a time. In all, close to 300,000 students went on strike, closing almost all public higher education in Quebec for up to seven weeks (and continuing on many campuses). Up to 15,000 secondary school students joined demonstrations in solidarity - with backing from the teacher's unions. Many University and CEGEP professors' and administrators' associations also endorsed the strike - as did a wide range of Quebec's other labor unions.

The strike began February 23 with a walkout by 30,000 CEGEP and University students, organized by the most radical of the three major student associations, CASSÉÉ (a coalition of the Association for Student Union Solidarity - ASSÉÉ - and unaffiliated student groups). The motivating grievance was a drastic cut in student stipends from the Quebec government, announced by the Liberal Minister of Education - some 103 million Dollars (Canadian Dollars - US equivalent about 80 million Dollars) per year, beginning with this academic year's promised amount. ASSÉÉ included in its demands an end to the Liberal government's planned privatization and decentralization of some CEGEPs and other higher education programs, as well as a call for free tuition, and "humanistic curricula."

Tuition in Quebec is already the lowest in Canada - which is, of course, lower than almost all public institutions in the United States. Disabled and very low income students receive further assistance, which were not included in the cuts. Yet student groups were nearly unanimous in outrage at the take back of scholarship money. The two largest federations of students - FECQ for CEGEPs and FEUQ for universities - endorsed the strike almost immediately. Even traditionally conservative associations representing students in medicine, law, business and education, joined in. The elite private, English-speaking universities took symbolic but important steps by staging a one-day strike (Concordia) and issuing supportive statements - though the militant atmosphere did not carry over to the Anglo institutions, for the most part. (Concordia's radical student government was ousted after a huge and heavily funded media campaign vilifying its pro-Palestinian stance last year.) Among the French-speaking,

working-class students, CASSÉÉ itself grew rapidly in membership - now up to about 60,000.

And the strike has been a huge success. On April 3, the Liberal government caved almost completely on the student stipends - promising to restore immediately 70 million Dollars this year, and to return to the 103 million Dollars for coming years. They also shelved immediate plans for privatization and decentralization (seen as an attempt to divide students). (from: April 15, 2005, Lessons for US Radicals, Students Rise Again in Québec, by Tom Reeves)

Slovakia: Fourth student protest this year

17th of March. For the fourth time this academic year, hundreds of students gathered in the streets to protest the proposed law requiring university students to pay tuition fees. Last time they gathered in front of the Government Office, while this time they protested in front of the Slovak parliament. Students showed their dissent by chanting slogans, carrying banners and demanding, once again, Education Minister Martin Fronc's resignation. The rally was organised by the ad hoc created Student's Strike Committee, which describes itself as an independent body struggling for the rights of students and high-quality university education. The students asked the deputies to come out and support them. However, only the communist party representatives and one independent deputy did so. The protesters argued that the reform doesn't guarantee an increase in quality and that paying for university would start a scheme that can be described as "I am paying, so give me my diploma". According to some recent studies, over 30 percent of students plan to leave to study abroad, if the tuition fees are indeed introduced.

20th of April (SMI). Thousands of secondary school students across Slovakia called for Education Minister Martin Fronc to resign in a national protest on April 20. The demonstrations came as a result of problems in this year's school leaving examinations as well as because of the new system of leaving exams as a whole.

Italy: Don't Work, Be Happy...

18th of March. ...slogan of school students on the demonstration of public sector workers. On the 18th of March over 200,000 public sector workers marched in Rome protesting against the fact that the government hadn't prolonged their work contracts. The social workers demanded to be employed by the council. Home care and work in youth centres is often organised by so-called cooperatives. The workers employed by cooperatives have limited contracts, don't get paid holiday and sick pay.

update.car-industry

As an update on the situation and strikes in the car industry in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Germany and Italy we took some material from several (leftist and not) newspapers. The struggle at Dräxlnmaier in Bremen, Germany, is yet another example of the industrial power workers have in their hands in post-fordism. Dräxlnmaier is one of the main German direct investors in Romania and other countries in Eastern Europe. The (wildcat) strike at Skoda in the Czech Republic and the spontaneous protests at Fiat Mirafiori in Italy counterpose the silent closure of the Rover factory in Britain (see also the articles on Skoda and Citroën in this edition of the newsletter and those on Daimler, GM/Opel and others in 'pro-position news' #1).

First strike for thirteen years at Skoda, Czech Republic

[See also other article on this strike in this newsletter.] 30th of March. Some 12,000 of the 21,000 employees at Skoda walked off the job for an hour on the 30th of March, putting the company 240 cars under its daily quota of about 2,000. Negotiations began with the unions, which originally demanded a 10 percent wage increase, while management offered a straight cost-of-inflation increase of 2.8 percent. In the new collective agreement signed between Skoda management and the unions that goes into effect retroactively from April 1st, employees will receive a 7 percent wage increase, for the regular wage and the 13th salary. In addition, they will receive an annual bonus of 3,500 Kc, said Jaromir Cvrcek, a trade union spokesman. This has been the highest wage increase since the transition/end of socialist regime in 1989/90. Skoda is the Czech unit of Germany's Volkswagen. The Czech workers earn about 800 Euros per month, which is the lowest income of the Volkswagen Group. Comrades from the Czech Republic told us that the demonstrations and roadblocks were more or less under union control and that they heard of anti-German slogans being put forward by the unions ('We are not a German colony'). The media warned openly that the strike at Skoda could spread to other international companies and car suppliers in the Czech Republic, such as Bosch, Siemens, Panasonic, and Philips.

Siemens wants to close down plant for automobile parts and re-locate production to the Czech Republic

April, 2005. After the Easter holiday 2005 it became official: about 1250 jobs will be cut in Würzburg/Germany and re-located to Ostrava in the Czech Republic. The metal union in Germany reacts as usual: they

complain about the anti-patriotic management, they beg politicians for solidarity and they organise toothless symbolic protests, such as a human chain around the factory, on the 15th of April 2005. Nevertheless the rank-and-file union members talk about a 'combative atmosphere' and refer to 'the loss unemployment benefit and the difficulty to survive on Hartz IV money (see article in newsletter n.1)' as the main fear and driving force of the workers.

US-company Danaher closes NEFF (automation and driving technology) in Waldenbuch, Germany

22nd of April, 2005. The US company bought the supplying company and wants to re-locate production to Brno in the Czech Republic. The unions organised actions similar to those at Siemens. There is also a website with info on the stage of resistance.

<http://www.arbeitnehmer-danaher.de>

Slovakia: Argument about labor-shortage

April 13th, 2005. In this country, car-producers have to deal with an unknown problem: the lack of qualified employees. In Slovakia it is already by far the biggest industry. In 2004, according to the Slovakian weekly newspaper for economics "Trend", the automobile industry reached a turnover of 310 billion crores (roughly 8,2 billion Euros), accounting for 25 percent of the overall industrial production of the country.

Volkswagen Slovakia is, according to Minister Mikuš Dzurinda, the "motor of the Slovakian economy". In addition to Volkswagen and its many car-suppliers, two big car-factories are coming into the country with PSA Peugeot Citroën in Trnava and Kia in Žilina. The concentration of such firms will, of course, attract other suppliers. The automobile sector will also be the biggest employer of the country by far. According to a prognosis of the federation of the Slovakian automobile industry, Slovakia, ultimately, is supposed to produce 800.000 cars per year by 2007, when PSA and Kia reach full production.

Volkswagen Slovakia employees more than 9000 employees already, according to its own statements. PSA and Kia want to hire between 2300 and 2800 employees each. A multiple of those numbers of employees will be required by employers in the supplier industry.

Assessments project that in five years up to 100,000 people will be employed by the automobile industry. And so investors, who are coming in streams, are threatened with the paradoxical situation, that they will have to vie for qualified workers, despite an unemployment rate of almost 18 percent. [In German: http://www.pragerzeitung.cz/?c_id=5754]

Strike at car supplier Dräxlmaier in Germany stops production in DaimlerChrysler plant

6th of April 2005. About 50 to 60 of the 336 workers at Dräxlmaier (Bremen) blocked the factory gates on Monday, 4th of April. They demanded a collective contract and the reduction of working time plus wage compensation. Dräxlmaier is not a member of the employers' association, the working week amounts to 40 hours and wages are well below the wages of the collective contract. The management has also established an arbitrary bonus system, which further antagonised the workers. The final straw was the recent announcement of the management to dismiss and re-locate staff.

The plant in Bremen produces about 92 to 100 inside linings for the Mercedes sportscars SL and CLS. The workers combined their strike with a blockade of the factory gates and patrols, given that the management tried to load lorries with work material through a breach in the fence. At 12 o'clock the same day, when the assembly lines came to a halt in the nearby Mercedes factory, the management used helicopters in order to get parts out of the Draexlmaier factory. They were able to transport 25 to 30 of the inside linings. Production at the Mercedes plant was resumed two and a half hours later. Mercedes management confirmed that production had been affected by the strike, but refused to announce the number of cars lost that day. The helicopters also transported scabs, and not for free: about 300 Euros per minute for the three helicopters plus 1,500 Euros per hour for the local fire brigade. Thanks to a summary proceeding, the management won a legal decision which put an end to the blockade of the gates on the next Tuesday at 3 p.m.. The regional police forces were alarmed about the possibility of resistance against the decision of the court. There were some scuffles at the gate and ten lorries had to leave empty, but a big clash was avoided, also due to the announcement of the union to stop the blocking of the gates. The management had threatened the strikers with a penalty of 250.000 Euros in case the workers would have continued the blockade.

A worker told the 'Rote Fahne': "Most of us are members of the IG Metall (metal union), and the local reps give us advice, but we decide what to do ourselves. We want an official ballot, so that the union pays us strike money, but we continue the strike anyway. We won't go back to work before the management agrees to an acceptable collective contract. So far the management offers are arbitrary. There are about 20 scabs here and some temp workers, who have been hired for that purpose. The management promised the scabs that in case of redundancies they would get paid their wages for another year. Once the stock is empty the produc-

tion at Mercedes will stop again, with gate blockages or without".

On the 8th of April the strike officially finished. The union announced that negotiations have taken place or will take place, but it didn't make the results public. According to union information there might be an official ballot for an unlimited strike in the near future.

Dräxlmaier opens new production unit in Hunedoara/Romania

25th of May 2004. Dräxlmaier has invested 15 Million Euros in Romania, the firm's fifth direct investment in the country since the opening of plants in Pitesti, Timisoara/Temeswar, Satu-Mare and Brasov/Kronstadt. The investment in Hunedoara secures about 600 jobs and by the end of the year 400 more workers are supposed to be employed. Dräxlmaier has invested over 120 Million Euros in total and is one of the most important foreign investors in Romania. The Group has 40 production units worldwide and employs 23,000 workers.

More spontaneous strikes at Fiat Mirafiori, Italy

21st of April 2005. Today Turin saw another short and spontaneous strike of blue and white collar workers at the Fiat factory Mirafiori. Last week, on the 12th of April, an assembly which was supposed to prepare a four-hours general strike in the metal sector on the 15th of April turned into a spontaneous occupation of the avenue Corso Agnelli in front of the factory. Surprisingly many office workers took part in the action. One reason for the protest is the announcement of the management to transfer 1,300 workers into the 'Cassa Integrazione' (people are sent home for a certain period, they get a small compensation paid by the state). The office workers know that Fiat is in deep crisis and that the announced three month of 'cassa integrazione' won't be management's last measure. The strike today was also combined with an occupation of the avenue in front of Mirafiori; the workers want to extend their protest beyond the factory gates.

Final crisis of Rover in the UK

On the occasion of the final crisis of Rover in the UK the Socialist Equality Party (Britain) published a detailed article on the development of the automobile industry in Great Britain: 'The closure of MG Rover and the need for an international perspective'. Have a look at: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2005/apr2005/rov1-a26.shtml>