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prol-position news

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The current riots in France are just another sign of the desperate situation capitalism's current development has created for a large fraction of the working classes all over the world. While a section of the young migrant youth is being expelled, like in the banlieus in France, with no capital wanting to exploit it, other sections are being squeezed even harder in the factories, warehouses and offices. All of them have to deal with surviving, with making their voices heard, and fighting for their interests. Struggles are developing faster and become more radical in form, but so far there does not seem to be much to win. Capitalist crisis and the de-funding of the state institutions limits the space for individual capitalists and the state compromising with proletarian demands. And despite seeing more people in rebelling against poor living conditions, the perspective of revolution, of liberation from capitalist exploitation within the struggles is not at all visible. This leads to a range of questions, from the isolation of the different parts of the working classes, to the role of desperation and violence, and that of religious and other movements.

This edition of the newsletter contains some articles on the increased exploitation, the attempts of capital to re-locate in the search for cheaper labor, and the (subse-

quent) problems and struggles both in the old and new regions. We aim is to shed more light on the different situations and struggles of workers in order to better understand the current developments - and to discover how we can intervene and support these struggles.

The first two articles in this edition are on a **struggle of workers in the catering industry at the airport of Düsseldorf, Germany**. The company, Gate Gourmet, saw another strike in August this year at the London-Heathrow airport where the workers got the support of other airport employees. The airport was shut-down for about two days. The workers in Düsseldorf do not get that kind of support, but so far - after about seven weeks of strike - they are still picketing and trying to block delivery trucks...

The main focus in this edition is on Polish workers, who have a long tradition of migration. But since Poland and other Eastern European countries joined the European Union in May 2004 a new phase has started. While most Western European countries in the EU did not open their labor markets to workers from the new member-states, Britain and Ireland did (see more in ppnews #2). Now Polish migrant workers are standing up against low wages, long working hours and lousy working conditions. Are they taking the lead and showing other workers how to resist and fight? Read the articles on their **struggles at Tesco in Ireland**, in the **British meat industry**, and in the **shipyards and other places in France**. See also the articles on **workers' resistance in a Lodz/Poland appliance factory** and on **French investments in Eastern Europe**.

The next two articles deal with the situation in factories and warehouses in Germany. Besides the Hartz IV welfare reform (see ppnews #1 and #3) that creates new pressures for a large part of the German working class there is also a process of work flexibilisation and re-location of certain industries, both attacks on the labor standards. See the article on **the closing of a Bosch-Siemens washing machine plant in Berlin** and the conditions in a **Hewlett-Packard warehouse in Duisburg**.

The article on **mobilizations in the Greek textile industry** shows how workers fight industrial re-location

but without other workers involvement: "Workers respond to the closures with demonstrations, strikes and occupations but they seem incapable of reversing these developments by appealing to other parts of the working class and generalizing the struggle."

India is undergoing a process of economic growth and many compare its development with that of China in the last 15 years. But behind the numbers on foreign investments, new industrial zones, a growing middle class, and mobile phones sold per year lies another reality, that of the workers in the new factories who - after a few years of working in the factories - have learned to fight back. Read about the **strike of Honda workers in the region of Gurgaon**, the brutal police attacks, and the subsequent workers' riots. This is followed by another **update on the struggles in the car industry** and an article on the **growing social tensions in Iran**, on investments by the car and other industries, and, again, the flip side: low wages, poverty, unemployment, and working class struggles.

Two articles on the situation in the United States deal with **developments after Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans** and the **difficulties facing the US Army in finding more black recruits**, a serious problem for US government war plans.

Finally, we translate the text of a **Wildcat-poster** added to edition 69, Spring 2004, a text that brings us back to the questions posed above: "Which way to the revolution, please? Capitalism has been stagnating for thirty years. For the last twenty years, the social system and people's working conditions have been under attack from above; and for almost ten years, there has been a worldwide movement denouncing the injustice of this system. Why do so many people still stay so quiet? Why doesn't capitalism finally give up and die?" After all the other texts on bad conditions and struggles against it, some closing food for thought.

Stay tuned...

air-catering

It's been three weeks since this article was written but the strike of the Gate Gourmet catering workers in Düsseldorf is still going on (22nd of November). In August Gate Gourmet workers had been on strike against sackings at the airport in London-Heathrow. They were soon supported by British Airways groundworkers so the airport was broad to a standstill for almost two days. The management accepted to reinstate part of the sacked workers and pay higher compensations to others. Unfortunately, the workers in Düsseldorf do not have that kind of support, yet. But there are still fighting and hope to organize enough pressure. Read the following article and the up-date to find out

how to support them... (More information: <http://www.labournet.de/branchen/dienstleistung/gast/ggduess.html>)

Strike at Gate Gourmet in Düsseldorf

Acts of Solidarity are needed – and possible: in Atlanta, Bangkok, Copenhagen, Hong Kong, Johannesburg, Karachi, Madrid, New York, Paris, Quito, Rio de Janeiro, Stockholm, Sydney, Tokyo and more places in the world...

The catering company Gate Gourmet became known worldwide through a spectacular strike at London Heathrow Airport which caused turbulence in international air-traffic. (see also http://www.iuf.org/cgi-bin/dbman/db.cgi?db=default&uid=default&ID=2360&view_records=1&ww=1&en=1)

Since October 7, workers in Düsseldorf of the worldwide multinational (according to a self-portrayal: "150 branches on five continents, with 26,000 employees") are on strike. Out of 120 employees, 85 are actively on strike and stay at their strike-tent in front of the company's gate around the clock. A saying against the strike breakers written with white paint on the street of the company's ground ("Schleimspur für Streikbrecher") loosely means continuing to work is the slimy way for scabs to kiss up to management. Passing strike breakers get cat-calls. But visitors who come in solidarity get coffee and rolls and information about the course and background of the strike.

The strikers are an outstanding, strong group and they point out that now they have gotten to know each other much better during the strike than before, despite the fact that some of them had worked together for sixteen years. Because they didn't have common break-times, and enormous amounts of work to do there was no time for conversations during work. More than half of the employees are migrants, most of them coming to Germany from Turkey, but also from Poland, Morocco, Croatia, Greece, Sri Lanka or Brazil. Obviously this has no negative affect on their solidarity.

"It was just enough!"

The main reason for the strike was the steady growth of stress at work and new impertinences by the management. They had no increase in wages in three years. In the last two years, the workers had given back half of their Christmas bonus. Now the management wants to enact deeper aggravations: extensions of the weekly working hours from 38.5 to 40 hours, shortening of the yearly vacation by about five days to 25 days, more flexibility with working hours and a reduction of bonuses for night shift, Sunday work and holidays. The counter offer of the union, NGG (Nahrungsmittel, Genuss, Gaststätten, union for the food industry and restaurants), to compensate for the changes is a wage

rise of 4.5 percent. When the negotiations failed, 93 percent of the workers voted for the strike.

The business in Düsseldorf, formerly LTC, was taken over by the multinational Gate Gourmet. The company agreement after the takeover had already worsened the working conditions. Since then, the work became more and more intensified. On the line, where they equip 10-15,000 food trays a day, they don't have any breaks anymore. The drivers, who bring the catering/meals to the airplanes, by their own estimates figured that they walk 15-20 km and move 10 tons per hand per shift. The workers get a lot of pressure through the threat of layoffs without notice, formal reprimands for the smallest things and home calls when they are sick. In summer, they have to work 10-hour shifts to compensate for the fact that there are not enough workers. The works council agreed to the longer hours. Most of the workers are between 50-70 hours ahead on their work hour accounts. The strike is not only about the 4.5 percent wage increase, but about the whole situation – a situation that is not uncommon nowadays. It is uncommon that the workers are fighting back.

Organized break of the strike

The strike has cost the company a lot of money already and has disturbed the service of the airlines. Gate Gourmet serves LTU, Air France, Iberia, Air Maroc, Turkish Airlines, Scandinavian Airlines, Deutsche BA, Egypt Air, and others. In the beginning, flights had delays which caused enormous contract penalties. Towards the official claim that the work is running normally despite the strike, the strikers report that the strike breakers have huge difficulties in coping with the unknown work. From the viewpoint of the airport, they observe that the delivery and loading of the catering into airplanes doesn't work as smoothly as before. Nevertheless, the company succeeded in half way maintaining their production for 23 days. To weaken the impact of the strike, the company invests in strike breakers and additional security to protect the gates and the strike breakers from the rage of their colleagues.

Beneath the little strike breakers for Gate Gourmet in Düsseldorf, there are three of nine works councils members who refused to strike. That includes the former shop chairman and his deputy, both were deselected three month ago. "They'd rather represent the company than the employees," reported a worker at the strike tent. Even some of the bosses are forced to now work in production. But most current workers are from other Gate Gourmet locations (Frankfurt, Munich, Stockholm...). The union NGG, which had organized the strike in Düsseldorf, can't do anything against it because those workers are organized at Ver.di (service union)!? Additional strike breakers are coming

from two different temp agencies, Tertia from Krefeld and G+A in Duisburg. Also, a few Chinese students are still working, yet the strikers have some understanding for their situation: "They depend on that job, they can't do anything."

A big part of the loss of the production is balanced by deliveries from locations in Frankfurt (Zeppelinheim and Kelsterbach). On October 19, a delegation of 25 workers went to Frankfurt to talk to their colleagues. They couldn't get into the location because the executive producer and a works council representative stopped them in front of the gate.

Solidarity

The strikers demonstrated at the airport compound two times and distributed leaflets to passengers. Another demonstration, maybe in downtown Düsseldorf, is under discussion (see: www.ngg.net). But Gate Gourmet is present at many airports around the world, so it presents plentiful opportunities to get active. We can show this multinational that we are everywhere as well and we can inform workers at different locations who probably face similar problems as the strikers in Düsseldorf. The further course of the strike will particularly depend on the success of preventing the strike break. When the strike at the catering division affects international air traffic, which happened massively in Heathrow due to the solidarity strike of the ground staff of British Airways, then the workers will succeed in their struggle.

By now, many solidarity addresses for NGG arrived at the strike tent, including international ones, even a letter from IWW in Australia. The works council of the temp agency G+A came over and promised to try to talk their management into not sending workers anymore. If you want to visit the strikers: go to Bahnhof Düsseldorf-Flughafen (not terminal), go downstairs and walk along the sky train in the direction of the terminal, shortly behind the LTU-plant you will see banners and the strikers' tent. (*October 29th, 2005, 23rd day of strike, Wildcat Köln, koeln@wildcat-www.de*)

Gate Gourmet locations worldwide under: <http://www.gategourmet.com/797/798/835.asp>

foodie weapons

Spread Cheese against Scabs

18th of November. The strike at Gate Gourmet against the deterioration of the working conditions and the lowering of the wages is on for 43 days now.

The company uses scabs from other Gate Gourmet locations and temp agencies.

When today around noon a Gate Gourmet truck with meals for an aeroplane tried to leave the company grounds it was blocked by about 70 strikers and some supporters.

The truck-driver, a scab from a different Gate Gourmet location, ruthlessly continued driving forward, but the strikers held out in front of the truck pressing against it. Security guards from the firm Chevalier tried to pull people away and started hitting them but they could not break the blockade. Instead the truck-front got damaged and apples, icecream and curd cheese were thrown from behind.

When finally the truck front window was smeared with spread cheese (fat content 40 per cent) the driver could not see anything anymore and gave up. Cheers from the crowd followed, and the embellished truck was driven back onto the company ground. When the police came and asked the strikers to finally let the truck drive through, it was nevertheless blocked again. There were some scuffles, minutes passed, but in the end when the police threatened to make arrests the truck could get through.

The whole thing lasted more than an hour and no trucks could leave or enter the Gate Gourmet premises.

Some workers from LSG, the biggest catering-firm for airlines world-wide, were passing by in their trucks, driving very slowly and showing their solidarity by honking. Other LSG-workers had come by earlier in the week to show their support. They understand that the cheap labor at Gate Gourmet also puts their (still better) working conditions and jobs in danger.

Summary of a report written by Wildcat Köln, German version: <http://de.indymedia.org/2005/11/132964.shtml>

food warehouse

This interview, done by Jasoslaw Urbanski, was published in July 2005 in the Polish monthly Nowy Robotnik and in Wildcat no.74, summer 2005.

"We are picking 800 - No more!" Interview with Polish Temp-Worker in Ireland

How did you get to Ireland?

For ten month I had worked for a company in Poznan/ Poland as a sales-man. After they hadn't renewed my work contract I decided to go abroad in order to earn

some money. A friend had told me that wages in Ireland are not that bad and that there aren't any bigger problems to find a job. I decided quite quickly. I arrived in Dublin with 100 Euros in my pockets. I was lucky to be able to sleep in friends' houses and not having had to pay for hotels. My expenditures I reduced to buying cheap food.

How did you start working at Tesco?

I looked for a job in all kind of ways: I applied at shops which announced 'Employee wanted', I used the service of the job centre FAS (which is similar to polish job offices although much more effective and friendly to the job seekers) and I asked acquaintances. At the FAS I met two Polish women who told me about the job agency Grafton. Recently this company started its activities in Poland, as well, in order to recruit workers for the bigger companies, amongst others for Tesco. It was a Friday when I arrived with my CV in the Grafton office; on Monday I already had a concrete meeting with the manager and on Tuesday I started working at Tesco Distribution in the storage depot. You have to admit that the work agencies work quickly.

How did the irregularities and exploitation at Tesco look like?

In the huge depot where I work now since seven month there are workers who have a permanent contract with Tesco and workers employed by an agency. I belong to the latter group, together with a lot of other Polish and some people from Slovakia, Lithuania, the Czech Republic, Hungary and a few Irish. The permanents are mainly from Ireland plus some black people (due to political correctness), Russians, Turks, French. And also a Polish guy who had started working before Poland joined the EU. After a short time I realised that these two groups (temps/permanents) not only differ in terms of nationalities. The permanents earn at least 12.50 Euros per hour, depending on how long you work on a certain job in the company. Every few month they got a wage increase. We still only get 9.52 Euros, although some of us work for the agency for over a year now. No wage rises! Due to that we only get about 360 Euros per week, although we do the same work. The permanents get extra money on Christmas and on Easter, we don't. The permanents work every second, we have to work every Saturday. There are a lot of these little differences. Every temp worker dreams about getting a permanent contract at Tesco and to be freed from the agency. But that would nearly require a miracle. Tesco has an elaborated policy and knows for sure that people from Eastern Europe would work happily for 7.60 per hour (minimum wage in Ireland). In addition to that Tesco gets rid of the responsibility

by employing people through temp agencies. The temp agencies hire us, they pay us, hand out the weekly pay slips, shift us from one depot to the other, according to the clients requirements, they pay our social security and compensation in cases of work accidents. In legal terms we are only temporary staff. What that means for our rights is difficult to say, even for lawyers. In these times of migration they were clever to install this system which enables them to exploit the workers from the East to the max, them not knowing their rights and desperately looking for a job. We worked within this system up to the moment where the managers started to enforce higher daily work norms, a higher work load. Roughly spoken our work consists in sorting products. We pick stuff from Euro-palettes and sort it into specific containers which are then delivered to nearly all Tesco-supermarkets in Ireland. Our main task is 'picking'. We know that the Irish permanents picked about 500 boxes a day. That was before the extension of the EU. If they picked more than this unofficial norm they got some extra money. When the Polish arrived it was said that 750 boxes per shift are supposed to be picked. I can remember that number from my first working days of my career at Tesco. About two month ago the managers announced in informal meetings that it would be fine to pick 800 or 850. Those who dreamt most vividly about a permanent contract at Tesco picked already 1400 boxes and a guy from Slovakia broke the record by picking 1900 box during a seven and a half hour night-shift. One month ago, when they announced that the norm is now 900, we - six Guys, all from Poland - went to the shift manager and asked him about what was going on. During the training period we had seen videos for hours saying that we are supposed to take care of our backs and now we are supposed to pick 900. He said that we could go home, if we don't like the work, and that a lot of people are only waiting to do our jobs.

How did you react to the attempt to squeeze so much out of you?

On the next day I went to work with my t-shirt, where I had written in big letters: *We are picking 800. No more.* Although it was Saturday, the top manager appeared straight away and called me into his office. He called the boss of Grafton there too. Then they both put me through the ringer for about two hours. Why had I written that? Whether my back hurt? What my colleagues thought about it? They were very nice, careful and polite. They even ordered me a vegetarian pizza because I had missed my lunch break.

During our meeting I got an SMS for my work mates in the hall "We are with you", which was really important. The guys even came up to the office door and let

it be clearly heard that they were there! I insisted that the norm should not be any higher than 800 boxes. They asked me not to wear this controversial t-shirt any more. I asked the Grafton representative what he would do if I didn't take it off. He said then they may have to sack me. Then I threatened him with the union, at which point he very quickly changed the subject.

That was a good day. We were all sure of our - so it seemed - successful resistance. The Irish showed us solidarity, when they saw my t-shirt they gave the thumbs up and mentioned Lech Walesa. They gave some good advice. The next thing were the people from the SIPTU Union (Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union) introducing themselves to us and telling us, what most of us already knew - that we are exploited and it would be time for us to organise! They encouraged us to join the union on mass so that they could successfully represent us. I had known of the SIPTU for a few months and had even tried to had in a membership application, but Grafton, as my employer, had blocked my membership. It came out later that they had no right to do this.

What happened then?

The following week on of the top SIPTU activists visited our workplace. Temp workers from all the three shifts had a meeting with him. The guy told us they would help us. SIPTU is the largest union in Ireland, one often hears of their actions on the radio, there are adverts for them in the busses. They are very active. They had already helped us with some small questions, after an announcement by the SIPTU at the *Jobs Agency* (previously *Job Shop*) the guys had immediately got their P60 accounts, which they needed for their tax year calculations.

How many of you joined the union?

I that that during this time half the temp workers at Tesco joined the SIPTU. Maybe a third. Many workers hesitated, partly because they were only working here for the holidays and would go back to their own countries in three months. Others were afraid to stick their necks out too far. There were also those for whom the 3.75 Euros membership fee per week was simply too much. They didn't understand that they could win more by joining. At the moment there is a new employment law coming in Ireland. Situations like the one we find ourselves in at the moment, will be illegal: that we do the exact same work as the permanent workers, but earn 200 Euros less per week! The SIPTU are doing intense lobbying work to change this sick situation.

What is your daily life like at Tesco at the moment?

The SIPTU are currently preparing a complaint

against Grafton and Jobs about all their irregularities. The next thing to go to the employment tribunal is about the sacking of our colleagues last week, who did not reach the imposed norms. It was cleverly arranged. Tesco told the temp agencies which workers had to go. The agency told the guy in a very rude way, that he didn't have any more work, AND they told him at 6 in the morning in front of the gates to the warehouse when he went to sign in for his shift. There were two such cases. Legally the agency should find the person another job, for at least the same wage. They also have to pay any time in-between, if they do not find new work right away. Most people don't know that, which benefits the agency. If you don't demand any holiday pay, you can be sure the agency won't remember to give you this all by themselves!

For three weeks now the daily norm is now 1000 boxes for us! Finally it became clear that our resistance was not successful and our joy unfounded. The manager invited us all one by one to a meeting as said, like old friends, we all have to achieve more, and it is an order from above, that they can't influence at all. Sure they like us and all, but if it doesn't suit us, then they will have to get rid of us and get new workers. And finally, when some of us can pick 1200 or even 1400, why can't the rest of us pick 1000? With this they managed to talk many of us into picking 1000 and more and more of the guys are now doing this. And this really puts pressure on our backs! There are only a few of us remaining, who are staying on the 800 limit. We are ready to act, but we counting on the union helping us.

How do you think this conflict will end up?

After the success of the 't-shirt action' I wanted to just go ahead and form a temp workers committee at Tesco. We even met at work to discuss this. I thought of a press conference to really publicise the issue widely. It is clear that Tesco is afraid of public criticism. When it came out how badly they were treating the workers from the east, it damaged their carefully constructed image. But most of our circle thought that it wouldn't make sense, we wouldn't have a chance against such a huge Colossus. There was only a handful of us radicals, actually only three who were prepared to risk our jobs in order to preserve our dignity and - and a healthy spine. Afterwards the idea was taken care of by the committee. But I think it will perhaps also bring some results, if we rely on the SIPTU. They are the professionals. They have got employees, offices, support amongst the people. As an anarchist I do not get along with everyone, which is not the case for the SIPTU. And if the agency tells me that I will not be working for Tesco any more, maybe then I will chain myself to the forklift truck. Since they

sacked one of us for not fulfilling the norm, I have been going to work with my t-shirt again: *We are picking 800. No more.* I am determined to resist until the end. Luckily I have not fallen victim to the slave syndrome that has spread amongst our countrymen!

meat factory

This is the summary of a collectively revised discussion paper including fact briefing on the Crewe Polish migrant worker scandal and its possible solution, written by Martin Kraemer after helping out in translating between Crewe unionists and Polish migrant workers, June 2005

Polish work gangs in Britain

In the last months, T & G Union has evolved a campaign to unionise the workforce of a very aggressive convenience food company, Grampians Country Food Group. This group controls around 50 percent of the British Convenience food sector. It puts tough price pressure and logistic on suppliers and is itself submitted to significant pressure from the supermarket chains. It sticks to an aggressive anti-union policy. The plant at Winsford near Crewe in Cheshire with around five hundred manual workers was opened in autumn 2004. In the course of campaigning for independent trade union representation the T&G Union came across the preparative moves of what appears to be a massive operation aiming to replace contracted (mainly British workers) with temporary agency-driven staff from Eastern Europe, the Baltic Republics, Spain and Portugal, a clear majority of them originating from Poland. Within the last months entire factories have been cleaned of contracted workers and seem to be taken over by agency-controlled migrant labour.

According to T&G research a 300 workers Grampian plant is already operating on a Poles-only basis. The convenience food sector could actually head towards a curious situation of negative racism in its employment policy. Polish work gangs are organised in groups of 5 to 15, mainly around 9 people, often mixed male and female, which are mainly housed in one place and bussed to and out of work with minibuses operated by their agency. Every worker is stopped 12 pounds out of her or his net wages declared on the wage slip for transport. Such stoppage is seriously overpriced, illegal and most probably linked to tax fraud by the agency. Of this society, the workers see very little. They were clearly impressed to learn that British unions actually take an interest in them. Polish workers work much longer than their British workmates. They earn only half of the British manual workers' wage of about 7 pounds an hour. The official minimum wage has risen

to 4.85 pounds in October 2004 and to just a little over 5 pounds in 2005. However, the minimum wage only appears in a contract between the "Consistant Group" and a Polish sub-contractor, as being paid to the sub-contractor. The Sub-contractor then makes its own deductions before paying out its workers. Hardly any worker wants to stay in England under such conditions. Living costs are high and food alone will use up a lot of the money which was to go in savings for providing consistency, funds for losses on rent, insurance, resources to look for new jobs in Poland after a break in the working biography there. The only option for workers staying in Britain is to change the site of exploitation to "something decent at least" or stabilise their working relation with a direct contract. Both does not seem to happen, about 10 workers interviewed closer in direct conversations could not name a single success story they heard of in and around Crewe. This climate and the threat of additional costs for an individual return (a peak time ticket Crewe-London can eat up a monthly Polish wage) can coax workers into continuing the working relation with Grampian's agents even if sound reason and sober calculation is against it.

In effect, Polish workers in Britain have hardly any material benefit from their sacrifice of home and personal life. They are being exploited in the genuine modes as established by Polish capitalism in their home country. The costs of individual return and the shame of coming back from England with nothing are the decisive psychological differential on which agents capitalise to the full extent possible. Even when working double hours as compared to their British colleagues, they do not get the possibility to earn as much as them. This adds to a peculiar hierarchy, in which for example on the meat cutting assembly line professional protective gloves are rare and only to be obtained by certain workers.

"If we would work 40 hours a week, we could all go home at once, we would not make any money here, just losses," says X. (name known to the author) among general approbation. The overall working week for Polish workers at Grampians varies between 70 to 80 hours according to their accounts. Work is ordered on extremely short notice. A work gang would receive a telephone call around 10 o'clock at night that is when the last worker of the gang comes home from late shift. This telephone call would tell them who was to arrive at what time the next day. The start of work could thus be put at 6 o'clock, only 8 hours in advance. Free days are never enjoyed by a gang as a whole. Bank holidays, such as Easter holidays, are treated by Grampian workforce logistics just as normal working days. The contract between "Consistant Group" and a Polish sub-contractor, forwarded to a contracted worker on the 20th of October 2004 to serve as a "example" and

justify pressure on workers as a direct result of pressure on the sub-contractors states explicitly under 15.4 that there is no right to claim paid holidays and any holiday is to be seen as a favour granted by the company. The rare free days granted for individual workers seem to be rotating on purpose and leaving only leaving individual workers in the house on purpose. The housing documents we could secure clearly forbid any party or joint social event in the house. They threat with immediate extradition "to London" when: any person other than the agencies officers enter the house, in the case of a social invitation, the worker and the invited will both make the journey "to London" (in practice, they are thrown out of the minibus at a distant highway). One place we visited does not even have a bell to ring.

You have to make yourself understood to the workers upstairs by shouting through the letterbox. As soon as a neighbour or a police involvement is recorded (music, social events, alleged drug incidents), the agency announces to victimise the entire group of lodgers housed in the location, firing them from work and evicting them from their house on immediate notice. Regulation of this type has to be signed by the workers on moving in. The relevant document as been typed down with incredible lack of care for spelling or punctuation, but it exceeds incredible care on the side of the inmates. While a so called Michael, not giving his entire name and not signing himself represents the "Consistant Group" of the employers, the migrant workers have to spell out their entire name in print and sign that they understood and comply with the regulation. Such paternalistic relations seem to be a foundation element of the contracting system.

Workers are terrorized by stoppages, ie. money deducted from their pay envelopes. The only official stoppage is around 60 pounds weekly for housing, a sum obtained e.g. from all 9 workers in a two-bedroom house officially equipped for 7. So this group pays actually more than 2000 pounds a month for the house. Grampian officials are said to have invested in housing property because this is a very lucrative business when linked so closely to the workplace. Besides the official hosing stoppage, there are unofficial stoppages which are not tax recorded. The group of 9 workers in one house is being deducted more than 360 pounds a month for so-called "carpet cleaning". Some of them have been in the house for over half a year and they have never seen a carpet being cleaned. In fact, the stoppage would provide for entirely new carpeting in the house every week. The places are kept remarkably tidy and clean however. Even though no cupboards are provided and the place is in fact very crowded. There is very strict regulation not to smoke in the sleeping rooms, but the company forces workers to sleep on

the floor in the smoking room. The excessive tidiness might be linked to the constant threat that a cleaning firm will be called into the house and their price be stopped from the wages as soon as the condition of the place does not correspond to the expectation of the so-called agent's "supervisor". In spite of nearly no convenience being facilitated in the houses (no television, no cupboards, only most basic kitchen equipment, the company forces each worker to pay a 300 pounds deposit which represents the wages you can earn in the Polish countryside in no less than 3 months. As applies to the payment of the first two weeks, which is generally not handed over by the company, workers see the chance of getting these sums back as very minimal.

A very serious issue raised by workers is the fact that they are systematically deprived of their passport and identity cards. They are equally not handed out their permission by the home office to work in Britain. For a lot of workers it is unclear whether this permission has actually been obtained. Therefore they cannot be sure of being in a legal working relationship which makes them very cautious in contacts with British institutions or the option to search different employment. Medical treatment has been denied to X. (name known to the author), a Polish worker after he suffered serious health problems at work. When he asked to be allowed to see a doctor, he was told that this is "his problem". He did not get leave from work and understood that he cannot see a Doctor.

Nevertheless each Pole is being stopped more than 4 pounds weekly out of her or his wage for National health insurance. Younger workers who are more familiar with the internet have found out that they can download the forms for getting work permission in Britain from the Home office website and apply individually. Such an option would be preferred by all workers we asked, but they would not be very confident in being able to follow up this process to a successful end. Workers have taken the initiative to tackle the awkward situation of being in a foreign country without documents to identify themselves. When calling the agency, they were told, these documents have been sent back to the solicitors. Nobody would say why. Dealing with British authorities would need some confidence in language skills. The informal offer by Cathleen and Neil Clarke to provide amateur language courses have been greeted with enthusiasm.

Though workers are forced to do 80-hours work weeks, they have a quite vivid sense of taking the initiative. After explaining some essentials of British "fighting back" trade unionism, the first question for the T & G activists was characteristically "How can we (the Polish migrant workers) help you (in your cause)?" To be honest, this was what we least expected and we even

might have had a slight tendency to think that we had come to help them.

In the past months, Polish migrant workers in Crewe have been trying to challenge the regime of informal control of their entire life in Britain in some dramatic individual clashes. Characteristically though, every escalation has been won by the agents. Maciek complained with a friend about sums missing in his wage envelope (this is claimed to be a general phenomena). In the course of the argument, Maciek was driven to an unknown highway and kicked out of the minibus. His colleague managed to stay in the plant. Polish workers related the story with suspicion towards certain colleagues who would be able to furnish details of the two contesting workers to the management and thus allow them to split their case to their favour. In a more dramatic development a Polish woman signed off from work and housing, realising the ever-present temptation of all those caught in the treadmill. Her effort of getting hold of her housing deposit of three week's wages took her a long time and lengthy paperwork to be read and signed. In the meantime, the agency would empty the fridge in her house of her belongings and kick it on the street together with her personal luggage. Scandalised by this inversion of any notion of leave notice, she convinced the police to send two officers on the scene. It turned out that a woman officer of the agency has close relations with a higher-ranking police officer in Crewe. So when she called another patrol against the first it turned out, that, in the Polish workers' words "the workers' patrol turned down and left, so additionally to her eviction, she had to face accusations and trouble with the police". This incident has resulted in migrant workers taking caution not to contact the police at all, even in the case of obvious maltreatment.

Up to now migrant workers get thrown out of work and out of their houses on immediate notice and driven to a highway. In the case for Maciek reported by his workmate this happened for his demanding the pay he was entitled to but which was not paid. In general the first two weeks' wages as well as the 300 pounds deposit for the accommodation are seen as not retrievable by the migrant workers themselves.

Strategic considerations, open questions

How is the contracting chain organised? Who can be held responsible for what? How can we collect evidence, researching in Britain and Poland alike to link the producers in Britain to the migrant workers trade chain extending into the Polish province? We know about a key role of the Dutch multinational "Convenience Food Systems" with currently two offices in Poland (CFS Polska, see researched details below). The main contracting agency for Poles in the Crewe region is at

Wrexham. They have subcontracted Polish agents from different regions (Wielkopolska, Malopolska, Kielce, see address below). Most of the Polish workers however state that they have been dragged into the agency chain by "friends" and personally known people. False promises are evidently made on the last two levels of the chain who are most involved in getting workers over to England. Once they are there, they face the harsh conditions and the patronising disciplinary power of the so called "Consistant Group", for the Winsford workers they are based at Wrexham (address see below). Grampian is on very good working relations with the agents organising the Polish workforce. On request by Polish workers, they have been informed that the agents would not interfere with Grampian directly contracting migrant workers they would like to secure for their production for a longer period of time. This form of cherry-picking by the factory, creating a competition for "advancement" within migrant workers has not yet started among the Polish workforce. Up to now, only Spanish migrant workers have been contracted by the manufacture to get out of their agents' patronising.

Individual bargaining is involved in every stage of the supply chain of new migrant workers. In Poland this involves seriously false promises, in Britain the threat to send off workers back to Poland without any savings earned in England. Any effort to collectivise this bargaining on the Polish supply side could seriously shift the power balance around a Grampian plant. Within the coming months, Grampian will not only need to replace conscious migrant workers but also access new dimensions of supply for replacing British staff. Campaigning to increase the price of migrant labour supplies would most effectively target British gangmasters on the basis of the new licensing regulations and Polish sub-contractors in Poland alike.

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appliances

Translated from Wildcat 75, December 2005

Poland: From the household appliance industry's promised land

Masked men attack a manager from the Indesit kitchen stove factory and cut his face with a razor knife: This story from Lodz went through the Polish press in October. The attack came one day before the funeral of a young worker whose head had been crushed by a two-ton sheet metal press in the neighbouring refrigerator factory which also belongs to the Indesit corporation.

The automatic stop mechanism had been removed from the machine in order to prevent the line from being stopped all the time. Below, we print excerpts from a reportage from the daily paper Gazeta Wyborcza. [1]

The reportage shows graphically what a Western corporation's brand-new large factory in Eastern Europe looks like for the workers: hiring predominantly through temporary work agencies, low wages [2] for which skilled workers do not want to work, a correspondingly high turnover, brutal norms which are achieved by avoiding security regulations and endless - partly unpaid - overtime. A factory command which is almost exclusively organised through pressure.

The media as well as the police have immediately made a connection between the fatal work accident and the attack on the manager - a connection which is refused by local leftists. An article for the *Nowy Robotnik* also criticises that "there is no political consciousness in the plant. We haven't met any charismatic people who would take up the task of organising a union or a strike in the plant." [3]

Similar complaints can be heard from factory leftists in many Western European plants. But most workers neither form unions nor attack their managers but work overtime. At Indesit in Lodz they seem to do it with a deep alienation towards the factory and growing hate of their bosses. It was exactly this impression - the lack of mediation between workers and management in one of the new centres on which capital says it plans to base its future - which we found interesting when we heard of the attack, and this reportage has only reinforced the impression.

Lodz, Poland's second-largest city with 770,000 inhabitants, was considered the "Manchester of the East" since the 1860s, it was one of the centres of the Russian Revolution of 1905, and it was a centre of the textile industry through the 1980s. Most textile factories have closed down since the collapse of the Eastern European markets. [4] At 16.8 per cent, unemployment in Lodz is only slightly lower than the national average of 18 per cent, but significantly higher than in other big cities like Warsaw (6.3), Poznan (6.7), or Cracow (7.4 per cent). Accordingly, the city advertises the fact that local manufacturing wages are at only 85 per cent of the Polish average. [5]

The city administration had the consulting firm McKinsey devise a "strategy" which among other things proposes a focus on the household appliance industry which is currently leaving Western Europe. [6] With some success: In the last few years, the big names of the industry have settled here. There are 1700 people working just in the two Indesit plants which were opened in 1999 and 2004. This makes Indesit one of the biggest employers in the city. Bosch-Siemens has been active

since 1998 and is currently making 700,000 washing machines and dryers a year with 450 workers - at conditions similar to Indesit: gross hourly wages of 6 Zloty and norms at Western levels. Suppliers like Mecalit, Coko, Wirthwein, Prettl, DSWI, Drahtzug Stein, or E.G.O. have also moved to Lodz. In the reportage, an Indesit manager says: "We have already invested over 100 million Euros in Lodz and we are still investing. We are not going away." It remains to be seen whether the "strategy" will work out for the corporations as well and whether the local working class will turn out to be not just cheap but also cooperative.

Notes:

- [1] The reportage has appeared on 17 Oct 2005 in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, the biggest bourgeois daily in Poland. We have abbreviated the German translation to about half the original length and re-arranged some parts. The full German translation can be found at www.wildcat-www.de.
- [2] The reportage talks of 4.20 Zloty per hour. According to the *Nowy Robotnik*, gross hourly wages for workers hired through a temporary work agency are slightly above 6 Zloty per hour. The exchange rate is at approximately 4 Zloty to 1 Euro.
- [3] Malgorzata Michalska in *Nowy Robotnik* Nr. 21 (25), <http://nr.freshsite.pl/?nr=25&id=577>.
- [4] For example, the textile factory Uniontex still employed 14,000 workers in the 1970s. In 2003, an occupation strike was organised against the final closure of the plant - against the big unions *Solidarność* and *OPZZ*. After the end of the strike, a self-managed cooperative with 130 employees was founded in the factory.
- [5] Unemployment data from the Polish statistical office (<http://www.stat.gov.pl>). Investment data from the site of the Lodz Special Economic Zone (<http://www.sse.lodz.pl>) and from the Polish press (local news eg. at <http://wirtualna.lodz.pl>).
- [6] See the article and the interview about the Bosch-Siemens plant in Berlin-Spandau in *Wildcat* 74 - "The only thing they can expect from us ... (is a kick in the arse!). A washing machine factory closes down." [translation in this edition of the newsletter]- and also the current conflict at the AEG plant in Nürnberg.

razor

Excerpts from a reportage from the daily paper Gazeta Wyborcza (17.10.2005). An accident in the Italian household appliance-factory Indesit in Lodz/Poland lead to an attack on a foreman by masked workers who cut his face with a razor knife...

Attack on Foreman in Lodz

Lodz with 700.000 inhabitants is becoming a center of the European household appliance-industry. Until 1989 the city was a center of the Polish textile industry which since then has been closed down. The city is poor, with high unemployment. Some household appliance-factories have settled down here, among them Bosch-Siemens (see article in this newsletter on Bosch-Siemens in Berlin).

The two Indesit factories for refridgerators and cooking stoves employ 1,750 people, among them 1,300 manual labourers. The rest are Polish white collar workers and only a few Italians, among them the three Italian bosses. The workers are under high pressure from the management. The wages are low (4,20 Zloty an hour, about 1,10 Euro). With overtime the workers earn about 1000 Zloty. Despite high unemployment Indesit has problems finding skilled workers, the turnover is high.

The workers are complaining about the treatment in the factory. Young workers are being employed after finishing school, without experience. No other skilled worker would accept 4,20 Zloty an hour. The training on the machines lasts only a few minutes. Then the conveyor belt gets started and the managers and foremen press the workers to work fast. If the workers do not meet their piece-rate, their foremen are being punished for it by the management. That is also why many workers have to do overtime and work on Sundays. Often the workers are being told to carry on working just before the end of the shift. It happens that they work till 10 p.m. just to get back to work at 5:30 a.m. next morning.

The workers hate their bosses, especially the Polish foremen. Those had asked the workers to take the security installations of the machines to speed up production. That measure - and the fact that the 21-year old worker was completely overworked due to overtime - is seen as having caused his death. He got stuck in a machine that he could enter because the security installation was taken off and was squeezed to death.

In general, there are many injuries, especially cuts on hands and heads... Before the accident happened the foremen had increased the piece-rate and asked the workers to take of their gloves to be able to work faster.

The worker who was killed had saved another workers life some time earlier on the same machine. The foreman and managers also treated the workers badly, shouted at them, blamed them for standstills that were due to missing parts. Often the pay-slips were wrong. There had been other attacks on managers before, in and outside the factory. The foremen whose face was cut was called the "SS-man" by the workers.

"It is a Gulag, a work camp," say some other workers about Indesit. They are using the internet, forums and chat-rooms, to exchange comments and threaten the managers. Many of the most hated managers are mentioned with their full names. Every morning when they come to the office they read the stuff to find out who is being threatened, who is highest on the hate-list. They are scared, especially after having seen the foremen's face. "Now he's got a broad smile", says a worker. Since the foremen was attacked the other managers are getting escorted home every day.

migrant workers

This article was written by a comrade from Oiseau-tempête. See more below the article.

Eastern European migrants in France: the Polish example

Few Eastern European workers migrate to France

Eastern European migration flows to France are recent and have been quite small in comparison with other migration flows : they only started around 2000, except for Polish workers (employed as seasonal workers) who already started coming in 1990 and Romanian workers (as asylum seekers) after 1994. In 1999, Eastern European migrants represented only 2.2 percent of the 3.3 millions foreigners in France compared to 1.7 percent of 3.6 million foreigners in 1990 (the total proportion of foreigners in France has been stable for many decades : 6 percent of the total population). So there is a small but modest progression, especially if you compare it to what happened in most of Western European countries: Germany saw Eastern European migration peak at the beginning of the 1990's; Portugal has received a strong Ukrainian migration from the end of the 1990s (around 400,000 Eastern European migrants live presently in this country); Italy has seen an important inflow of workers coming from Rumania, Ukraine and Albania [1]. In Spain, the government estimates that there are around 500,000 legal and illegal Rumanians.

Polish people constituted the most numerous contingent among Eastern European migrants in France in 2000 [2], but in contrast to those coming from the ex-USSR, their number is diminishing (from 47,000 in 1990 to 33,500 in 1999). They represent 40 percent of all those who have a residence permit, but it concerns a small number of persons : around 30,000. In 1999, only 2.7 percent of Polish people having recently migrated settled in France as compared to 327,000 in Germany.

Eastern European migrants (with residence permit) in 2001 in France

Nationalities

Russians 11,537

Ukrainians 3,118

Central and Eastern Europe : 48,281

Including Poles 28,009 i.e. 41,1 percent

Rumanians 10,530

Bulgarians 4,098

Polish workers in Europe : mainly in Germany and in Great Britain

65,000 Poles came to work in a country of the European Union since it was enlarged to its ten new members, a year ago. But if one counts 'seasonal jobs' in the European Union, 450,000 Poles have been employed during these first 12 months. Most went to work in Germany (28 percent), Great-Britain (21 percent), Italy (11 percent), Ireland (7percent) and Netherlands (7percent). In 2005, according to the Polish Ministry of Labour, 500,000 seasonal Polish workers will go abroad to work, mainly in Great-Britain (as farm workers, dentists, medical staff and even... plumbers) and in Germany. This number is not very different from last year (2004) when 300,000 Poles found a seasonal job in Germany and 100,000 a seasonal job in Britain. Wrongly fearing a massive arrival of cheap labour, most of the 'older' 15 members of the EU, except Britain and Ireland, have instated a transitional period of at least 2 years, before opening their labour market to the citizens of the new member countries. Some states (Germany, Spain, Italy and Netherlands) have been more pragmatic and have created, for seasonal jobs, quotas which apply to the new members.

Eastern European migrants in France: in which sectors are they working?

Contrary to other migrants, most Eastern European workers are educated and qualified. Central and Eastern European migrants rarely get with a permanent residence permit (valid for over a year), partly because French immigration policy has become harsher [3].

They are Poles, Romanians (qualified blue and white collar workers) and Russians (executives, engineers).

A more important number of Eastern European workers come with a temporary status (residence permit for more than a year and provisional authorization to work) : the number of those receiving temporary permits has increased tenfold from 1990 to 1999, they are workers, asylum seekers and students. Among those who come and work, one mainly finds Russians, Poles and Romanians in manufacturing industries, building industry (including shipyards) and collective social services (for example hospitals). Since Poland entered the European Union the 1st of May 2004, hundreds of nurses, disappointed by their working conditions, have left Polish hospitals to go and work in other countries of the European Union.

Seasonal work, illegal work and 'secondment' of Eastern European workers: building industry, public buildings and works sector, and agriculture

As well as the official entries into France, the number of illegal workers has also grown. Some networks (mainly Romanians and Ukrainians) control street hawking and prostitution (37percent of the prostitutes working in France come from Eastern Europe). But most illegal workers are exploited by the building industry, more often in private houses than on big building sites. They can be hired illegally by small business whose owners are sometimes themselves Eastern Europeans, who arrived a few years ago and offer their 'services' for prices which are 10 to 30 percent cheaper than those of French craftsmen.

The most numerous migrants are the seasonal workers, whose official number has literally exploded. Among the Eastern European workers, the majority are Poles. They have been among the first to arrive in France after 1990 and, every year, thousands of Poles come, usually just for a seasonal job in the agricultural sector, to evade poverty and unemployment which have particularly devastating effects on Polish rural population. France has signed a specific bilateral agreement about seasonal workers with 3 countries: Poland, Tunisia and Morocco. In 1999, the Poles represented 34percent of the seasonal workers who did not have an EU passport and in 2001, 43 percent. But many of them are not declared by their bosses. They work in the farming sector (fruit, vegetable and grape pickers [4]), in the building sector and in restaurants.

An illegal practice is spreading very quickly and affects many Polish workers (and not only them) : the 'secondment of employees' offered to French companies by Polish companies which pretend to provide 'services' while in fact they are selling (cheap) labour. This practice is growing in the building sector, agricul-

ture (market-gardening, wine-growing), or in nuclear power stations, and in factories for specific works, but to a lesser extent.

These workers are disguised employees, false self-employed workers: they are not declared in France (but in Poland) and their employers are not subjected to paying social security contributions to the French State. The legal procedures are complex and, in fact, the famous Bolkestein directive has already been enforced for a few years. Only 20 to 25percent of the companies which 'second' their employees on French territory declare their staff to the French Ministry of Labour. Most of the time, the Inspection du Travail (Factory Inspectorate, a State administration which is supposed to control factories and companies) controls only the working conditions and not the hiring conditions.

Agricultural work: fruit, vegetable and grape picking

In many market-gardening areas (Bouches-du-Rhône, Brittany, Alsace, South-West), more and more Polish workers (adding to the Moroccans and the Tunisians) are employed by the farmers for wages which are largely lower than those authorized by French legislation, often 5 to 7 euros per hour compared to 12 to 13 euros per hour normally. In these sectors, labour accounts for 60 to 80percent of the production cost.

French bosses claim to be obliged to give low wages to farm workers because of the strong competition of German producers: from 1991, Germany has introduced the statute of 'seasonal worker' in the agricultural, forest and hotel sectors, a statute much appreciated by employers : the hourly wage is sometimes lower than 5 euros, the contract is limited to 3 months, there is no minimum or maximum duration of work per week and, if the contract lasts less than two months, the employer does not pay any social security contributions for his workers and can legally hire them for around 5 euros per hour. 90percent of the migrants hired by German farmers come from Eastern European countries.

In July 2005, 240 seasonal workers, Moroccans and Tunisians, went on strike in two farms of Saint-Martin-Crau which belong to the Sedac and Poscros companies, large producers of peaches and apricots. The workers wanted their 2004 and 2005 overtime working hours to be paid, which amounted to about 1500 to 3000 euros per head. They usually work 230 hours per month, but are paid only for 150 hours. They also protested against their living and working conditions: they had to buy their own working clothes and shears, they slept in ruined dwellings without water. In theory, they were supposed to receive the minimum wage (called in French the SMIC) and to have an OMI (Office des migrations internationales, a French State orga-

nization different from the IOM and mainly related to French former colonies) contract. With this contract, employers can only recruit foreign seasonal workers for a limited amount of time (8 months maximum) and their employees receive around 800 euros per month.

The strikers of Saint-Martin-en-Crau won : their employers promised to put them in workers hostels, to pay their transport expenses as well their past unpaid overtime hours, and to rehire them next year. So they came back to work. But the next day a new strike began in another farm, mobilizing 120 workers, both seasonal (Moroccan, Tunisian and Polish), but also permanent workers, with the same requests. In this conflict, divisions appeared between seasonal workers according to their nationality: the 30 Polish seasonal workers did not follow the movement because they had received pressure from the management and threats of being sacked. Not speaking French as Moroccan workers do, they also form part of a very recent immigration, and are therefore less armed to defend themselves. Being newcomers, they probably think that abstaining from striking will enhance their chances of being hired next year. As usual, the State and the Farmers trade union tried to convince the public that these scandalous practices concerned only a minority of bosses who don't respect the Labour Code, whereas, in reality, these practices have existed for many years and develop because of the increasing competition.

Workers trade unions are traditionally weak in the agricultural sector, including among permanent farm workers. Whereas the CFDT trade union published and distributed booklets (on the beaches!) about student seasonal workers rights, the only visible organization in this conflict has been the CGT trade union, through its local and departmental organizations. During the conflict won by the strikers on the two farms of Saint-Martin-en-Crau, the CGT played an important role : several of its delegates were received to discuss with the ' préfet ' (representing the State in each French department) accompanied only by only one of the 240 strikers!

Strike on Saint-Nazaire Shipyards (Chantiers navals de Saint-Nazaire)

Polish companies provide Polish workers to French subcontractors who themselves work for large corporations. Their goal is to reduce by 30percent the manufacturing cost of the ships.

In July 2005, around 20 Polish electricians of Kliper, a Polish company which deals with the assembly of electric cables, working on the construction of two steamers, went on strike because they had not been paid for two months (since June). Their foremen had disappeared with one of the company's minibuses, also

taking their contracts with them. Kliper, the Polish company, works for a subcontractor (Gestal) of the Atlantic Shipyards of Saint-Nazaire (Alsthom Marine).

On Saint-Nazaire shipyards, these scandalous practices are well known since the strikes of the Rumanians, Greeks and Indians (paid the minimum wage, the SMIC) who worked in 2003 on the Queen Mary 2. Their employer, Avco Marine, refused to pay 92 Rumanian workers. First they went on strike alone, and then they were joined a few days later, with the help of the CGT trade union, by French, Indian, Polish workers of the Atlantic Shipyards and of sub-contracting companies. They received 3,200 euros which were paid immediately. But, to this day, they only got 50percent of their wages. Legal actions have been launched but Saint-Nazaire's public prosecutor office decided to close the case.

Wages, which are apparently in conformity with French standards, in fact hide low-cost practices: subcontracting companies oblige their workers to pay for their housing, their meals and the shuttle buses which takes them to work everyday. These companies use a trick which is invisible on pay slips: a rate which represents half of the minimum wage (the SMIC) in the event of a 'period of availability'. This vague concept makes it possible to reduce by 50 percent the wages when the employer claims the work process is hampered by another company doing work on the steamer. This boss can then force the Polish workers to wait, without being paid, in the unfinished gangways of the liner. The working conditions are very bad and they slave away more than 50 hours per week. The Poles buy their food in cheap supermarkets, eat generally from cans and never in the Atlantic Shipyards staff restaurants. They are paid in Poland, in zlotys, according to the rate of exchange most favourable to the employer. The industrial accidents on these shipyards are frequent, the injured workers have often no insurance (the agreements between French and Polish Social Security are not yet operational).

Most of the Polish strikers from Kliper had arrived two months ago from the Gdansk and Szczecin shipyards. They had not received their wages (1,200 euros per month compared to 500 euros for the same job in Poland) since their arrival in France, just a hundred euros to buy some food. When they were informed that they would not be paid at all for the moment, the workers decided to begin a hunger strike in front of Saint-Nazaire's City Hall. They declared that they will not move from there until their case is settled in France... since the Polish company Kliper proposed to send two buses to repatriate them in Poland! This method is used with each conflict: a first group of workers arrived in Saint-Nazaire in Spring and was entirely renewed in

May, because their wages had not been paid. Finally, this first group was partially paid and sent back to Poland.

The CGT trade union is mobilized on this case (and has started a legal procedure against the non-payment of the wages) and all the representatives of the local authorities including the Polish consul hypocritically have regretted that the Labour Code is not yet precise enough on these questions to enable them to intervene...and each one tried to put the blame on the other.

But on the 3rd August 2005 the Polish hunger strikers stopped their action because they won. The hunger strike in front of Saint-Nazaire's city hall was no good publicity for the mayor and "his" town, some of the strikers had even stopped drinking water and the local population was moved and showed some solidarity. The media took interest in this case, so the French and Polish governments were obliged to react promptly in front of a quite unexpected determination, unexpected indeed by everyone : the strikers, the CGT trade union and the authorities. So the workers got their money (for the first time in this kind of conflict) but they were sacked and sent back to Poland where they will be on the dole because their contract ceased. During this strike, the CGT trade union was able to show that it did not have anything against Eastern European workers coming to France and argued that a "Social Europe" should implement reforms favorable to workers.

Conclusion

Concerning Eastern European workers in France, one can note two tendencies:

- a limited inflow, contrary to the situation in other European countries: thus the theme of the 'invasion' of French labour market by cheap Eastern European labour is a myth, which particularly flowered during the referendum campaign for the European constitution, in parallel with the propaganda about the relocations to Eastern Europe;
- the Eastern European workers who arrive in France, mainly Polish, are more and more often illegally employed. Either they are not declared by their bosses, or they are submitted to all sorts of dubious 'legal' contracts which can easily be violated by their employers.

Some sectors (building industry, agriculture) have always employed illegal foreign workers and succeeded in exploiting migrants who were obliged to leave their country to find a job.

Three more recent factors also play a role today: the lack of local labour in agriculture, the increasing competition between European countries which try to find

new ways of degrading working conditions, and the fact that farm workers can't find any more jobs in their native countries, which is the case for the Polish workers.

Borbala (Oiseau-tempête)

Footnotes:

[1] The 2003 regularization of clandestine workers shows the importance of Eastern European migrations : of 635,000 people who have been regularized, 133,000 are Romanian, 100,000 Ukrainian and 47,000 Albanese.

[2] After the war, there were 425,000 Poles (25 percent of the foreigners in France) compared to 47,000 (1.3 percent) in 1990 and 33,500 in 1999.

[3] More and more illegal workers are expelled. From 2003, 1672 Romanians have been expelled including 134 by 'special grouped flights' and 1528 on commercial flights. In 2002, 1157 Romanians were expelled. But the number of Eastern European students is growing.

[4] Over 2228 seasonal workers legally picking grapes in 2003, 2225 were Polish. France has several trade unions whose members, in all, don't represent more than 7 percent of the "wage-earners". The CFDT is a former Christian trade union, which after 1968 attracted quite a lot of white-collar Far Left militants and used them to build a Leftist reputation in the 1970s before expelling them later, expulsions which gave birth to new trade unions (called SUD, in the Post Office, Health sector, Education, Railways, etc., mainly in the public sector). The CGT, traditionally more influential among blue-collar workers than the CFDT, is a trade union which has been controlled by the Communist Party for decades, but as the French CP is now fragmented between several fractions, it is a bit more "open" (i.e. a bit less Stalinist) and even reintegrates in its ranks revolutionary militants who were expelled in the 1970s and 1980s, and give them significant local responsibilities. Before the beginning of the last European referendum campaign, the official leadership of the CGT supported the "yes" vote while a good part of the apparatus, supported by Far Left militants, defended the "no" vote. A microscopic incident which revived once more the Far Left illusion to push the trade unions to the Left and/or to control them.

Oiseau-tempête

Oiseau-tempête is a journal of social critique which exists in Paris since 1997 in Paris. It is produced by a collective of a dozen people from different political

origins, who are partly inspired by anarchist, Marxist, situationalist or surrealist ideas. Most of them don't identify totally with any of these currents. To make a long story short, our project can be defined with 3 words: communist, libertarian and internationalist. All humanity's wealth and tasks should be put in common : we refuse any instituted power, any useless mediation. We think that common freedom is the necessary precondition to the blooming of each one's liberty. Outside the journal, the collective also publishes leaflets and papers according to the events. The last issue (n°12, summer 2005, 80 pages) appeared in June 2005.

Oiseau-tempête

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investments

The "French touch" in the CEECs*: lay-offs, low wages, limited freedom and high productivity

(*CEECs: Central and Eastern European Countries)

In May-June 2005, during the electoral campaign about the European Constitutional treaty in France, there was a lot of discussions in French medias about the famous "Polish plumber", presented as a menace to French workers by the sovereignist Right and Far Right parties.

Curiously, nobody tried to seriously inquire about what was, on the other side, the behaviour of French companies in Eastern and Central Europe. Few journalists dared to say that French hypermarkets like Carrefour, Auchan or Leclerc in Poland pay their employees with delay, open on Sundays with no extrapay, change their timetable from one day to the other, etc. Or, to be more precise, the journalists did their job but on marginal radios, like the State-financed Radio France Internationale (RFI) and on one of the national channels - after midnight! Nevertheless, listening to or watching these medias, one could get some interesting informations.

On RFI, for example, there was a long report about French investors in Romania. The French capitalists interviewed on the radio used the anti-globalization rhetoric to justify why they paid low wages to "their" Romanian workers: after all, they were contributing to a "durable development" in that country! And a worker, who was probably cumulating hundreds of overtime

hours, explained that he succeeded to buy his house in 5 years, earning 150 euros per month. But the journalists also interviewed a Romanian trade-unionist about the multinational French distribution group Carrefour, which has heavily invested in several CEECs, and fires any employee who wants to organize a trade-union in its supermarkets. If Romanian workers still had any illusions about the "fatherland of the Rights of Man", they probably have lost them all now.

And on national TV (after midnight) there was a one-hour report about some French companies who have bought thousands of hectares in Poland and make Polish farm workers sweat day and night ("they are not as lazy and demanding as French workers!"). The cynicism of the French executives interviewed in this program was worth listening to and contrasted with the disgusting daily propaganda about the "Polish plumber".

Unfortunately, even if some French media partially did their job, most of them only focused their attention on the mythical threat of 150 or 180 Polish plumbers (the exact number was revealed only after the electoral campaign) against "French jobs".

This article tries to give some information about French investments in Eastern and Central Europe, i.e. the former Stalinist States which were part (like the Baltic States) or not of the USSR and are now, or will be in a near future, integrated into the EU. Written by a non-specialist, this text certainly contains errors and flaws and should be obviously enriched by data about the reactions of Eastern European workers in front of the methods of French companies, in order to build an effective international solidarity. The most important remains to be done.

France: a minor investor... but a major exploiter in Eastern and Central Europe

Prol-Position has already documented the importance of German investments in Eastern and Central Europe. In most of these countries French capitalists have less economic weight (6 percent of the market) than German bosses (27 percent of the market). Several French administrations Affairs closely follow these questions and, for its specialists, this difference is linked to several factors:

- Germany and France have different historical and diplomatic links with Eastern and Central Europe.[1]
- Germany can count on a much more developed network of small and medium firms which are commercially aggressive (for example in Poland, there are 91 French companies as opposed to 226 German ones);
- German banks are much more implanted in the CEECs and have much closer relationships with German corporations and small and medium firms.

Whether these French specialists are partially right or not, that does not change much to the daily exploitation of Eastern European workers. Even if French capitalists are generally behind German bosses in the "East Rush", their methods are exactly the same.

If one considers the CEECs, Germany and the United States are the two main investors. For example in 1997-1998, Germany invested 11,436 million euros, the USA 8,460 and France 2,905, closely followed by countries like Netherlands and Austria whose GDP is almost four times inferior to the French one.

Nevertheless, French imperialism has done its best to take its share of the Eastern European cake. As soon as the "Popular democracies" opened their frontiers to foreign capital, French multinationals tried to take over major State companies (power stations were bought by EDF or phone companies by France Telecom) and did not hesitate to sack thousands of workers. When Renault bought the Dacia factory in Romania, to produce its 5,000-euro car, the "Logan", it sacked 12,000 workers over 28,000 and generously decided to pay 143 euros per month to its workers.

After this first stage of gross looting, French companies are now studying what are the best possibilities for them on each local market and adapt themselves to the various political situations: corruption plays a negative role for foreign investment, while low taxes and low wages (French wages are 6 to 8 times higher) act as a powerful magnet.

Between 1992 and 2003, France has multiplied by four its exportations to the CEECs. The levels of its exports is superior to the exports concerning China or Latin America, and more stable.

If the rate of growth of the CEECs is higher (between 3 and 4 percent as opposed to 1-2 percent for the rest of the EU), official and unofficial unemployment rates are much higher (18 percent in Slovakia, 19 percent in Poland and 40 percent in Bulgaria, for example), a factor which maintains the wages level low, while the qualification is generally quite good according to European standards, the Baltic countries being the first "pupils of the class", Slovenia and Hungary being the last ones.

This article presents some basic factual information about the situation in the CEECs: who are the main French firms involved, how many local workers do they employ, and what's the rank of French imperialism in relation with its competitors in each country.

For the reader who has not the patience to read these data, one can sum them up in a few words: around 220,000 people work, directly or indirectly, for French companies in Eastern and central Europe (80 million people are employed in all the present European Union). The main French banks are involved in East-

ern and Central Europe as well as the most important groups of the car and building industries, and the distribution corporations. French imperialism has a strong influence in Romania and Poland; a reasonable influence in Hungary, Bulgaria and Czech Republic; and a weaker position in Slovakia and in the Baltic countries. French imperialism contributes to the destruction of local agricultures and to the dismantling of all major state-owned companies.

The presence of French imperialism is often hidden by subcontractors: Technic Plastic Romania works for Salomon, Solectron produces phones for Philips, etc. And the clothes produced by Alca Group factory in Bucarest for Lacoste, Etam, Pierre Cardin or Hugo Boss don't indicate that they are "made in Romania".

Bulgaria

France is only the 13th foreign investor, the main ones being Austria, Greece, Netherlands, Germany and Italy. French companies employ around 3,000 persons. As a bourgeois economic journalist notes: "At industry level, French-Bulgarian trade shows the classic structure of trade relations with the developing countries: export of investment goods and semi-processed goods and import of labour-consuming goods. (...) From the top, these industries rank as follows: textile products for supplying of new partnerships in the field of ready-made clothes; the pharmaceutical industry, perfumery and detergents; motor vehicle construction with the Peugeot Group, which ranks first on the market of new cars; chemical industry, rubber and plastics; mechanical equipment. After these come electronic and electro-technical equipment, food industry and cloth and furs, sold as raw materials to Bulgarian factories of working with client-supplied materials.

"(...) French participation in Bulgarian privatisation is limited to several industries, mainly the banking sector (the acquisition of Express Bank by Société Générale), energy industry (the acquisition of Pirin-Bistritsa by Mecamidi), electrotechnics (the acquisition of a production unit in Perushtitsa by Schneider), cement industry (Bulgarian enterprises of Devnia Cement and Vulkan have been purchased by Ciment Francais), do-it-yourself (the opening of two centres of the trademark of Monsieur Bricolage in Sofia and Plovdiv) and food industry (the acquisition of the Serdika state-owned milk-processing factory by Danone). The Dewavrin business group has recently built an enterprise of washing and colouring of wool in the region of Plovdiv. (...).

"Many French companies have commercial representations and/or agents. Some of them are of major importance: Peugeot, Renault, Citroen - they have made the French cars the best-selling cars on the Bulgarian

market, but also Alcatel in telecommunications, Servier and Boiron in the pharmaceutical industry, Lactalis in the cheese industry.

"(...) But small and medium French enterprises are attracted by the low expenses for access to a market with production potential and - as a result of that - of prospects for economic sub-delivery: qualified personnel, medium salaries, interesting regional and geographical location. Thus, 75 per cent of the French presence in Bulgaria is made up of mainly small and medium enterprises of the textile and clothes industries, shoe industry, telecommunications and services."

This long quotation describes a basic scheme which is often reproduced in other CEECs.

Czech Republic

France is the 4th investor behind the Netherlands, Germany, Austria. 300 French companies employ 60,000 persons. The majority of French companies employ from 50 to 250 persons. 45.5 percent in the manufacturing sector, 39 percent in services and 15.5 percent in commerce. The most important companies are:

- Alstom (mobile phones),
- Carrefour (distribution),
- Danone (food industry),
- Saint-Gobain (14 manufactures producing glass and building materials),
- Société Générale (bank),
- Sodexo (catering),
- Suez (town water),
- Veolia (town water), Dalkia (heating in collective housing units, electricity), Connex (transport), Marius Petersen (industrial waste treatment)
- Vinci (road and railway infrastructures)
- PSA, allied with Toyota, has built a factory in Kolin, near Prague.

Croatia

Croatia's main partners are Austria and Germany. Although French investments have been progressing, they represent only 2,42 percent of foreign direct investments. There are 5 companies concerned by French investments: Alstom, Lesaffre, Bouygues (building industry, which possesses 51 percent of Bina Istra), Saint-Jean Industrie (car components) and Bricostore (do-it-yourself). In all, 2,000 persons work for French companies including the workers employed for the construction of Istria motorway. In 2005 ORCO is supposed to invest in Suncani Hvar hotels.

Estonia

France is the 19th foreign investor. Main companies: Télédiffusion de France (in Eesti Ringhaalingu Saa-

tekeskuse radio) and Dalkia International (in 2 companies dealing with collective urban heating), JC Decaux (street and urban furniture), Billon Simex International (table tennis), Connex (urban transports) and Riviera (wine, cosmetics). Around 2,400 people work directly or indirectly for French companies.

Hungary

France is the 5th foreign investor behind Germany, United States, Austria and Netherlands. French companies have invested in the food industry (Danone, Bon-grain, Ceva-Phylaxia), building industry (Bouygues), energy (Total, EDF, Suez, GDF), car industry (Renault, Peugeot, Citroën, Michelin), distribution and do-it-yourself department stores (Cora, Auchan, Bricostore, Decathlon, Plaza commercial centers controlled by BNP Paribas bank), chemistry-pharmacy (Servier, Sanofi-Synthelabo), publishing (Hachette) and hotels (Accor). In all, 351 French companies employ 57,583 persons.

Poland

France is the 1st foreign investor. Mainly concentrated in the telecommunications (France Telecom has bought 47,5 percent of the national telephone company TPSA in 2000; through massive lay-offs and downsizing, in 5 years 42,000 jobs over 70,000 disappeared and now TPSA employs outsourcing companies and temp workers) and distribution sector (food department stores: Carrefour, Auchan, Leclerc, Leader Price and Casino; do-it-yourself department stores: Monsieur Bricolage, Leroy Merlin, Castorama), the investments touch all economic branches: hotels (Orbis linked to Accor), car industry (Michelin in Stomil Olszryn), car equipment (Valeo, 3 factories), Lafarge (building industry), Saint-Gobain (glass and building materials), Thomson (electronics), Air Liquide (chemicals and petrochemicals), Danone and Pernod Ricard (food industry), Sanofi-Synthelabo (chemistry-pharmacy), Faurecia (auto equipment). 33 percent of French investments are concentrated in the manufacturing sector, 30 percent in services and distribution and 35 percent in telecommunications.

The following example is quite illustrative of French capitalist methods in the PECO's. A French company bought Wyborowa vodka in 2001. At that time 640 people worked there, now (in 2005) the workforce has been reduced to 250. And it could have been even worse, because a few months ago the French investors wanted to fire another 112 people and to reduce wages of the rest by 50 percent (!). The workers reacted and did a hunger strike for 13 days. Final result: "only" 90 workers were sacked and the wages were "just" reduced by 7 percent... All that in a factory that always did and

does bring profits! In fact French capitalists don't want to keep on producing a lot of small cheap local brands of vodka, as before. They just want to concentrate their efforts on one or two big brands, mostly for export, and with this new commercial choice, they don't need as many workers as before. So the vodka for the Polish market is much more expensive and there are more workers on the dole.

Romania

France is the 2nd foreign investor behind the Netherlands. Danone (food industry) has built one factory. Carrefour has 5 supermarkets and plans to open 20 more before 2012. Bricostore (do-it-yourself) has 3 department stores and Cora 1. 50,000 persons work for French companies and 75 percent of them in companies which were been privatised such as Renault Dacia, Apa Nova Bucarest (Veolia), Lafarge Romcim, BRD-Société générale and Michelin, Sical (paper and cardboard), Dalkia (collective town heating in Ploiesti and Bucarest). France Telecom has invested in mobile phones (Orange Romania) as well as Alcatel.

Small and medium companies have massively invested in small towns of Romania: confection, shoe industry, wood industry (Parisot builds furnitures for Confororama, Ikea and Mobexpert), mechanic industries (IUS Outillage in Brasov), electric industry (Energom in Cluj) and engineering and NTIC (Kepler Riminfo in softwares and call centers).

Car equipment factories have invested in Pitesti (Auto Chassis International, Valeo) and Sibiu (SNR, Société nationale de roulement, Faurecia for car seats). Salomon France is going to partly relocalize its activities in Romania to produce skis.

Slovakia

France is the 3rd investor behind Germany and Austria. 200 French companies employ 25,000 workers. 70 percent are small and medium companies (less than 51 workers) mainly concentrated near Bratislava and Trencin but big groups have also started to invest like PSA Peugeot Citroën who has bought 25 ha to produce 300,000 cars in 2006 with 3,500 workers and plans to provide 6,000 additional jobs to subcontractors. It has also created an industrial park in common with Slovak and American companies to host car equipment companies and services linked to the car industry.

French companies have also invested in the

- Food industry (milk, cheese, sugar),
- mechanic industries (metallic fences),
- chemistry (Rhodia has bought Chemlon factory in Eastern Slovakia)
- collective urban heating (Dalkia manages 6 towns including Petržalka in Bratislava),

- mobile phones (Orange Slovakia controlled by France Telecom)
- banks (Dexia Slovakia a French-Austrian consortium; Natexis in Ludova Banka),
- car equipment (Plastic Omnium invested 60 million euros next to Bratislava Volkswagen factory, Valeo, Faurecia),
- security equipments (Bacou-Dalloz in Partizanske, Central Slovakia),
- gas (GDF has its own filial Pozagas and has bought 24.5 percent of the local gas company, SPP, which employs 5,600 workers and has 1,42 million of clients nationally,
- Steel industry (Arcelor),
- Petrol (Total),
- Plasturgy (Nief-Plastic),
- Tooling (2MI),
- Road construction (Vinci), etc.

Slovenia

France is the 3rd foreign investor, behind Austria and Switzerland, and has leading positions in the banking sector (Société Générale), car industry (Renault), management of public services (Ondeo in Maribor), distribution (Leclerc), building industry (Lafarge bought the second cement factory). 40 French companies employ 5,700 persons.

Yves (Ni patrie ni frontières)

Footnote:

[1] As Davide Passoni notes in *Pagine Marxiste* no. 5 (November 2004): "during all the 18th and 19th century, the Eastern and Balkanic Europe has been an object of permanent struggle between Germany, France, England, Italy and Russia, struggle which led to two world wars. It was the tendency of German imperialism to grow towards East which provoked the reaction of the European powers and of the USA. They wanted to impede Germany to acquire a specific weight in Europe which would have enabled it to lay the basis for its hegemony on the continent". And Passoni adds: "The amplification of its internal market [after the reunification of Germany] and the reconstruction of its Eastern part have pushed to the east the baricenter of Germany and Europe, and it's no mystery for European diplomats that German economy is the one which profits most from the enlargement of the European Union."

washing machines

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“...the only thing they can expect from us...”

A washing machine factory is closing down.

How quickly things change. It was only 40 years ago that major household appliances were mass-produced in Western Europe, but there are already few factories left and most have been shut down or relocated. It's nothing new that almost entire branches go abroad. What is new is that no new branches arise which hire significant numbers of people. Between 1990 and 2003 roughly 330,000 jobs were relocated from Germany to Eastern Europe. This was around 25,000 per year. Through the worldwide relocation of production, Germany loses up to 50,000 jobs each year. With around 38 million employees in Germany this is a little more than 0.1 percent a year. In comparison, the little cyclical boom in the year 2000 increased employment by 700,000.

The first washing machines, refrigerators and stoves were produced as industrial mass-products in Italy for the (West-)European market in the late 50s and early 60s. Before the 70s, companies which were limited to “their” national market were more productive than afterwards, when all of them had to expand. They were threatened by companies which tried to compensate massive class struggles in production with aggressive price competition. As a result Bosch/Siemens (BSH=Bosch Siemens Hausgeräte) became a “cheap Jack”, churning out low-grade products at discount prices. In the second half of the 80s the factory in Berlin/Spandau (Hausgerätewerk Berlin, HWB) had to deal with product return rates of 15 per cent and a similar degree of sick leave. We often wrote about struggles in this factory in Wildcat, and some of us had worked there. Now this factory is supposed to be closing.

A branch is migrating

More people work in industry in Germany than in the most developed capitalist countries. 27 percent of German employees worked in industry in 2003, five percentage points above the numbers in France and ten percent above the numbers in Great Britain; in the USA even less people work in industry. This is the fundamental reason why Germany has always been the export world champion. But like elsewhere in Europe in Germany the numbers sunk steadily in the past 15 years (in 1992 it was 35 percent). In the German

electrical industry the amount of employees sunk in the past 15 years by about one fifth (1991 1,087,331; 1993 980,000 with less than 74,000 in East-Germany; by June 2005 less than 810,000). But the electrical industry means everything from the production of a hair dryer to a generating plant. More important are the movements in between the generic term “electrical industry”. For example the relocation of consumer electronics had already started to take place in the 70s and 80s, during the heyday of the major household appliance. Today conventional telephones, small household appliances like mixers, and consumer electronics in general are no longer produced in Germany. The rationalization in household appliance production in the second half of the 80s and the increasing internationalisation and concentration of the sector since the 90s lead to the steady decline of jobs in Germany (in the beginning of the 90s the turnover was getting higher, since then that too has sunk). The production of washing machines in Germany increased from 1.6 million pieces in 1982 to 2.8 million in 1992 (record rates during the re-unification boom). Between 1987 and 1989 US companies got into the European production of household appliance, for example Whirlpool had taken over Phillips and Bauknecht. In the beginning of the 90s Bosch/Siemens had bought Spanish and Turkish household appliance producers. After that Electrolux took over Italian companies and AEG in Germany and has since been the world market-leader. BSH is number three in the world ranking (worldwide 34,000 employees, 14,000 still in Germany; 16,000 three years ago) and makes more than three-quarter of its turnover (of 6.8 billion Euro) abroad. Of the 42 factories, seven are still in Germany, the others in Spain, Greece, Latin America, USA, Poland, China and Turkey. In the last few years Turkey has become probably the most important location for production of major household appliances in the world. In 2002 the Turkish Arcelik group took over Blomberg (the last German producer of household appliance except Miele), two years later Blomberg stopped the production of washing machines in Germany. Miele too, which had marketed its expensive products with the label “Made in Germany”, is going to get rid of every tenth employee of the 11,000 in Germany until 2007. The core segments of the household appliance sector have being shifted (i.e. for 15 years there has been no development in cooling units and no big progresses are expected; the lowering of consumer prices, the increase of laundry and the shift to electronic control was for washing machines a key development in the last few years, in the future there will be only gradually advances). What happened with electrical goods in Germany is now taking place in the production of top loader washing machines; in

about two years no top loader will be produced in Germany anymore. It happened in France with the production of refrigerators, in 1960 there were 20 producers of refrigerators, in 1967 only Thomson-Brandt was left, and since 1993 no refrigerators are produced in France anymore. Except the Miele factory in Gütersloh there are only three and a half washing machine production locations in Germany: Bauknecht in Schorn-dorf - "threatened"; AEG in Nürnberg - "threatened"; Bosch/Siemens in Berlin and Nauen close to Berlin. The plant in Berlin is supposed to be closed by the end of 2006. Officially the plant in Nauen is suppose to produce the new generation of washing machines, but it has been made known that doubts exist over the continued existence of Nauen as a location for production. The decision "for Nauen" depends on the increase of subsidies through the provincial government in Brandenburg.

Crisis of production

In the production of household appliances in the last 40 years the typical mass-production worker compassion was employed: unskilled assembly workers who were hired from rural areas. Maybe one forth were women, up to 90 per cent migrant workers. This reservoir of labor is exhausted in Western Europe. Significantly no workers with Turkish descent of the third generation are working at Hausgerätewerk Berlin. For them this kind of work is completely uninteresting. The employer is able to get a little time advantage when they build factories in rural areas with high unemployment rates in Eastern Europe. But these areas are in industrially shaped regions. The situation they are attempting to escape appears quickly. In general the employers are looking to leave those regions in 10 to 15 years, when the wages will be "to high" or no "appropriate labor" will be available.

Crisis of consumption good

In general the employers make the "cost pressure" responsible for relocation. In 1992 40 per cent of all washing machines sold in Germany cost less than 600 Euros, by 2004 it was over 80 per cent! In 1987 1300 DM represented the average delivery price of a washing machine in Germany, in Italy it was 580 DM. Correspondingly in Germany in 1987 there was 12.3 billion DM worth of major household appliance in Italy, in it was Italy only 7.3 billion but Italy produced double the amount of washing machines than Germany (in Germany over two million, one third of those in HWB!). Not many people pay these high prices: firstly because "cheap brands" like Eko and LG deliver almost the same quality, and secondly because the German brands lost their leadership in technology (they had it with

ecological criteria but they didn't develop new ones). In the past years this development was aggravated, because of sinking wages and shrinking domestic markets in Germany. There is no "national protection for brands through label oriented behavior of consumers anymore", not only because of the processes of industrialization in Turkey, but also because of increasing single-households and increasing rates of divorces: a washing machine is no longer a long term purchase.

The household appliance plant in Berlin

From 1960 to 1980 the amount of employees working in electrical plants in West Berlin halved to 66,000. But it was still the biggest branch in West Berlin. After re-unification and after the decline of the "re-unification boom" a clear structural change of industry in Berlin begun. In May 1992 the whole of Berlin had 223,000 industrial employees; this was less than 21.4 per cent a year before, in April 1993 only 152,900. The developments lead to a strong increase of the unemployment rate. Since January 1992 the Western part of Berlin has the highest unemployment rate of former West Germany.

History of the plant

For about 50 years washing machines were produced in Berlin/Spandau, at first little units together with other household appliances. With the acquisition of the Constructa Company and the amalgamation of Bosch and Siemens in 1966, they began to produce only washing machines in Berlin/Spandau. In the mid 70's 2,100 workers produced 450,000 machines a year. In the mid 90's 2,500 workers produced more than one million washing machines and more than 200,000 tumble-dryers. The increase in unit-production took place in the 80's: from 600,000 devices in 1982 up to one million in 1986. The units of washing machines and dryers produced per year per worker doubled from 1978 to 1988 (from 205 to 442). In the beginning of 1987 young second-generation Turkish workers organised a slowdown strike against the steady rise in unit-quotas at the assembly line. They did this so well that that the employer couldn't enforce the new quotas, not even with foremen, spare men, snitches and forced transfers of workers around the factory. After a while the workers even reduced the quota. Finally they agreed on more spare men at the line. The workers

learned a great deal during their struggle, they could flip the cooperation at the line at their will. When they had idle time during reorganisation they could force their ideas about how many machines they wanted to produce. Since fall 1987 they didn't need to protest against legally obligatory overtime: they just subtracted the machines they had produced in overtime the days

after from the “normal units”. “If we wanted to, we just reduced the units anytime”. At this time the vanguards of the struggles became, in their own words, “professional saboteurs”. More and more machines had scratches, planned or “just because” (it was possible to buy such machines on a discount at the factory-shop). Once the early shift came to work and every single machine was scratched. Now and then the line stood still because of sabotage at the “robots” or because of a cut drive belt. Despite the fact that a spare man (a worker who replaces other workers when there is a problem) supervised the drive belt it was sometimes broken three times a day. “Then they put a security guard at the line for three weeks, he was walking around the belt. He had to listen to a lot of stuff from the workers! But it didn’t help. They just didn’t understand how we did it.” At late shift the spare man had to stay until every worker left the factory. Nothing worked. In spite of repeated transfers of the suspects, nothing helped.

The management never tried to raise the quotas at this line; instead they transferred the workers through the whole factory. In 1992 they decreased production. In the three years which followed more than 1000 workers left the factory, mostly with very good compensation payment.

Since the mid 60s the HGW in Berlin was now and then an object of investigation for industrial sociologists and work scientists. In the end one had the impression that they became desperate: all attempts at “humanization”, “team-work”, and all of those buzz-words failed. Today when a system of team-work rules the line which largely corresponds to those dreams of the work scientists, the plant is in line for closure.

“In sum one can assert that almost all serious difficulties with personnel are caused by the execution of the Taylor System.” *Wexlberger, former director of industrial science at HWB*

packaging job

Monet in the Duisburg Docklands Two Weeks in the Hewlett Packard Packaging Plant

Hewlett Packard has recently been in the public spotlight due to its management’s announcement to dismiss several thousands of workers in Europe and because of the resulting strike of HP employees in France.

What follows is a report on the work situation in HP’s central packaging plant for printer cartridges in Duisburg, which is run more or less entirely by subcontractors. The report reflects a two weeks stay in the plant and can be read as a call to confront the rather abstract and often ideological debate on precarious work with a discussion based on concrete experiences and (small-scale) inquiries...

Looking for Work

For Germany we can say that in addition to the reformed unemployment benefit scheme (Hartz IV), which standardised the level of benefit after one year of unemployment, there is another recently standardised level of income for proletarians: the wages for temp workers according to the collective contract. During the last years this contract was negotiated between the unions and most of the bigger temp agencies. It doesn’t matter if the job is to assemble mobile phones at BenQ in Kamp-Lintfort (see ppnews #3) or car seats for General Motors in Bochum, the wage level for unskilled work is 7.02 Euros/hour (before taxes). For skilled work, e.g. mechanic or electrician jobs, you get 8.92 Euros/hour and sometimes 1 Euro bonus or ‘food money’. At least in the area around Düsseldorf, Duisburg, Cologne you will hardly find an electrician job within the industry which is not mediated through a temp agency. The (skilled) workers I met during the job search and at work said that the collective contract lowered the general wage level. If you don’t mind the wages and conditions there are plenty of jobs available (at least in this region, for job seekers of medium age and qualification): Siemens/BenQ hires lots of people via several temp agencies, at the same time as announcing dismissals of ‘their own’ workers. A temp-agency in Krefeld wants to hire 200 people for the mobile phone plant, in both Düsseldorf and Duisburg they are hiring at least 25 each. The general gateway for all temps is the test of manual capabilities organised by Siemens. A temp-agency guy in Duisburg told me that he can’t give me the job, because the wages are too low. If I had to drive the way from Düsseldorf to Kamp-Lint-

fort, which is about 70 kilometers, I would have to spend 350 Euros per month on petrol. The wage at Siemens (40-hours week, night-and day-shifts) would amount to 820 Euros after taxes. You wouldn't be able to afford to work, although the distance of 70 kilometers is 'reasonable' according to the Hartz IV dole-regulations: formally you would be obliged to accept the job. The same is true for jobs at the Nokia plant in Bochum and a lot of jobs in the car part supplying industry around Velbert/Heiligenhausen. The job ads often already exclude people who don't live in the direct catchment area. The limit to which workers are able to pay an extra part of their wages on travel costs is reached, their demanded job mobility is fucked up by the petrol prices...

The Hewlett Packard Packaging Plant in Duisburg

The first hurdle when starting the job was to understand who is who and who owns what. The huge complex of storage halls belongs to Kühne & Nagel, a global transport, logistics and 'supply-chain service' company. The machine workers and fork lift drivers are employed by Kühne & Nagel, as well, or by Dekra temp agency. The machines and packaging lines belong to HP. The workers who maintain and repair the machines (officially and in the following called 'skilled workers', although the concept is a rather capitalist/fetishised one) are hired by HSG and Personal AG temp agency. HSG is a facility management and service company with about 4,500 employees in Germany. Amongst others they organise the facility management (security, general maintenance of the buildings) for Citibank in Duisburg and various train stations. HSG was a subsidiary of the construction company Philip Holzmann, but after the bankruptcy of Holzmann it was bought by the construction firm Bilfinger und Berger. Apart from the electricians and mechanics of HSG there are also specialist from various machine constructing companies (Jones, Schubert, Koch) running around on the shop floor. They come for temporary visits in order to solve special problems of 'their' machines.

Some of them are sent from the USA, most of them from the south of Germany. Hewlett Packard has their own engineers, who come for visits mainly in order to check the precarious administration software system (PAMA) responsible for the control and tracking of the whereabouts of each single printer cartridge. Their main problem consists in reconciling and interlinking their admin software with the various production softwares of the different packaging machines.

The whole complex and all the different people are brought together and to the brink of nervous collapse by five more or less completely automatised packing lines, composed by quite modern roboters, different

conveyor belt systems, machines for plastic and carton packaging and stupid names (Lava, Monet, Monypenny). The lines are meant to run on-line, meaning that ideally HP people in the USA could follow the packaging progress, can check and theoretically change certain machine settings and get an overview of recorded production mistakes. The lines are also meant to run on-demand, meaning that they package cartridges after they have been ordered. Actually everyone, or at least the HP management, is quite happy if the machine's maximum capacity is utilised by 50 percent, which depends rather on the (technical) production process than on the customer's wish. On each line they have easily noticeable computer monitors with different graphs and stats and colours, indicating the momentary efficiency of machines and workers. Each line can theoretically package 100,000 to 200,000 printer-cartridges of different types per shift. I couldn't find out how expensive the machines were. A robot-station at the head of one line, only picking up bulk-trays from a pallets, putting them on a belt, was supposed to be worth 150,000 Euros. The work could have been done by two workers at the same speed. On each line and shift work four to five women, there are two fore(women) for the machine workers. There are two to three skilled workers per shift taking care of the machines. Their main job is to get rid of production flaws, but sometimes they also have to supply machines with material (heavy coils of plastic foil etc.). The cartridges are produced in Singapore, Puerto Rico and Ireland. In Duisburg they are packaged for the European, Russian and African market. Kühne & Nagel is said to get 7 cents per packed cartridge. There is another smaller packaging plant in Amersfoort, Holland, but the main storage depot and the most modern lines are supposed to be in Duisburg. The plant has existed since 2000 and has expanded since then. The plant runs two shifts, night- and weekend shifts only happen in exceptional circumstances. The machine workers who are directly employed get about 10 to 11 Euros (before tax) per hour, but only 20 to 30 per cent of all women have a permanent contract with Kühne & Nagel. At the moment people are only hired via temp agencies. Their wage is about 6 to 7 Euros. The turn-over of staff is extremely high, due to often arbitrary seeming management decisions and the frustration of the workers themselves who aren't granted a real training period and who therefore often don't cope with the work stress. It's a similar situation for the 20 fork-lift drivers. A work-mate told me that about 100 drivers were herded through the company during the last two years. The machine workers are between 20 to 50 years old, of German-Turkish-Polish origin. Most of the women are divorced and/or single-mothers, so their wage is not an additional income. Some

of them have a second job, meaning that after their shift they work in a shop, in a solarium or as cleaners, which adds up to a 60 hours week. The skilled workers get about 15 Euros/hour (before tax), for most of them that is less than they earned in their previous job. The skilled workers hired by the temp agency get about 9.50 Euros. HSG is not part of a collective agreement with the unions. Most of the work contracts are individually negotiated. Officially the skilled workers have the status of employees, meaning that they get a fixed monthly wage which leads to the fact that over-time is often not paid for or that people are sent on home 'over-time holiday' if there isn't that much to do.

The main work of the maintenance workers, but to a certain extent also of the machine workers themselves, is evolving around the flaws of machines and products. It is rare that a machine is running for more than 5 minutes without an interruption due to flaws. The more or less complex packaging process (punching, folding, sealing, labeling etc.) and the flexible material (cardboard, plastic foil) are not made for the high speed, so the whole process gives the impression of a (rat) race of high speed making up of the time lost due to stoppage due to flaws due to high speed. The fragility is aggravated by untrained and over-burdened workers and the control-mania of HP to bar-code scan each single cartridge at each completed work-step. Often the lines get hick-ups because the production software has communicative problems with the admin-software. Therefore one of the main tasks of the machine workers (besides the re-filling of the different stations with cardboard-boxes, labels, foil) is to re-work the faulty products. If there isn't any total machine collapse the women have no breaks during their work, apart from the official ones. Some of the machines are very noisy and the work-stations are several meters away from each other, so often there is no chance for a chat during work-time. The maintenance workers are called once a machine worker can't solve the problem herself. The relationship between machine worker and maintenance worker is a contradictive one, in this case additionally shaped by the gender division. The maintenance workers solve problems, they get the machine going again and often blame the alleged technical incompetence of the machine workers for the flaws. The machine workers aren't given any tools or technical information, apart from the ones necessary to operate the machines. On one hand the flaws cause the only additional breaks for them, on the other hand they feel their foremen and the demanded numbers of packed cartridges at their backs. They sometimes make jokes during the smoke breaks that they 'already killed two lines today'. They often blame the slow maintenance workers for delays, or the awkward new work-mates. The maintenance work-

ers are caught between the front-lines of the battle over responsibility, competences, decision-making waged by the management of HSG, Kühne & Nagel and HP. New maintenance workers are only hired by temp agencies although it is clear right from the start that they would have to work there for about a year in order to be fully effective and profitable for the company. New employees don't get time to get familiar with the machines, they are expected to work right on their first day, although everyone admits that it takes at least half a year to know the machinery well enough in order to work independently. Stress and low wages cause a high turn-over of maintenance workers, as well.

The union is only officially present at Kühne & Nagel, they have a dull notice board. The works council was formed by some engineers who feared their dismissal and who thought that by getting elected as a works council member they would have more job security for themselves. One of them is a hated foreman. I haven't heard of any past collective conflicts in the plant. People didn't know about the strikes at HP in France and they didn't feel too threatened by HP's plans to sack workers. There weren't many discussions about the recent German elections, only sarcastic and gloating comments on the post-ballot chaos. HartzIV is a topic, of course. People blame the reforms for having to keep the job or for having had to take it. Apart from the old work-mates everyone in the maintenance crew talks about quitting the job, some are actively seeking an alternative employment.

The most impressive character and revelation of the job was to see how HP tries to make all kinds of different companies (officially all 'service companies') and (artificially) divided workers cooperate by keeping the control over fairly modern and expensive machinery. They are able to bring together former miners from the Ruhr area, IT specialists from the US, proletarians (ex-) Polish women from Duisburg's run-down areas and Turkish students. Despite all the problems and across all the barriers of subcontracts and out-sourcing, HP manages to get a fair share of its world demand of printer cartridges packaged by two dozen women and their fork-lift driving friends in some rented concrete halls in the Duisburg docklands. The significance of these 'fordist' central depots has recently shown up during the strike at the central storage of H&P in France and the conflict at the Tesco depot in Ireland, where young workers knew how to make use of their central position...

This article was sent by people from TPTG, Athens.

Recent developments and workers struggles in the greek textile industry

During the last decade, 44.000 jobs were lost in the greek textile industry. 28.700 workers have been sacked only in 2003 and 2004. Production in this specific industry is carried out through the use of obsolete machinery, piece work and a large workforce and thus it is based on “intensity of labour”. Since profits are based on the low labour cost, it comes as no surprise that with the opening up of the neighbouring countries’ markets, which had been out of reach for the western capital for long, capital moved where it could achieve a better rate of profit. Production is relocated to Bulgaria, Macedonia, Albania and Romania where wages may be even 10 times smaller (the average gross wage reaches up to 1000 euros in Greece, whereas in the other Balkan countries it’s around 120 euros). 3.500 greek textile companies operate in Bulgaria alone and almost every piece work workplace has been relocated.

Accounts given by Bulgarian unionists draw a rather depressing picture of the working conditions there: many factories operate on a 24 hour basis, Christmas bonus and holiday pay are being withheld, and there is no full pay leave. Incidents have been reported about confinement of the workers in the factories through the locking of doors by the administration till the workers end a certain amount of products. At the same time, state inspections of working conditions are actually nonexistent.

The factory closures should be seen in the context of the labour policies put forward by the greek state in the previous years. The ongoing reforms of labour legislation continuously aim to reduce labour costs, through relaxing rules of dismissal and by introducing provisions for the extension and non-payment of overtime work as well as for the flexibilization of labour in general. The companies that were subsidized by the state for supposedly productive investments have in fact used the money for relocation, while they have reduced their workforce making use of the advantageous new regulations for easier dismissals and voluntary retirements.

Recently, the Union of Northern Greece Industrialists proposed to the government the creation of a “Free Trade Zone” near the northern borders so that the wave of relocations be restrained. Their true aim is, on the one hand, to reduce relocation costs and, on the other hand, to exploit the labour power of foreign workers

inside Greece on the terms of their home countries as far as wages and social security are concerned.

Workers’ response to closures and relocation has been unsuccessful and inadequate. While factories were closing one after the other, the workers could not manage to form a community of struggle and practical solidarity actions beyond the local level were largely taken a day after the fair. For example, last year when the workers of an occupied textile factory (Tricolan) in Naousa tried to get in touch with the workers of another textile factory in Thrace [a region near Bulgaria] belonging to the same owner they were confronted with indifference or even fear. What’s remarkable about this story is the fact that it is very possible that the workers of the factory in Thrace will also face a closure very soon.

Nevertheless, the textile workers of Naousa, which is one of the cities most severely affected by closures and relocation, went on a large number of mobilizations during the previous year. The mobilizations ranged from road blocks, demonstrations and 24-hour solidarity strikes organized by the local union branch to their culmination with the occupation of the Tricolan factory last November. On the 31st of October 2004 the workers of Tricolan occupied the factory and refused to turn it over to the boss unless their following demands were satisfied:

1. A 3000 euro allowance for each worker
2. Unemployment benefits equal to their last wages until they could find a new job.
3. Recognition of the unemployment period for retirement pension.
4. Additional financial aid to families with student members.
5. Funding of the housing loans by the National Organization of Worker Housing.
6. A 5 years reduction of the age of retirement.

The most interesting point about these specific demands is the fact that every worker who is thrown out because of closures can relate to them, as well as other unemployed workers. But the occupation of Tricolan remained relatively isolated. There were no other militant strikes or occupations and so it eventually ended on the 25th of November 2004.

There were some developments during August and September this year in the city of Naoussa. Klonatex, a company belonging to the same owner as Tricolan, announced the closure of two more factories, Olympiaki and B’ Klostiria Naoussis, employing 110 workers. The Workers’ Center of Naoussa responded with the declaration of three 24-hour general strikes: one on 5th of August, another one on 11th of August and the most recent one on 23rd of September. The strikes were quite successful as far as participation of workers

is concerned. All the textile factories and the municipal services remained idle on these days; many people (even high school students, construction workers and packaging factory workers) participated in the demos organized on the 5th of August and the 23rd of September in the city of Naoussa and on the 11th of August in Veria, the local capital. Also, small workshops and small retail stores closed down in the area, in solidarity with the strikes since the whole local economy is affected dramatically by the very high rate of unemployment (34 percent). Despite the mobilizations, the administration of the factories has declared its determination to close them unless “a spectacular and unforeseen solution [sic!] is found”. The real meaning of that is the suspension of the operation of one of the factories since they claim that their productive functions overlap. On the 22nd of September the textile union organized in Naoussa a national meeting of textile workers from factories in Athens, Thessaloniki, Preveza and Evros where similar events are taking place.

In Athens, the underwear company “Sex Form” has stopped paying its workers since the middle of July. On the 29th of August, the 250 workers of “Sex Form” decided to go on strike demanding immediate payment and guarantees for the continuation of the operation of the factory as the administration is constantly blackmailing them with dismissals and relocation to Bulgaria. Working conditions in the factory have deteriorated in the last years with intense work rates, low wages and humiliating checks against product theft. At the same time the owner of the company has received generous subsidies from the state. The administration of the company has managed to persuade 50 of the 250 workers to scab. Since the beginning of September the strikers have begun a long struggle with demos and continuous picketing outside the factory trying to persuade the scab workers to join the struggle. They have also organized public meetings at the municipal cultural center. The highest point of the struggle was on the 26th of September when the strikers blocked the entrance of the factory to prevent its operation. That day the production stopped and the administration called the police special forces to break the blockage. At the same time, the scab workers sued their colleagues for “preventing them to work”! There was an immediate response by the strikers who called an assembly outside the police station. According to some accounts, the trade unionists have undermined the mobilizations since they have accepted to participate in common meetings with a committee of the scab workers at the Ministry of Labour. The same accounts hold the union responsible for preventing more radical actions proposed by some workers as well as saving the owner of the company from lynching by the strikers on the

6th of September. Local militants from the leftist and the antiauthoritarian milieu have organized solidarity actions in the area.

Similar developments are taking place in Thessaloniki as well. A textile company opened up a new factory employing 300 workers in Bulgaria and threatens to close two factories (Ergo-Textil and Ergo-Iliofin) employing 320 workers in Thessaloniki unless new loans are provided with the aid of the state. Moreover, the company stopped paying wages two months ago. Workers of both factories have gone on strike since 19th of September and in the case of Ergo-Iliofin they have also occupied the factory, demanding an allowance of 3000 euros for each worker as an immediate aid for the satisfaction of their basic needs. Furthermore, one more factory (Voulinos S.A.) ceased its operation in September because of a 15.000 euro debt to the electricity company. The workers of this factory also went on strike at the end of September demanding immediate government intervention for the restart of its operation. On the 27th of September, a meeting among the workers of the three factories was organized in the Workers’ Center of Thessaloniki with the participation of representatives of the textile union. Two days later, on the 29th, the workers demonstrated in the streets of Thessaloniki. Militants from the leftist and the antiauthoritarian milieu participated in the demo.

Finally, in the city of Preveza, one more factory (Klostiria Prevezis) stopped its operation in September as workers didn’t agree with the dismissal of 42 employees. The dismissals were considered by the administration to be ‘essential’ for the continuation of the factory operation. The workers in this factory have not been paid for the last 4 months and we should note that many of them are near the age of retirement. However, this particular factory will restart its operation since the solution of subsidized voluntary retirements complemented with immediate payment of the wages was agreed in a meeting among workers’ representatives, the factory administration and government officials.

All the above examples illustrate a situation that is rather gloomy for the working class in the textile industry. Workers respond to the closures with demonstrations, strikes and occupations but they seem incapable to reverse these developments by appealing to other parts of the working class and generalizing the struggle.

TPTG and friends

motorcycles

The following summary relies entirely on media reports - we couldn't get hold of any first hand reports from comrades.

Strike and Police Brutality at Honda Motorcycle and Scooter India (HMSI)

The month-long strike/lock-out at HMSI and the police attack on the workers caused a big stir in India. This is mainly due to the location of the strike: a modern factory of a multinational company in a developing region which up to that point was not seen as prone to industrial disputes. The conflict at Honda threatened to become a spark in a generally tense atmosphere within India's modern international industry. Therefore the police brutality against the workers can't be understood as a mere response to a single workers' struggle, but must rather be explained by the general situation in the new investment zones (see also Newsletter 3 on call centres in India). In order to understand the political significance of the dispute for the Indian economy we recommend you read the detailed analysis of the Indian group Rupe. They describe the increased dependence of the Indian economy on foreign capital influx since the crash in 1991, the new privatisation schemes and the other, dark side, of "India Shining" (the Indian boom). (www.rupe-india.org/39/contents.html)

About the Region

Gurgaon is situated in the state of Haryana, close to New Delhi, a town in a rural area without any tradition of workers' struggles. The new town centre is characterised by modern office blocks and shopping malls. Companies such as Microsoft, IBM and Nokia have their headquarters here. The government of Haryana implemented strict anti-union labour laws in order to attract further foreign investment. The industrial zone mushroomed during the last five years and comprises 90 factories, with a large share of companies in the automobile sector. About 70 percent of all motor-scooters produced in India are said to be produced in this region. Japanese companies play an important role, given that Japan is India's fourth biggest foreign investor and about three quarters of all Japanese companies in India are situated in Gurgaon. The AITUC is the most important union in Gurgaon, it is supported by the CPI(M). The Communist Parties of India have a difficult role to play. On the one hand, they have to make an effort to appear to support the workers, including by "patriotic propaganda" against foreign in-

vestors. On the other, they have the duties of governing parties. West Bengal is a CP-led state and attracts the second greatest amount of foreign investment of all Indian states. Shortly before the incidents in Gurgaon the government of West Bengal signed a 500 Million US-Dollar deal with Mitsubishi.

The Situation in the Modern Industrial Sector

The struggle in Gurgaon took place against the background of various conflicts within the modern industrial sector which often resulted in significant wage improvements for the workers. At HMSI the management claims that the workers already received a 100 percent wage raise in the previous year. In June 2005 the workers at Toyota in Bangalore demanded a 100 percent wage increase. The management promised 25 percent and was able to avoid industrial action. At the car part suppliers Speedomax, Hitachi Electrics and Omax Auto, all situated in Gurgaon, industrial disputes were only settled a few days before the police attack on the HMSI workers. Apart from a booming, but still modest, automobile export industry more and more electronic device companies (mobile phones etc.) are opening their factories in India. Companies like Solectron and Flextronics have recently increased their investment in the sub-continent. The individual ownership of mobile phones has increased from 6 million in 2000 to 50 million in 2005 and is supposed to grow by 20 million each year. The automobile export sector is still confined to a few companies and models (Toyota, Hyundai, Ford, Fiat, Skoda, Suzuki and Mahindra), exporting about 130,000 cars in 2004, but the sector, particularly the car component industry, is growing.

About the factory

The factory is modern, only four years old. The plant churns out 2,000 scooters per day and employs about 1,900 to 2,500 workers. In 2004 HMSI is said to have sold 550,000 scooters in India. Scooters and other two-wheelers are still the most important means of motorised transport in India. In 2003-04 about 5,625,000 motorcycles were sold, compared to 850,000 cars. Most of the workers are hired by subcontractors or only get daily contracts. The wages are poor, securing mere survival. A lot of workers come from the surrounding small villages or even from other states and they rely on the company's bus service.

The Cause of the Conflict

The conflict began in December 2004 after a manager allegedly hit a worker, who was said to be engaged in organising a union within the plant. Another four workers were sacked after they expressed their solidarity with their workmate. The official justification for

the dismissals was "undisciplined behaviour in the factory". The whole situation came to boiling point when the management sacked another 57 workers and nearly all the workers in the factory reacted by going on strike in June 2005. At the end of June 2005 the management replied by officially sacking 1,000 workers and locking out the strikers.

About the Strike

27th of June: Workers from the surrounding villages are not fetched by the company buses. The management wants to force them to sign a declaration saying that they renounce further demands and strikes.

10th of July: According to media reports, about 38 percent of the workers are still working, some of them are recently hired temps and redeployed office workers. For two days different sources speak about 200 workers still producing. The production is said to be down, only 30 percent of normal volume. In June the total sales of the scooter Unicorn decreased by 66.5 percent compared to the previous month.

13th of July: The employers' association of the automotive supplying industries (ACMA) demands that the government takes steps against the strike at Honda, complaining about the negative impact on the situation in other plants in the region.

17th of July: The media reports that the company has already lost 200 Million US-Dollar due to the conflict. There are also reports on large numbers of police troops being deployed in Gurgaon, arriving from various nearby towns. Unionists talk about the first acts of intimidation from police and management. The management offers to let 100 locked-out workers return to work.

25th of July: Between 2,000 and 3,000 workers of the Honda plant demonstrate in Gurgaon, supported by family members and employees of other factories. Near the factory some initial scuffles break out, but the demonstration continues. Workers are said to have tried to occupy the nearby Highway 8. Allegedly without warning the police attack the protestors with long bamboo batons, tear gas and rubber bullets. The television shows pictures of policemen hitting already unconscious workers. One worker is said to have died right on the street. The reported number of injured people varies between 300 and 800 and a lot of them have serious head injuries and broken limbs. The fights continue, people start to riot, burn police cars and buses and loot shops. There are pictures on telly showing groups of women chasing policemen with their own batons. About 300 workers are arrested, about 60-80 are still in custody at the end of August, some charged with attempted murder.

26th of July: Workers, family members and friends

search in hospitals and police stations for protestors who are still missing. Later on a union lawyer claims to have seen police beat an arrested demonstrator to death and then burn him. On the

26th of August Indian newspapers announce that 28 workers are still missing. More riots break out which continue the following day.

28th of July: A solidarity strike takes place in Gurgaon, called for by left parties. The participation is low. An India-wide day of protest is announced for the 1st of August.

1st of August: Production is officially resumed, but only 800 to 900 scooters are produced per day. Arbitration proceedings take place, but no representative of the workers is admitted.

About the Results of the Strike

In total the company lost about 1.2 Billion Rupees due to the strike. The media presented the result of the strike as following: All dismissed workers are rehired, under the condition that they sign a so-called 'good-conduct' declaration promising to abstain from further demands and strikes. The workers are granted a wage increase for the year, although we couldn't find any info on the exact amount. There is contradictory information on the question of whether the days of the strike will be paid or not. Some sources say that all strike days in May and June will be paid, others say that they won't. The AITUC demands the release of all workers still in custody and union recognition in the company.

About the Reaction to the Strike

The strike and the police attacks got huge public attention and caused diplomatic tension between India and Japan. Prime Minister Singh met representatives of the left parties in a special session in order to consult over the strike and its consequences. On the second day of rioting the chairman of the governing Congress Party, Sonia Gandhi, came to Gurgaon for mediation talks. The Japanese ambassador told the media that the strike would endanger future investment by Japanese companies.

Managers of automobile companies operating in the region expressed their concern that the strike could have negative effects on the production climate in their plants. On television there were hundreds of SMS messages expressing solidarity with the Honda workers. The daily newspapers and political magazines published several articles asking whether the strike is a prelude to a wave of new struggles in the multinational companies, after a general decline of strike activity since 2000. The Hindu nationalist opposition party BJP talked about "national security", which according to their opinion

would be harmed by foreign investment. The CP was also trying to play the patriotic trick and announced a general strike against the changes in the labour law in September. Against the background of the strike the bosses were publicly discussing the need for reformed labour laws. They demanded, amongst other things, that strikes would have to be announced three weeks beforehand and that an approval of 75 percent of all workers in the plant would be required as the legal precondition for the dispute. In addition, for each day of wildcat strike the bosses want to make the workers pay a fine of eight days' wages!

car-update

Following a short update with news from the global car industry, serving as background information to the articles on the automobile sector in Iran and India in this newsletter. The car industry is still the most 'globalised' sector and therefore an indicator of the general condition of global capitalism. At the moment we can observe an acceleration of the crisis and of the global shift of the automobile industrial centers. Two of the biggest companies of the USA and representatives of a whole area of industrialisation, GM and Ford (and its suppliers Delphi and Visteon), are on the verge of formal bankruptcy and consequently announced mass redundancies and even factory closures. The Business Week from the 25th of July 2005 deals with the emergence of a new 'Detroit' in Eastern Europe and Asia, stating that: "The full impact of Detroit East's manufacturing muscle will hit Western Europe around 2008. That's when the plants will reach peak capacity, flooding the Western market with cars that enjoy a newfound pricing advantage. The surge will occur just as Chinese imports start to accelerate. The combined effect on prices will make it increasingly difficult for laggards like Fiat, Opel, and Volkswagen to maintain expensive, excess capacity in the West, and may well force auto makers to shut down Western factories." We can already see the prelude of this process:

23th of July: Ford announces to sack 30 per cent of it's staff in the US (10,500 workers).

26th of July: Daimler Chrysler wants to reduce it's German workforce by 5,000.

23rd of August: Volvo wants to dismiss 1,500 people.

29th of August: SEAT declares to cut it's workforce

by 15 per cent.

10th of October: Delphi, the supplier of General Motors, declares to be insolvent; currently 185,000 people are employed by Delphi worldwide, in the USA about 8,500 are supposed to loose their jobs this year, 25 plants are planned to be shut down, the remaining workers face severe wage cuts.

It will have to be seen in the future what the reactions of the workers will be and if the 'defensive' struggles in the West might come together with struggles of a new workforce in the car factories in the developing East. For example Hyundai announced at the end of September to invest 1 billion Euros in a new car plant in the Czech Republic and while Ford cuts jobs in the USA it hires new workers in Russia (see below). So far capitalism can't rely on any other sector which would replace the automobile industry and it's importance for the economy. During the last months there have been various struggles worth mentioning:

Threatened strike at Ford in Russia

On 30th of September Ford workers in Russia threatened to strike if management refuses to increase wages by 30 percent and offer other concessions. The workers demands come as the firm is planning to almost double production at its St. Petersburg plant, putting additional pressure on its work force, the union official said. While Ford plans to add to its workforce of 1,700, the production boost will nevertheless add pressure to workers who already do overtime in the hope of a bigger paycheck. Most of the plant's workers earn between 10,000 rubles (350 US-Dollars) and 17,000 rubles (600 US-Dollars) per month. In comparison, Ford workers in Brazil earn between 560 and 910 US-Dollars per month as well as receiving 1 percent of the profit a plant makes. Recent discontent over terms and conditions has led to a dramatic increase in union members, with membership rocketing to more than 1,100 from just 112 in August. [<http://www.moscow-times.ru/stories/2005/09/30/042.html>]

Strike at VW in Brasil surprises the official unions

On 31st of September a general assembly of 8,500 VW workers in São Bernardo decided to go on strike against the official recommendations of the union. They were joined by another 3,000 workers of the late shift. The unions reacted by telling the workers to go home and come back to work at the 3rd of October. In a statement, the automaker accused the São Bernardo do Campo union of being out of control. Plants at Taubaté and Curitiba were effected due to missing car parts from São Bernardo. Workers at the other plants joined the strike on the 4th of October. For the first time all VW plants in Brasil came to a standstill,

18,000 workers walked out. At São Bernardo the strikers were joined by landless people who occupied land owned by VW. On the 18th of July hundreds of workers occupied an area of 42 acre in size. By October up to 7000 persons - including about 2000 children, were in the camp.

The strike at Taubaté ended after about one week when workers accepted a VW offer to pay 5,000 Real (2,125 US-Dollar) per worker subject to an agreed production volume being reached in 2005. Workers originally asked for 5,500 Real profit share per employee, while VW countered with 4,700 Real. In early October VW said it had now lost 12,000 cars and 9,000 engines because of the strike. On the 24th of October the São Bernardo workers finished their strike. The 12,400 workers at the oldest and largest VW factory in Brazil returned to the assembly line though they had not signed an agreement with the automaker.

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Spontaneous strike at VW in Bruxelles/Belgium

On the 17th of October workers at the VW plant laid down their tools spontaneously in response to the governmental plans to raise the age for entering retirement from 55 to 58 years. Their action happened in the aftermath of two one-day general strikes in the country. [http://auto-motor-und-sport.de/news/wirtschaft/vw_streik_gegen_rentenalter.93961.htm]

Indian rulers want to enforce anti-strike law against car workers

On the 25th of October the high court in Bangalore, location of Toyota and other automobile plants, upheld three notifications issued by the government declaring automobile and auto component industries as a public utility service under the provisions of the Industrial Act. Justice R. Gururajan observed that the wheels of industry have to keep moving in the larger interest of the economy and upheld the notifications. It is implied that workmen in public utility service cannot go on strikes and lockouts.

Strike at SEAT in Spain against redundancies

On the 10th of November all three SEAT plants (Barcelona, Martorell and Pamplona) were on strike against the announced cuts of 1,350 jobs. Already earlier in October a strike of lorry drivers stopped production at Spanish plants of Citroen and Daimler Chrysler. [<http://www.rp-online.de/public/article/nachrichten/wirtschaft/unternehmen/ausland/115035>]

iran

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United against the Social Earthquake

The defeat of Rafsanjani and the election victory of Ahmadinejad might surprise outside observers, but only if they had ignored the growing economic and social misery in the country or had considered the development a result of the “politics of the mullahs” and their economic compartmentalization against the West. In Iran itself even conservative intellectuals assess the social situation as much more explosive. In his campaign against the millionaire Rafsanjani, Ahmadinejad promised to let the poor share the oil wealth. In fact, as mayor of Tehran he had the opportunity to win over the poorer layers. For years his conservative party dominated the city councils and was at odds with the “reform-camp.” Ahmadinejad’s party had a parliamentary majority and against the opposition of Khatami’s government had pushed for price stability policies. The party influenced and cooperated with the Pasdaran (Revolutionary Guards) and the paramilitary Basij, which had manipulated and shaped the election results, based on these group’s stances against U.S. aggression.

The highest authority in Iran (responsible for foreign policies, the head of the judiciary, military leaders. And the head of radio and TV and Friday prayer leaders) is not the state-president, but the non-elected Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Moreover, Rafsanjani, the West’s favorite, wields major political influence as chair of the powerful “Expediency Council.” However, with Ahmadinejad, the powerful in Iran now have a devoted appointee as president. Therefore, government will rule more effectively.

Great Game

The U.S. strategic goal in the Middle East is a change of regime in Iran, either through war or a Ukraine-style Orange revolution. Le Monde diplomatique (January 14,2005) rightfully called U.S policy “Haunt, Encircle, Isolate.” The Iranian ruling class has no doubt that an Iran without nuclear weapons cannot act as the region’s dominant power and oppose Israeli and U.S threats. The question is just at what price i.e. risk of US embargo or war. With U.S. troops stationed in almost all neighboring states, economic and geo-strategic constraints show that in the long run, the Islamic Republic will not act as the regional hegemonic power without U.S. tolerance. In both the war against Afghanistan and Iraq Iran avoided a confrontation with the United

States; in nuclear politics, it relies on cooperation with Europe.

The EU, Russia, China and India are major players in that game. The EU is Iran's largest commercial partner. Forty per cent of all Iranian imports come from EU countries, with German imports alone estimated at a volume of more than four billion US dollars this year, and 35 per cent of the exports (80 per cent of which is oil) go to the EU. After negotiating with Germany, France and Great Britain, Iran signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty's additional protocol on October 21, 2003. One week later French corporation Renault decided to invest 700 million Euros in a car factory, the first involvement of a foreign company since 1979. In July 2004. Volkswagen too jumped into the growing Iranian market. In the economic zone Arke Jadid, (close to the southeastern city Bam, still in ruins from an earthquake in 2003); as a start Volkswagen is supposed to assemble 20.000 vehicles a year. The factory belongs to the Iranian company Kerman Khodro. Kerman Khodro had assembled cars for Daewoo until General Motors took over Daewoo and ended the contract because of the US embargo against Iran.

On the question of nuclear energy a triangle of China, Russia and Iran are positioned against the US. China and Russia deliver equipment and know how; in return, China now already gets 13.6 per cent of its oil imports from Iran. Last October China signed a contract with Tehran for about 100 billion US dollars to deliver 10 million tons of liquid gas (that is 150.000 barrels day). Recently Iran secured observer status at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a relatively young confederation made up of China, Russia, and four Central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan). The SCO has started demonstrating greater independent politics; recently it asked the USA to shut its Central Asian military bases. Also India has started negotiations with Iran over long-term gas delivery. Despite threats of U.S. sanctions, both countries want to invest in oil field exploration. (The U.S. wants to prevent a 2600 kilometer-long gas-pipeline from being built from Iran through Pakistan to India.)

The boom and its social undersides

As a result of the Iraq War, not only has Iran increased its influence over Iraq, but the war has also generated increased revenues for the Iranian government because of higher oil prices. In 2004, economic growth was above 7 per cent, 90 per cent of that caused by rising oil prices. Petrol dollars still allow the regime the means to pacify the middle class. "Unemployment, Street Kids, Drug Abuse" was how "Die Zeit" (German liberal weekly newspaper) from June 1, 2005 described the "dark sides" of the boom. Real wages have declined

since 1988 (at the moment, the average wage is roughly 110 Euros a month). The fifth Parliament abolished the labor laws for companies with less than five employees. In 2002, the sixth Parliament decided to do the same for the 300.000 rug makers. With the enacting of a law to adjust and modify the labor force ("Ta' diel e Nirooy e Kar") the textile companies just laid off 100.000 workers. Now, the seventh Parliament wants to remove labor law protection from workers with limited working contracts; this is the half of all workers! According to official statistics, in 1996 1.4 million were unemployed, today that figure is 3.2 million (independent sources count 4.3 million unemployed); that means a population growth of 18 per cent is coupled with a 130 per cent increase in unemployment.

Pragmatism instead of reforms

Both outside conflicts and internal frictions in the country are often described as a fight between conservatives and reformers, as "tradition against modernism." Behind that lies divisions within the ruling class over the question of how to guarantee conditions of exploitation. Khatami's motto: "political development first, economic development later" was an attempt to intensify and control this exploitation by involving more groups from the bourgeoisie. In Iran all kind of NGO's are allowed and supported. Now, 15.000 groups are operating. They are desperately needed to deal with, for example, the growing drug problem.

The reform movement became, so to speak, nationalized: bought off and influenced by the state; the radical movement ended up isolated and defeated. During the "power struggle between the conservatives and the reformers", an agenda arose backing pragmatic collaboration between the ruling classes and the bourgeoisie from abroad. The women's and students movements got stuck in the dead end street of the reform movement, their hopes for state concessions disappointed and their spokespersons disillusioned.

The ruling class cannot and does not want to forbid the little freedoms, for example, the everyday criticism of the regime that goes on in the markets, buses and other public places. Today in Iran, such criticism can be freely made. However, the state reacts mercilessly if people act against the system. Recently riots among the Arab population, who live in deep poverty and are discriminated against, were brutally suppressed, leaving 50 dead while the predominantly Persian human rights activists watched silently. Since Reza Shah and the beginning of the oil production, the policy of the ruling class toward the Arab population is resettlement, underdevelopment and eradication. The Arabs remain mostly poor peasants and unskilled seasonal workers living in villages and slums.

The union movement

For years, Iran attempted to cooperate with the International Labor Organization (ILO). The ILO provides technical and consulting help, especially in overcoming unemployment, and it tries to adjust Iranian labor law to international standards. In June 2002 at the 90th ILO conference, the Iranian labor minister demanded that the ILO should help remove obstacles to Iran's admission to the WTO. On May 26, 2005, after years of veto, the US accepted Iran's membership in the WTO, this happened one day after new negotiations opened over nuclear weapon program between Iran and three European countries. The delivery of spare parts for Iranian airplanes was also discussed. The ILO demands free elections of workers representatives, but still accepts the Islamic labor councils and the "Workers House" (something like an Islamic workers party) as legitimate representatives of the Iranian workers. In July 2003 the ILO and the Labor Inspection Department of the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs declared that trade union free activity and independence should be guaranteed which caused protest from the Islamic labor councils and the "Workers House." Soon the ILO wants to re-open its branch in Tehran, which was shut down 24 years ago.

Since the end of the workers councils, which arose during revolutionary times, worker activists and the left have argued over the "right" workers organization. During the Shah's regime the trade unions were henchmen of the state. Workers at the big companies grasped this role of the unions, so no one spoke about founding trade unions, but instead about starting independent workers organizations. But practically every workers organization was outlawed anyway.

The trade union movement appeals to the "free workers" of the world respectively the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), to supply the solidarity missing from the inside with help from the outside. Also those workers opposing trade unions and for councils (in fact, German-style work councils, not workers councils) pin their hope on political influence from the ICFTU and protection by the ILO. Many party leftists and worker activists now see a historic opportunity to form free independent workers organizations. Not only because of pressure from the outside and acceptance of trade unions by the state and parts of the bourgeoisie, but also because of the weakening of the power of the Islamic labor councils and the "Workers House", a weakening of power that was noticeable on this year's May 1st. The May Day rally with a lot of propaganda and 12.000 workers in Tehran ended as an embarrassment. When the organizers started promoting Rafsanjani's election campaign, the workers pro-

tested loudly. They shouted against Rafsanjani and the election, and left the demonstration. Rafsanjani could not speak at all and later he said that he cannot speak at a rally where anti-state slogans are shouted. He is seen as the architect of the "liberalization" and responsible for the wave of lay offs during his time in office.

Committees

In February 2005, the "Committee to follow up creation of Free Labor Organizations in Iran" emerged. More than 2371 workers signed a letter addressed to the Iran's Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, the Labor and Workers Organizations throughout the World and the ILO demanded accepting workers' rights to build independent organizations and remove existing obstacles to their formation. A second committee named "Coordinating Committee to Form Worker Organizations" called for workers to self-organize and build a workers organization through their own power. The ILO would have the duty to force the Iranian government to put an end to the suppression of the workers' activists and the Islamic Republic has to guarantee the security of the workers activities. Copies of the 3029 signatures went to the ICFTU and the ILO. Many unionists and a political spectrum from the Tudeh party to Worker-Communist Party of Iran support the first committee, which at the end of the day wants to found one big trade union like in Germany. Others see in the second committee a power which is far more left-wing and against wage labor, with the goal of founding a left political union or even workers councils. The two committees might differ in theory, especially in their political spokespersons and supporters. Nevertheless, practically one sees little difference by now. Both organize from above, collect signatures, and hope foreign trade unions will support them. Both have modest demands and use symbolic actions like May Day, which itself has a ritual character.

In the run up to May Day 2005, the representative of the Coordinating Committee, Mohmood Salehi, addressed himself to the president of the ICFTU. The ICFTU then announced that they will watch events in Iran, in particular the government's actions at the May demonstrations. In contrast to last year, this year all events and demos in Tehran and other cities ran without incident, despite red banners and singing of the Internationale. However, not only was the state restrained, so were the workers representatives. The bakers trade union in Sagges, with Salehi as spokesperson, participated in a rally with the "Workers House," where first the governor of the city, then the chief of the job center and finally Salehi spoke to 1500 workers and their families. The more these activists negotiate

officially with the government, the more they abstain from independent and radical actions.

The first legal trade union

Bus drivers are poorly paid and work in bad conditions. On top of driving they have to collect tickets and take responsibility for enforcing gender separation inside the buses, which is mandated by law. In 1970 a bus drivers union existed, but after five years of the Islamic Revolution, it was dissolved. For a long time, union activists tried to re-organize this trade union. When they gathered on May 9, 2005, they were attacked by the Islamic council, management and security and some unionists were hurt. On May 13, a second attempt to meet failed because of intervention by the secret police, security and a part of "Workers House." The same day 3000 workers got together and demanded the disbanding of the Islamic Council. On June 3 there was another appeal for a work meeting. This time security forces prevented workers from getting to the meeting place. During the day, roughly 500 workers got together with banners. The police then gave orders to go back. Later on, during the workplace meeting, the Tehran Union of Public Transportation Workers was founded. Supposedly 5000 (of 14.000) workers participated in founding this first legal union.

Workers getting active

In 1997 2000 oil-workers had demonstrated in front of the oil administration in Tehran. The regime crushed the movement, more than 100 workers were arrested, and many activists were laid off. However since then strikes and spontaneous demonstrations have taken place, especially among textile workers fighting for their jobs and back pay. More than 80.000 workers in roughly 1400 factories participated in strikes, hunger-strikes in their factories, road blocks, spontaneous demonstrations in front of company offices and parliament and riots in cities, which mostly ended up defeated by the authorities.

One example: Shahr Babak

In January 2004 workers at the copper mines and copper processing facility in Khatoon-abad in Kerman province protested against lay offs and for several days organized sit-down strikes with their families in front of the mines. Security forces attacked and shot them, wounding several workers and their family members. Members were wounded and arrested. In the city of Shahr Babak, where many of the miners live, a large wave of protest and solidarity against these attacks emerged. The inhabitants demonstrated in the streets and threw stones at banks and company offices. Security also used helicopters to open fire on protesters. At

least four workers were killed and many more wounded and arrested. There is a new form of workers resistance: single workers kill their factory bosses with a gun, there is sabotage in the factory and so on...

Detroit of the Middle East

Since the mid-90s, the Iranian auto market has grown around 30 per cent a year faster than the Chinese. This year, car production in Iran will rise to roughly 1 million vehicles. After 38 years, production of the national car, the notorious Paykan, was discontinued. After the joint venture with Renault, the factories of Iran Khodro and Saipa are supposed to produce 300.000 Logans in 2006. The vice-president of Iran Khodro, the biggest car factory of the country says Iran will be the "Detroit of the Middle East".

However, when compared internationally, the Iranian car industry is seen as outdated and unproductive. The industry's boom is built on workers' bones. Workers call Iran Khodro in Tehran a slaughterhouse. Last year at least eight workers died of work-related stress and accidents. The company is the biggest producer of vehicles in the Middle East and with more than 30.000 employees, the biggest plant in Iran. Since 1997 no workers are contractors anymore, but they sign only limited work-contracts. The sub-contractors and service companies which work for the company, pay poorly. The company forces the workers to work longer than ten hours a day and cuts holidays.

More and more workers die through accidents, hard work and over-time. Despite meetings and strikes being forbidden, now and then workers protested and went on short strikes. In September 2003 a worker at Peugeot assembly died from exhaustion in front of his coworkers. The workers on the line struck. After the strike, working conditions improved. During New Year (March 21, 2005), the management demanded workers come to work during the holidays and on the weekend to avoid lay-offs. Management canceled the yearly bonus and because of the shut-down of Paykan production, laid off the employees of line one. The workers protested and went on strike. On April 12, the electricity was cut off on assembly departments 1 and 3 and production interrupted for a few hours. The Harasat (factory security) detained one protesting assembly worker, Parviz Salarvand. The Harasat interrogated Salarvand in the factory basement and removed him later to an unknown location. He was accused of protesting against the wages of the temporary workers. After three weeks, word spread that a warrant was issued for Salarvand's arrest on charges of "deliberate violation and sabotage" which he had confessed to. In a statement on May 18, 2005, the Coordinating Committee supported him, but rejected sabotage as an "ad-

venturist tactic against workers' interest." According to a message from a group of workers at Iran Khodro, Salarvand was released after the protests of his coworkers and the efforts of foreign worker organizations. Because of the workers protests the management had to declare May 1 a holiday.

katrina

New Orleans: After the Storms

Right after Katrina hit, it looked like issues of race, class, and poverty were again coming to the forefront in the United States. The images of "bloated bodies floating in muddy water washing over submerged pickups and campers, of corpses being eaten by rats as they decompose on the city streets, of people dying in wheelchairs outside the convention center as families poured water over their heads to keep them alive" transfixed the country. (New York Times, Sept. 4th) No one could fail to see that these people were almost entirely poor and Black. There were calls for a "renewed attack on entrenched poverty".

Six weeks later, how things have changed. The newspapers rarely carry stories on the survivors as a group; it's as if tens of thousands of people suddenly vanished. If the media mention them at all, it's about individual success stories: new marriages, people reunited with long-lost relatives and pets, those who have gotten lucky breaks in their new surroundings. Instead, what's most visible now is the political fall-out: the jockeying for money, and the reports of swindles and con-games connected with bogus charity fundraising. In other words, business as usual.

New Orleans remains semi-militarized, stripped of most of its population. There's still an awful lot of National Guard troops roaming around southern Louisiana and Mississippi providing "humanitarian aid" now, along with private security contractors, many from the same firms providing security services in Iraq. And significantly for its long-term effects, the social character of an important part of the South is changing, its working-class being recomposed from the shift of people out of the region and to a lesser extent from an influx of people streaming in.

A look at the numbers shows how this is taking place. Over one and a half-million people have been scattered from the area, mainly to the neighboring six states of the Deep South. Although the mass centers like the Houston Astrodome are now emptied out and the

public shelters are starting to shut down too, tens of thousands remain out of sight and public attention in individuals hotel rooms paid for by FEMA [1], the federal agency charged with disaster relief.

The national construction industry was especially hard hit by the storm; the Midwest factories making cement, brick, and wood-products all shipped through southern Louisiana ports. Because of these shortages in building materials, a shortage of skilled labor and the cleanup of storm debris in the affected areas, little permanent housing is likely to be built anytime soon. As many have pointed out, this transfer of people marks the largest internal migration in the United States since the Civil War, topping the Depression-era flight of poor white farmers from the prairie and outstripping the migration of southern Blacks to northern factories in the decades around World War II. Both of these past migrations led to social conflicts, especially the latter.

However, instead of a plan for permanent housing, FEMA has ordered hundreds of thousands of trailers to house survivors. These trailer camps will concentrate for an indefinite time the poor and working-class survivors in isolated rural areas, far from jobs, public transportation, and public services. Already, people are calling these trailer camps, "FEMA-villes," a play on words going back to the Depression when the tents and cardboard boxes of the unemployed were called "Hoovervilles" after the Republican president of the time.

All of this is already increasing social strains throughout the South. The states hardest hit by Katrina (and then Rita) are already the poorest in the country, with low-wages, little union membership, paltry public services, and few if any welfare benefits for single people. While some of this economic pressure may be offset by the influx of federal money and rebuilding efforts in the region, much won't - and it's questionable how much of this federal money will benefit the people most affected by the storm.

Baton Rouge, the next largest city in Louisiana, for instance, has doubled in size. As one writer in Baton Rouge recently described the local situation said, "Jobs are as rare as snow in August... barely a trickle of clean-up jobs are going to Louisiana businesses or Louisiana workers and those few that are magically trickling down into the local economy are grossly underpaid..." ("Losing Hope in Louisiana," Washington Post, Oct. 12th). Texas, which took in a large influx of evacuees is already a major site for undocumented immigrant workers from Mexico and Central America and the sudden presence of thousands of mostly unskilled relocated workers from the hurricane states has lowered wages there too.

The official body count of a little over a thousand

dead is suspiciously low and the efforts to recover bodies shrouded in secrecy. Recovery will be hard because many corpses have been swept out to swamps and rivers as one coroner in Mississippi told the Washington Post. Legally, someone declared missing without proof of death has to stay missing for two years before being officially documented as dead. No doubt this will aid the government in underplaying the true figures, much in the same way as it does with Iraq. (In Iraq, only deaths taking place directly in Iraqi soil are counted, leaving out the many wounded who later die in military hospitals outside the country.) With many families evacuated by the hurricane broken up and suddenly shipped off to different parts of the country, tracking who is alive and who is dead is still incomplete.

The Special Case of New Orleans

New Orleans has long been called the most Third World city in the United States. Mostly dependent on tourism, the city ranked among the poorest in the country, with over 25 percent of the population living beneath the official poverty line, a declining majority-Black city - over 70 percent of the population was Black - much like Detroit and Baltimore.

Although the area of southern Louisiana surrounding New Orleans is one of the most industrialized regions in the country, with a heavy concentration of chemical, oil, and plastics plants and a huge shipping industry, most of these manufacturing and port jobs were downsized or automated long ago; few city residents benefited. The Port of New Orleans, for instance, one of three major ports in the region, only had 350 workers officially on the port payroll, although the surrounding warehouses employed thousands more.

Back in the early 1990s, the collapse of the oil industry plunged the area into severe recession. At the time, I worked with a Cajun [2] woman who talked about the effects of the oil industry collapse. Her family had lived in southern Louisiana for several generations, yet now were split-up around the country. Rural towns were suddenly so poor because of cutbacks in services that dead alligators and dogs were left lying to rot in the streets. She lived near the Mississippi border. You could tell when you were crossing from one state to another: The grass strip in the middle of the highway on the Mississippi side would be immaculately trimmed while on the Louisiana side, the grass grew a foot high. Around this same time, David Duke, an open white supremacist and populist demagogue, ran for state-wide office and almost won. This part of the South has always been an incubator of powerful waves of populism: anti-elite, anti-big business, anti-Semitic and making thinly disguised racial appeals to southern whites.

New Orleans' reliance on tourism also decisively shaped the city in other ways. The master-servant nature of much tourism work - and the tourist were largely white and the workers mostly black - created an atmosphere of simmering racial and class tension which spilled over in especially gruesome and violent crime.

Another woman friend, who spent significant time in the city over the past few years told me that when you crossed the street at night, people would try to run you over with their cars. Street mugging was widespread and many locals wore eye-patches and used crutches because of attacks. Nearly everyone had some horrible crime story to tell, often where even after turning over their wallets and purses, the perpetrators still stabbed, shot, or beat.

Moreover, like many other poor, Black majority low-wage U.S. cities, the drug economy in New Orleans filled in the gap as the high paid jobs disappeared. New Orleans had one of the highest percentage of drug-related gang memberships of any U.S. city. Drugs and poverty erode people's ties informal ties and solidarity; it's no wonder that one study showed pre-Katrina New Orleans residents had little social trust in others (Baltimore Sun, Sept. 21st). It was a city where the white elite was more concerned about Mardi Gras floats than the festering poverty around it, police brutality rampant, and political corruption rife.

It's in this context that the reports of looting and crime erupting after Katrina has to be placed, without over-estimating or under-estimating what really went on: Just looking at the alleged numbers and incidents of looting and violence says little about its social character or what motivated people. Now, all of the sensational reports of murders, rapes and beatings in the Convention Center and Sports Stadium have now been discredited. There was in fact widespread and spontaneous social cooperation. As a Major in the Louisiana National Guard who was stationed at the Superdome later said, "The people never turned into these animals. What I saw was a tremendous number of people helping people... They have been cheated out of being thought of as these tough people who looked out for each other."

Even the actual looting that took place, beyond the theft of necessities to survive, often reflected existing social tensions. In *The New Republic*, a New Orleans based-writer argued that targeting an unpopular local Wal-Mart had much to do with anger at the tax breaks Wal-Mart had gotten and the low-income housing that it has destroyed in the neighborhood:

"Take the looting at the Wal-Mart on Tchoupitoulas Street the day after the levees began to fall. The store itself opened last year as part of a "redevelopment" of

the decrepit St. Thomas public housing complex. The plan, according to critics, involved a net loss in cheap housing units and a tax scheme that helped the world's largest retailer. The public debate was long, and acrimonious. None of this quite explains why people used Katrina as an excuse to relieve the store of its flat-screen televisions, but resentment was clearly simmering well in advance of the storm." "New Orleans Diarist: Past as Prologue" New Republic, Sept. 26th)

Yet it would be equally wrong to think that no anti-social victimization took place either. One group of residents from the Ninth Ward who had fled to a nearby school reported being held hostage several days by gang members before escaping. People going back to the Ninth Ward said their homes had been stripped of all valuables. At this point, an accurate picture has yet to come out.

For almost thirty years, the U.S has had no major social struggles. Traditions of collective solidarity are frayed if non-existent. You can chart this decline by looking at two major prison uprisings, one at the height of struggle and one at the dying end of this period. In Attica, prisoners forged a cross-racial solidarity that still stands out today. Yet just a few years later in the early Reagan era, another major prison uprising in New Mexico, gangs tortured and set rivals on fire.

A few days after Katrina hit, rumors spread in Baltimore that all the gas stations would shut down by late afternoon. Hundreds of people lined up at the gas pumps; tempers frayed; fights broke out, and in a few cases, guns pulled. A bitter joke I heard at the time went like this: "Question: What's the difference between New Orleans and Baltimore? Answer: Twenty feet of water." It's easy to see how in a social climate of sharp competition between people that sudden fear and scarcity can lead to more antagonism and not less.

"Disaster recovery is not just a rescue of the needy but also a scramble for power and legitimacy" - The Uses of Disaster, Rebecca Solnit

The New Orleans region plays a key role in the U.S economy. As one researcher puts it, "Historically, it (the Mississippi river and the ports of Southern Louisiana centered on New Orleans) has been instrumental in bringing the USA to its dominant trading status, contributing to the transformation of American from agricultural giant to industrial giant. Latterly, it has added energy, in the form of oil extraction, gas extraction, and petroleum refinement to its inventory. Some 25 percent of US crude oil extraction originates offshore and a significant proportion of refinement onshore. Indeed, and in no small way, New Orleans and the region may claim material credit for America's current

geo-political status... It is the worst possible place to build a city; but the optimum place to build *that* city." ("Hurricane Katrina: Location, Relocation, Abandonment...", Steve Gibson)

But if New Orleans has to be rebuilt, how and in whose interests will the rebuilding take place? Right now, there's much talk on how much of the infrastructure was damaged; whether oil rigs were toppled and plants wrecked, but not about the absence of workers. A certain State recomposition from above will take place; an attempt to reshape and mold the regional work force in capital's interest. Already, the Bush administration is trying to shape the character of this reconstruction by suspending federal wage laws guaranteeing union scale wages in the construction industry.

What's going to happen to the tourist-based old New Orleans economy? Will workers come back and where will they live? So far, the signals are mixed. One recent large poll of former residents living in the Superdome and other shelters showed 44 percent didn't want to return to New Orleans. Some small leftist and community groups are demanding a "People's" rebuilding of New Orleans, but with ex-residents so spread out far from the city, no one is listening. But if many do come back, will they accept a return to the old life of grinding poverty and low-wage jobs? Or will some sort of struggles break out? All these are open questions right now. (October 15th, 2005)

Footnotes:

- [1] While FEMA is associated with responding to natural disasters, one of the agency's lesser known missions when it was set-up in the 1980s is a plan to detain "suspects" in special camps in case of a political crisis.
- [2] Cajuns are descendent of the original French settlers in southern Louisiana who kept a distinct culture.

anti-war in the us

"Be all you can be"

As many wonder why Americans aren't doing more to oppose a brutal, illegal, but highly profitable war (if you have stock in Halliburton that is) they should realize that a very quiet but effective protest is going on. It is a protest that affects military planning, the morale of the US Army, and may ultimately lead to the end of the war itself. There is a boycott going on and it is being led by young, poor, black men.

The US all volunteer Army system (mandatory service was another casualty of the American War in Vietnam) depends on the same tools, tricks, and techniques capitalism uses to convince masses of people that they absolutely "must have" the latest contribution to their growing junk piles of products. "Be All You Can Be" and "An Army of One" are slogans that come from the same Madison Avenue hacks responsible for selling soap and toilet paper. Slogans aside, the US Army has traditionally found fertile soil for collecting recruits off of the streets of America's most depressed economic areas. Areas where a job is scarce and a good job is rare offer little hope for the future for thousands of young black men. The US Army offered these men a chance of escape that no other organization in the country would.

Blacks, a far from monolithic community, have supported service in the army since the Revolutionary War for economic and other reasons. Perhaps in the days of slavery it was simply the prospect of freedom since blacks fought on both sides of the Revolutionary and Civil Wars. Maybe it was considered a rite of passage to manhood denied blacks in most other areas of American society. Maybe it was another chapter in the unrequited love affair many blacks are engaged in with American culture as they try to prove their constantly questioned loyalty and right to first class citizenship through military service. Whatever the reason, blacks have been significantly represented in the US Army since WWII. By 2000, 24 percent of Army recruits were black even though blacks made up only 13 percent of the overall population. When you subtract the number of black men who could not serve due to criminal convictions, the amount of voluntary support is staggering.

Yet since 2000, the numbers and percentage of blacks in the army have been in decline. Today, blacks account for only 14 percent of US Army recruits. As the overall recruiting shortfalls in 2005 indicate, it isn't as if this decline doesn't matter. It isn't as if recruiters aren't trying as they troll the streets and roam the halls of high

schools peddling dreams of money for college and trips to exotic places like game show hosts. The fact is many recruits are simply saying "no". Even though poor black men are facing increasing economic pressure, such as a 50 percent unemployment rate in New York City, often living in dangerous surroundings with little hope of building a better life unless they leave, the prospect of fighting a war for the new American oligarchy seems foolish. Many would rather take their chances on the streets of Chicago than on the streets of Baghdad.

Black young men are often not alone in their decision to reject the call of the military. Parents of potential soldiers of all backgrounds are dissuading their children from military service too. The Army has attempted to counter that trend with an add campaign stressing the "independence and reasonableness" a decision to join the military is for young people painting the decision to support a war of aggression as a perverse right of passage to adulthood.

They even have created a web site specifically for parents of potential soldiers touting the benefits of being a soldier. Naturally, death and dismemberment benefits aren't mentioned. Parent organizations like No Draft No Way and Mothers Against the Draft are alerting parents to covert military aptitude testing in the schools and how to opt out of a law that requires all schools receiving federal funds to provide military recruiters with personal information about their children. They also share information about how to stop recruiter phone calls and contacts.

The decline in recruits, particularly from the black community, a source thought to be secure, hurts the army in many ways. First, current soldiers are not allowed to leave when their contracts are up because their replacements are not in the pipeline. This "stop-gap" provision, or back-door draft, creates morale problems when soldiers want to come home at the end of their enlistment and be done with it all but legally can't. Many soldiers are facing the prospect of their third tour in Iraq. Additionally, if recruiting numbers continue to fall and the US seeks to maintain troop strength in Iraq at 100,000 soldiers through 2009 (while threatening actions in Iran and elsewhere), a real draft may be necessary.

War planners fear a real draft because their main economic stooges, the American middle-class, will then be directly affected by the war as opposed to the faceless poor who are currently suffering the majority of the casualties. A real draft, especially one without the "my daddy is rich" exemption would awaken already stirring anti-war sentiments and may call the oligarchy itself into question. A Pew Research Center poll indicates for the first time that a majority of those polled believe the Iraq war is a mistake. An NBC poll showed

that nearly 60 percent of Americans want to reduce the number of soldiers in Iraq.

Polls have consistently shown that blacks in the US are overwhelmingly against the war in Iraq. A recent PBS report noted among black youth only 36 percent think the war is justified while over 61 percent of white youth think it is. Even though they are in the same country, many blacks know first hand what it means to be “those” people and they naturally question those in power. Blacks remember the days in the US when they were thought of as a community of potential terrorists too and treated accordingly. When blacks hear of terms like ‘haji’, ‘raghead’, or ‘sand nigger’ being used to dehumanize the Iraqi people, they know the tune of their oppression is still playing though the words have changed.

It is difficult to question the intelligence of young black men as they continue to see through the charade and march away from the recruiting station. As America recently marked the occasion of the death of the 2001 US service member, black men may be choosing to save their own lives while refusing to take the lives of others for a president that in the words of rapper Kanye West “... Doesn't care about black people.”

poster

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Which way to the revolution, please?

Capitalism has been stagnating for thirty years. For the last twenty years, the social system and people's working conditions have been under attack from above; and for almost ten years, there has been a worldwide movement denouncing the injustice of this system. Why do so many people still stay so quiet? Why doesn't capitalism finally give up and die?

Nothing is automatic

With the ‘Great Depression’ of 120 years ago, the end of capitalism appeared to have already arrived. But the way it vaulted over this barrier opened up a new era so impressively, that what first appeared in the overcoming of that deep crisis is precisely what today we call capitalism, i.e. the mass production of durable consumer goods such as cars, fridges and central heating systems. This meant a huge leap forward - including in the living standards of the people who produced them.

But now, the connection between the technological and social developments that capitalism seemed to guarantee has been broken before our eyes. In the last three decades, the only place where strong development is still taking place is in southern Asia.

When capitalism pushes up against barriers, then the preconditions for a radical change (Latin: ‘revolution’) of all this shit are produced; but capitalism will not break down ‘automatically’.

Why do people still stay so quiet?

For one thing, it's because of fear over jobs, and the knowledge that other people have it a lot worse. And secondly, there are social classes that believe sinking wages and social cuts to be in their interests: not only bosses but economic advisors, department managers, high-earning television news reporters, and politicians and functionaries of every kind, who bluntly and aggressively demand the sharpening of social inequality. In Germany, the Schroeder government is determined to push through tough reforms on behalf of this so-called ‘top third’(in reality, they clearly make up less than a third of the population).

Meanwhile, it is no longer only construction workers who are actually being set up in competition with workers on Ukrainian wages. The German car industry threatens workers with Czech and Spanish wages, and VW has managed to use this threat to significantly undercut the in-house contract for the first time, with its 5000 x 5000 model. Software departments are now set up in competition with programmers in India. Many people live under the threat of a worse life; but what is lacking in all the uproar - aside from reforms that leave the whole structure intact - is imagination about how things could be different. It is for this sole reason that the ‘domination of the ideological sphere by economic advisors’ exists.

What comes after the anti-globalisation movement?

Following the autumn 1999 protests against the WTO meeting in Seattle, a global movement entered the stage for the first time in history. In Seattle, workers and members of youth movements, unionists and anarchists fought side by side on the streets. It happened again during the World Economic Forum in Genoa in summer 2001: refugees; people from squatted social centres; workers: and the power of the state hit back - hard. Since then the movement has lost its real momentum, but it still breaks out again here and there: for example, when millions of people worldwide marched against the Iraq war; or at the demo in Berlin on 1st November 2003, against the government's social policies. The movement against neoliberalism has fulfilled its ideological aim, in that neoliberal ideology has

been discredited; but it has not reached its political and social aims: Iraq was bombed and occupied; inequality is on the increase; more and more people are dying of hunger around the world. Market relations are becoming more prevalent and more intense in everyday life, and the result is frustration and de-politicisation. Many 'star politicians' are quite happy with the situation, because their analysis and advice is reaching the ears of the powerful.

In this context the revolutionary current, which was mostly just a splash of colour at mass events such as the World and European Social Forums, might have a chance. More and more people know that capitalism is never going to turn into a vegetarian shark. But in order to seize this chance, it is no longer enough to talk about 'anti-capitalism' and 'social questions', and aside from that to continue practising the same politics as before. A revolutionary current has to relate to the fact that society's impasse, described above, has begun to be broken: in Italy, France, Poland, Britain, etc., strikes and actions are underway that are self-organised; that push things through by themselves, outside of institutional mediations. Even in Germany, the wind has changed in the last few months.

The motor of history is not 'technical progress' - but class struggle

Up until now, capitalism has stood out precisely for its ability to productively overcome 'natural' social and technical barriers. It seems to embody an unstoppable development, conquering the whole world with blood and iron, but also enabling a material improvement in the living standards of generation after generation of the exploited. Up to now, the destructive exploitation system has drawn its legitimacy from this: it is the means by which those in power have been able to claim to have a purpose in history, and they present themselves as the representatives of that purpose. Thus, massacres are justified, since otherwise 'we' wouldn't be 'where we are today'.

The labour movement has so far failed to radically criticise this view of history, postponing such a standpoint until some future time. Social democracy said: You must make sacrifices and build up the economy, so that your children and grandchildren will have better lives. Stalinism said: We need to kill a few million kulaks so that, in fifty years' time, we will have built-up communism. Both of these had the development of industry as preconditions; and both were big fans of assembly-line production.

Capitalism and socialism

Although we talk about 'capitalism' - in this poster, for example - it is perhaps a misleading term, since

what we are referring to is not some closed system. For clarity's sake, and since we are not talking about a thing, but rather about a social relation, it would be more precise to talk about 'capital'.

The transition from feudalism to capitalism was not a revolution, as bourgeois written history would have us believe: in fact the rulers, following that transition, were the same as before, with only a few of them a head shorter than they had been. Feudalism had reached crisis point for both sides. The serfs fled to the cities, and the landlords also fled: from direct dependency on their serfs into more fluid exploitation of them, through waged work. They were now only concerned with multiplying their riches, which increasingly took the form of money. The rebelliousness of the former serfs and servants had not led not to freedom, but only to a new class relation; to a new form of subjugation.

Capital is a social relation over which there is a constant struggle. Nevertheless, a great many things arise from this relation that we can touch with our hands - above all, machinery. The main characteristic of capitalism is the production of the forces of production themselves. Up until now, capitalism has been first and foremost the agrarian revolution: rural economic productivity has increased enormously, which created a surplus of labour force in the countryside. Throughout the entire history of capitalism, people have fled from the villages to the towns, from the fields to the factories, from the 'south' to the 'north'. In the last 25 years, this migration has far outweighed the valorisation possibilities for capitalism; the migrants are besieging the world's metropolises with huge rings of shanty towns; and there is a worldwide crisis of the city.

The capitalist development of agriculture is destructive: the use of chemicals and profit-orientated gene manipulation; the theft and reduction of cultivated plants and animal species by agricultural corporations; the worldwide plundering of biological resources, and the extinction of plant and animal species. The politics of agricultural economics are criminal, with agricultural subsidies destroying food production in other countries, and so on. Today, a small percentage of humankind could produce enough food for everyone to live on, but despite this people die of hunger. The insanity of this economic system is obvious.

As soon as people can read and write, socialism is surpassed

All ideas of socialism start from the premise that the factories should be placed under workers' control, and circulation organised through (state) planning. All other matters are postponed until the 'next historical stage'. Even anarchist utopias remain 'socialist' at their core, because they want to 'fairly distribute the neces-

sary work' - which immediately begs the question of which institution is to administer this distribution. Alienated labour remains alienated labour, even if it is 'only' for four hours a day! Socialist ideas have always been bound up with the state, and the official labour movement has always tried to fight its way into the state. Only anarchist and a few left-communist currents have been anti-state, and they remain peripheral phenomena.

In developing capitalist societies in which farmers are no longer the majority, the communist parties are disbanding and becoming social-democratic parties (in Italy, for example, the PCI became the DS). Social democracy itself then jettisons its poor utopianism and publicly declares its support for capitalism (e.g. in Germany, the 'Godesberger Program' of the SPD).

All of the 'revolutionary' movements that came to power in the twentieth century became development dictatorships, from the Soviet Union to the 'young nation states'. They had the objective precondition that development seemed to be possible for everyone - an idea that capitalism's thirty-year crisis has put an end to. The precondition, from the point of view of the people, was that they believed in the state (to direct the development) "which the worldwide revolutionary movement from 1968 onwards put paid to; and which the events of 1989 confirmed. And in this historical process, the people and their ideas also changed. No-one believes, any longer, that the state will make our lives better; or that nuclear power represents a safe energy source; and there are struggles worldwide against large-scale projects whose effect is to disenfranchise.

How are people to take their lives into their own hands, and be able to overthrow everything? Where is the power to do this supposed to come from? This is not a question of how we win the power, but of how we can destroy it. But the question must be asked.

Workers can change a lot when they collectively decide not to do something: when they strike

Oppressed and exploited people have always defended themselves. In this sense, the Communist Manifesto was right: history is the history of class struggle. But it is only in the capital relation that a class that can overthrow everything emerges for the first time; not simply replacing rulers and dividing up the work differently, but ending the domination of people over people and abolishing work.

The working class is more than a collection of people who are having a hard time. It is collective and interdependent on a worldwide scale, and its very collective nature is the precondition for capitalist productivity: it produces the capital. This is in marked contrast to peasants and slaves, who were also many, who were

also exploited, who also fought against it, and organised heroic uprisings; but they were isolated producers, through whose work the rulers exploited the 'riches of nature'. Today, workers are in the majority worldwide, not farmers and peasants. Fewer and fewer people work directly on the land "and even those that do are mostly (rural) workers.

The working class embodies the possibility of the abolition of all classes: of communism. And the working class can only be understood in the context of this tension, and only as a process - it cannot be defined sociologically ("who belongs to it, and who doesn't?"). Capitalism has always asserted that it has overcome its class character - but as long as people have to do waged work, there will be class antagonism. And these days - in which someone who was a 'housewife' yesterday is 'unemployed' today and perhaps, tomorrow, working in an office; and the day after that sitting at a supermarket checkout, or standing at a factory assembly line - people's position in terms of class relations is far more telling than their respective job. What was that about 'professional pride', again?

All social institutions have arisen from class struggle, and all of them have to be revolutionised: prisons, schools, factories and universities; town and countryside. Gender roles and the division of people into categories such as 'healthy' or 'sick' also arise out of the valorisation of (wage) work. Political concepts that want to abolish capitalism, but that 'initially' want to leave the factories, cars and social relations, etc., just as they are, are not revolutionary but exactly the opposite.

Having for many years totally neglected the 'terrain of proletarian struggle', there is now an increase in discussion, within the left in Germany, about 'social questions' and the 'working class' again. As a rule, those who employ the former kind of terminology tend to mistake the 'working class' for their representatives (works council representatives and union functionaries), and to maintain that their 'civil society' dreams of a minimum income and minimum wages are revolutionary demands. Meanwhile, those who prefer the latter term tend to go on about ideology and, following years of deconstructing supposed identities, are now celebrating the comeback of the cult of the proletariat and Leninist 'workers' politics'.

There are a number of things we might say in opposition to this: that there is no 'workers' identity'; that the working class is not a finished subject; and that its main need is to stop being a working class. It does not have a historical mission, and no far-off aim to reach - it is about the here and now. 'Communism is the real movement,' wrote Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology*. We don't stand outside of this as strategists

but are part of the class composition, which is different today from what it was in Marx's time, or what it was at the beginning of the twentieth century. The question of the revolution is also a different one now to that of the time of the Paris Commune. Today, the question is one of a liberated society without work. There is a massive surplus of productive know-how within humanity, which capital no longer valorises.

Historically the structural power of the working class has expanded throughout the rises and falls of the class struggle. The world economic crisis of the 1930s showed that workers could no longer simply be relegated to the position of unorganised proletariat; and the world economic system after 1945 was an acknowledgement of this, i.e., the attempt to integrate the working class into exploitation through the welfare state, unions and, effectively, a minimum wage. The worldwide class struggles of 1968 and beyond shattered this arrangement: in these struggles, everything was questioned: wages, work, the rejection of wage divisions, gender roles and careers, etc. At the centre of this economic, cultural and social crisis of the reproduction of the working class was the crisis of work; and the challenge was so radical that that crisis has lasted to this day: it is structurally determined - evoked and characterised - by the working class. Globalisation, where it has actually taken place, has led in the last thirty years - faster than ever before in history - to the working and living conditions of workers coming into line with each other through struggle (while, at the same time, large sections of humanity are excluded from all development, and the gap between rich and poor gets wider). The largest migration flows in the history of humanity have not crushed the demands of the workers, but have spread them even wider.

The crisis in the relations of exploitation has become sharper and taken many forms in the last decade, at every level of capitalist domination, right up to the decline of hegemonic power within the capitalist world system. The USA has failed to overcome its permanent crisis through war - quite the opposite: it has even intensified it ('the crisis of war'). The same has happened within the national arena: with the attempt to push through a tough crisis-management programme, the states, the unions and the parties have lost the last bit of credibility that remained to them.

In these circumstances, those who sit at a table with representatives in order to discuss the social question make stooges of themselves. Away with historical costumes ('the working class and its party')! Where struggles happen today, be it in Argentina or France, such concepts have long since been superseded: people are organising themselves, and no longer allow themselves to be treated like children. In Italy in December 2003,

the old 'worker aristocracy' and the young precarious workers joined together to organise wildcat strikes: we have to look to processes like these in Bolivia, Nigeria, China, Poland and in our midst, learn from them, and join them.