

prol-position news

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editorial

Bloody hell, summer is over, dole money is running out, the average worker in Germany now earns less than 20 years ago and on top of it all the papers are ramming racist anti-Chinese crap down our throats. So lets get down to some inspiring stories of class struggle from Germany, Israel and Poland and some thought-provoking analysis of migration in France, the political situation in Germany and of our own trends of activism. Yes folks, it's time for the autumn issue of the prol-position newsletter!

We start with some waves; a brief 30 year overview of the workers' movement in Germany and beyond; "**About Waves, Strikes and Re-composition**". This article was published in German magazine wildcat #79 and helps us to re-gain some sense of political orientation: What happened? (1980s global counter-revolution and industrial re-structuring, mass unemployment). Who am I? (de-composition of the old industrial cores, re-emergence of a new work-force) Where am I? (current capital and class composition in Germany at the end of globalisation) And where is the fucking way out of here? (what are 'struggle experiences', political résumé of the latest workers' struggles in Germany)...

Next we go right inside one of the cutting edge car factories in Germany guided along by a personal interview with a female VW worker. "**At some point you are not interested in the technology anymore**" was also published in wildcat #79. The main thread of the article is the interview of a woman employed at the assembly line of the re-structured VW daughter Auto5000. She describes the hopes and the process of disillusionment - the sense of excitement of working in such a high-tech factory where so many want to work slowly turning sour as the work pressure piled up with a range of sociological tactics by the management. Auto5000 was seen as the future of German car industry: the employers hoped for lower labour costs and a docile brain-washed work-force, the lefty sociologist hoped for a new chance for the unemployed, enriched work content and consensus decision-making. The workers proved them both wrong...

"At the beginning I was fascinated by all the technology. Cars gliding along the ceiling. You have never seen something like that before. Most

of us came from more artisan-type jobs, brick-layers, bakers, plumbers, truck drivers... During the first days, when I left the locker-room wearing my Mao Zedong gear, I always watched the ceiling where the cars were floating by and I thought: 'Fucking hell, that's wicked!' But at some point you stop watching. At some point you are not interested in the technology anymore, but in what the technology pressures you into. You first have to find out what the score is - initially we walked into one trap or the other... Over there in the VW halls, those old geezers know where it's at, they tell you 'Take it easy!'. We didn't know a thing: 'Easy? What for?!'. Then they put more work on your back and you don't have a flipping clue why! 'You did a great job, here you got some more, there are always second-helpings when it comes to work'."

Another revealing in-depth interview with workers from a German car parts factory follows the exciting story of a united and seemingly spontaneous wildcat walk-out with "no trace of fear". In "**Hardly anything comes out of the blue**", we see the background and lead-up to the protest, the transforming nature of the strike and the positive reverberations of the aftermath. The 1st of April 2007 was certainly no 'fools day' for these workers as they started the "**Successful strike at TRW automobile supplier in Krefeld, Germany**". A prepared wildcat strike, the company was not able to stock parts, because the workers refused overtime beforehand: no steering links for BMW and VW. The interview looks at the dynamics between the workers and the relation to management and the unions. Finally - one of the world's biggest automobile suppliers had to give in. The left hardly noticed this cunning little act, may be because the left prefers groups of workers who allegedly need the help of 'professional organisers' (see article in this issue) or who make the impression of being inexperienced villagers, e.g. from Nordhausen in Thüringen...

Now we stop walking round factories and get on our bikes! Ever rode a red bike made of Chinese parts, assembled under workers' control in no-man's land? "**Impressions from the occupied bike factory hall in Nordhausen**", in the east of Germany follows the occupation, shut-down and re-opening of a bicycle factory. The report was pub-

lished in wildcat #79. After being down-sized to the max and threatened with closure the workers empty the stock and occupy the factory. First it seems like yet another lost struggle against company closure, but the workers decide to re-start production under self-management. The proposal receives a surprisingly enormous response from the (radical) left and the union-rank-and file level: flyers advertising the strike-bike float about everywhere and 1,200 bikes are ordered within less than two weeks...

Over to Israel where the working class are facing the next squeeze with their own brand of workfare. "**Mehalev, Struggle against Workfare in Israel**", based on an interview with an Israeli activist, sheds a light on the conflicts and divisions within the Israeli society. Orthodox women signing kosher factory job contracts, while the Rabbi and the 'comrade' of the Communist Party wait behind them, threatening to cut their unemployment benefits. Protests and resistance against the scheme ranging from NGOs to direct activists. The work scheme was approved for a two-year trial in four areas, Ashkelon, Jerusalem, Hadera and Nazereth. It is being delivered by international private companies from the UK, Holland and the US, in partnership with Israeli temp agencies. It is targeting the drug addicts, people with health problems (physical and mental), the ex-prisoners and other long term unemployed people...

Meanwhile, back in Europe things are hotting up in the East... "**Striking nurses and revolting bus drivers in Poland**", also from wildcat #79 reports from two recent struggles. The first report describes the nurses' mobilisation in June and July 2007. The article was written with a few weeks' distance and attempts a critical evaluation. The second article about the two and a half week sit-down strike of the Kielce bus drivers was written directly after the end of the strike, at the end of August 2007. These struggles have received totally different attention: From the outset, the nurses' tent village was in the centre of media attention and enjoyed huge popularity in the entire country while the bus drivers' strike - one of the toughest class conflicts in the last years - took two weeks to be noticed outside of Kielce. There are many reasons for this: The nurses' movement was organised on a nationwide basis while the bus drivers' strike

was locally limited. The tent village in Warsaw was not far away from journalists in the capital while Kielce is a difficult-to-reach provincial town.

The nurses were attacked by the police right in the beginning. The bus drivers too received nationwide attention when they were attacked by security guards after two weeks...

Following the bike parts, we head back west to Paris and present an article by the French group Échanges et Mouvement. "**Chinese Workers in France**" goes back as far as World War I in order to describe the labour migration from China to France, the different waves of migration, the social composition of the migrant work force, the industries they work in (mainly garment, restaurants and catering, domestic services and building trade), the main problems Chinese migrant workers have to face up to today and their ways of resistance, for example "A spontaneous rank and file organisation of French parents was established around local schools to oppose the arrest of parents coming to collect their children at the school gate (the "Education without borders network"). Violent clashes with the police sometimes occurred. This network of active solidarity is taking care of any immigrant but, as in the Chinese districts of Paris, the police hunt mostly affects Chinese immigrants, it is they who are mainly involved in the resistance to it"...

Meanwhile back in the Social Centre... "Oh no - we don't want to *lead* the workers, we respond to what *they* do. For us it is all about *empowerment*". Lefty waffle or a new form of organising, finally capable of going beyond old union limitations? This article by wildcat #78 takes a critical look at new forms of 'radical' organising. "**When the work-mate becomes a client**" looks at militant Research, self-interviews, workers' centres, campaigning and organizing: currently there is a part of the left that gets enthused by 'un-dogmatic approaches' which tackle the question of resistance within waged work. Study trips to the US, visits at workers' centres and at organizing campaigns all give the impression that these new instruments of union struggle will shake up the rusty white-dominated union landscape in Germany because the target of these initiatives are principally young immigrant workers, women and employees in the

service sector. Is a completely new and different union in the making? Or, to put the question differently: does the crisis of the institution "union" open up spaces for new forms of organising? Does the union apparatus provide help for opening new doors or do lefty activists let themselves be instrumentalised in order to provide the institution with a new and up-to-date outfit?

We have a little introduction about the strikes in Egypt. Last fall students protested in Cairo's street and in December a strike of workers of a textile industry inspired a lot other workers to do their own actions, even security and police. Read more about it in **Egypt - Ghazl El-Mahalla textile factory**. Unfortunately, our only sources are English and German newspapers so everything is pretty official. If someone has contacts or is able to read Arabic, we would be happy to get that information.

Right then, we hope that you will have a good trip through the newsletter. As ever, we hope for some remarks and reactions, next time will already be winter, the snow might not be what it seems to be, therefore the next issue will be a special on class struggle in China...

Keep on rockin' hard and see you then!

prols

Article translated from *wildcat* #79, autumn 2007

About Waves, Strikes and Recomposition¹

In 2006 there were more strikes in Germany than during the previous twelve years. In 2007 their number will be even higher. "Going on strike is becoming fashionable amongst the Germans", announces a headline in the national daily newspaper *Frankfurter Rundschau*. When we added a strike poster to *wildcat* #69 in spring 2004 it was rather a general statement. Today we have to - or rather, we are able to - discuss strikes in a much more precise manner, because there are actually strikes going on! There are strikes against company closures, against redundancies and extension of working hours - but not for improvements. These strikes do not put into practice the workers' power which we refer to on the poster, the power to question capitalist valorisation by simply refusing to do something. Often the reality on the shop-floor looks rather shitty (see examples in this issue: the ample documentation on working in the adult education sector, on temp work and on the Auto5000 scheme at VW), but officially this reality is hardly ever made a topic of discussion during the strikes. This is one reason why many strikes remain isolated from each other, and why in the end everyone fights for themselves. A strike wave is something different.

¹ "Recomposition" is a concept which tries to relate changing working and living conditions and the forms and impacts of class struggle. Instead of applying an abstract, philosophical or monolithic concept of "working class", the notion of "class composition" emphasises that due to its inner contradictions, namely the struggle of the exploited, capitalism has to change and "recompose" the conditions of exploitation continuously (new technologies, company closures, new work organisation, migration etc.). This creates new divisions and new common reference points within the proletariat. Only in their struggles, which have to relate to the "recomposed" conditions, can workers overcome these particular divisions, find new forms of organisation and re-appropriation and "recompose" themselves as a new movement.

The global counter attack

It is only from books or films that people under 40 know the history of the worldwide class struggles and the certainty of being able to change the world which was based on them. This is because since 1980 at the latest everywhere in the world counter-revolution has been on the agenda. A precursor was the CIA coup in Chile, which got rid of the elected left-reformist government on the 11th of September 1973. The following combination of hard repression against the radical left and a new economic policy, which steered towards a head on collision with the working class, was put into practice for the first time in Chile and then implemented in many other countries.

In *wildcat* we often portrayed the reasons and motives for this counter-revolution by starting with its origin: the international revolutionary movement at the end of the 60s and beginning of the 70s. When we look at the last dregs of this movement we can see how important it was for capital.

In Britain the massive strike wave of the Winter of Discontent in 1978/79 toppled the "Social Contract" (curbs on wage rises) introduced by the Labour government, which threatened penalties against companies which increased wages by more than five per cent. After several weeks of a strike at Ford a 17 percent wage rise was agreed. Not only were factory workers on strike, but a major part of the infrastructure came to a halt after truck drivers, dockers, grave diggers, rubbish collectors, bakers and hospital workers laid down tools. The Prime Minister had to apply for new credits from the IMF in order to re-establish the solvency of the country. The massive propaganda of the political right against a Labour government which helplessly faced union power paved the way for the Thatcher counter revolution with the parliamentary elections in autumn 1979. Thatcher prohibited many of the previously common strike tactics and did not shrink from using severe punishments. The defeat of the miners during the strike of 1984/85 ended an epoch in which the workers in Britain were the most strike-prone in Europe, but despite their hard fights they never went beyond the limits of union struggles. In 1978,

9.3 million working days were lost due to strikes, in 1979 this number increased to 29.5 million.

In Italy the defeat of the FIAT workers after their months' long strike against mass redundancies in 1980 put an end to an epoch of workers' struggles. During this epoch Italy had been a laboratory for revolutionary experiments in many ways. In the USA Reagan ordered the arrest and handcuffing of striking air traffic controllers only one year after he took power.

At the beginning of the 1980s counter revolution became the predominant tendency world wide: military governments in Poland and Turkey; IMF credits only in exchange for neoliberal policies and welfare cuts; everywhere the unemployment rate increased to about ten per cent; everywhere state welfare benefits were cut.

The military suppression of the movement in Tienanmen Square in Beijing and the collapse of state capitalism in Eastern Europe at the end of the 1980s was bashed into our heads as "the end of history", meaning the end of any utopian vision of a free and better society. "Civil" wars in Africa and former Yugoslavia and the imperialist war of aggression (Iraq) fostered this message during the 1990s.

The situation in the Federal Republic of Germany

The particular situation in Western Germany is characterised by relatively poorly developed independent struggles and relatively strong unions. This is because of the following developments.

Here, as well, the last big struggles took place at the end of the 1970s (for example the steel workers strike in 1978). After that everything was pointing towards a policy of crisis. In 1974 there were about one million people unemployed, at the beginning of the 1980s their number increased to over two million. The SPD (Social Democrats)-lead government under Chancellor Schmidt started a policy of welfare cuts - the so-called Operation 1982 - smoothly continued by the conservative Kohl government which took over in a coup-like move in autumn 1982.

Despite the theatrical rhetoric of the CDU (Christian Democrats - Conservatives) government against something which they used to call "union power", in West Germany the unions took

over the lead of the modernisation process targeting the structure of production. During the 1980s the unions managed to maintain the wage level of the collective contracts and thereby avoided the fall into deep crisis like most of the other unions in Europe. For a decade the demand for a 35-hour working week - which had its origin in the liberal left milieu - dominated collective bargaining. The workers paid for every reduction in working time with poor wage agreements and further flexibilisation of their working time. Three-shift models and work on Saturdays are common in most factories now, as are working time accounts based on an annual calculation. Once the flexibilisation was achieved the real working time - which had been reduced continually during the previous 50 years - increased again.

The second development specific to Germany relates to the "re-unification". In 1987/89 Western Europe experienced a wave of self-organised struggles (students, railway workers, hospital workers, workers in the education sector). Workers formed coordinations organising themselves outside of the unions, because they mistrusted all institutions. Only the movement of the hospital workers managed to have an impact in Germany - after that there was only "re-unification" on the agenda. At this point completely different topics were brought to the fore and during the first years after re-unification all potentially threatening conflicts were appeased by financial concessions - workers of closed-down companies were put on short-time work, but given full-time wages. The crisis didn't come until 1993, when the federal bank increased key interest rates, but then it kicked in even harder. The number of unemployed sky-rocketed. And it took a very long time before emancipatory movements developed from below again. A big part of the youth in the East shut themselves off in the right-wing scene, while in the West during the 90s "left politics" equaled anti-fascism or being "anti-German", or both.

The social attacks of the labour-green government (Hartz I-IV - a welfare reform) no longer just targeted "marginalised groups". The cutting of the Arbeitslosenhilfe (unemployment benefit), which had previously been calculated according to the last wage earned, forced the unemployed to take a considerably worse paid job after a year of unem-

ployment, at the latest. This measure has dissolved the downward rigidity of wages and, amongst other things, resulted in the fact that real wages in Germany are now located in the lower ranks of the EU countries. The income disparity between well paid sections and the low paid has increased sharply. Permanently employed workers are increasingly badly paid as well. Poverty has officially become fact for about a tenth of the population, mainly unskilled workers, but nowadays for skilled workers as well: particularly people with a migrant background and/or with children.

Resistance

In summer 2004 the "Monday Demonstrations" (against the Hartz IV reform) brought the "social question" to the streets. The Daimler workers in Mettingen (south of Germany) blocked the B10 (a major road) and the Opel workers in Bochum went on the first wildcat strike in a long time, organising a six-day long company assembly. The "social anger" and the "enough is enough" atmosphere also expressed itself in more militant forms of struggle of (school) students: occupations, highway blockades etc.

For 2006 the official strike statistics of the Bundesagentur für Arbeit, a government institution, registered 166,000 strikers and 429,000 strike days, the highest number since 1993 (593,000 strike days). The high number is due to the long strike in the public sector and to the strikes for a "social collective contract". By pressing for "social collective contracts" the unions found a means to organise struggles against company closures as regular strikes with the usual formal features, e.g. a collective bargaining commission and strike pay. In the case of company closures, strikes for Sozialtarifverträge ("social collective contracts") restrict the issue of negotiations to the question of qualification measures (for the sacked workers), or transit employment in specifically formed companies (normally limited to a year). In cases where the company "only" sacks parts of the work force, the negotiations for a "social collective contract" are normally about wage cuts and working time extension. The results of these negotiations are "compromises", which are always celebrated as victories by the unions, because the "comprom-

ises" prevented worse. The result always solidifies a worsening of the previous standards (wages, working time etc.). In a brief and pointed way we can say: whoever goes on strike will be in a worse situation afterwards. The frustration at the end of such strikes is pre-programmed. Whoever is sick of it all will take the severance pay and leave. Severance or redundancy pay was another significant characteristic of strikes in recent years: high redundancy pay was dished out and it was mainly the strike activists who left the company in this way. During all struggles against company closures a significant part of the work-force wanted high severance pay instead of further employment at all costs (or cuts).

Hence it is not the case that people who are engaged in struggles against re-locations or closures have nothing to lose. You get strike pay, there is a real chance of getting severance pay and the transit companies offer you a year of hanging loose while receiving 90 percent of your former wage. The importance of the integrating function of the German welfare state (including strike pay and severance pay) becomes blatant if we imagine what would happen if workers threatened by closure actually had nothing to lose. Despite all the strikes and movements, real wages in Germany continued to shrink in 2006.

Are there any industrial workers left in Germany?

Of course - and not just a few - despite the fact that their working and living situation drifts further out of the spot light of public interest. Given the background of job cuts and flexibilisation, the "working class" has lost its fearsomeness as a threat to the ruling social relations and therefore it has lost its political visibility.

What does it mean when Germany becomes an "export world champion" for the umpteenth time in a row? In total, German companies export (calculated on a common currency) more goods than any other country in the world. These goods are mainly industrially manufactured goods (machines, chemical products and cars). They are assembled or finished in factories in Germany, although a big chunk of the necessary pre-products are manufactured abroad (their share as part of the valorisation was 24.4 percent on average in

2006). Industrial production grew faster than the total economy - but it was re-structured at the expense of the workers. Departments of simple mass production were closed, parts ordered from suppliers. Because of this mainly older workers without qualifications lost their jobs, which up to this point had been relatively secured by a collective contract.

There are still about 7.5 million industrial workers in Germany, although their number decreased slightly during the last year. The phase of de-composition of the old working class and of their entitlements in Western Europe is in its final stage, but it has not finished yet. Examples are the re-location of nearly the total production of home appliances (washing machines etc.) to Eastern Europe and Turkey and the re-location of electronic appliances to East Asia.

The way in which these defensive struggles of the "old" mass workers is orchestrated by the unions and the media results in a clear message, which is directed at those other workers who might have the possibility to prove its opposite: "It can only get worse for you".

In the booming export industries, the unions act very cautiously: some token strikes, short collective contract negotiations, quick agreements, everything, but not a strike! In those sectors workers could have completely different possibilities to go onto the "offensive" and to win. Struggles which finally enforce clear improvements would be extremely popular and be able to carry along workers from other sectors.

"Export world champion" also means that these 7.5 million industrial workers are highly productive and that they still are at the centre of surplus value production in this country - surrounded by "knowledge workers" (engineers, mathematicians, controllers) and "service providers", which supply the company with temp workers.

What are the experiences of struggle?

The majority of workers in Germany have not been on strike during the last 30 years (if we ignore symbolic token strikes). Given this background it is of major importance that the unrest which started with the self-organised activities in 2004 - the Monday demonstrations, the B10 occupation, the strike at Opel - has not lost its mo-

mentum since then. The forms of action are more militant and more new things are tried out compared to the past. The fighting subjects are more multi-faceted (nurses, car workers, bin men, teachers, kitchen hands...). People are open to other experiences and are interested in other people getting involved.

In Germany, finally, people experience struggles of a broader scope. In the past the few experiences fizzled out and the following struggles started from scratch again. They took place in a social vacuum. All strikers felt left alone and unnoticed. This has changed recently: bit by bit the strikes build up their own social terrain. When people get involved in a confrontation they have already heard of other struggles and they know who they can learn from. When the striking BSH-workers (Bosch-Siemens Hausgerätewerk)² arrived in Kamp-Lintfort (Siemens used to have a mobile phone plant there, but it was sold to BenQ and many workers were sacked) and they were welcomed by half of the town inhabitants, something like a proletarian public sphere emerged, at least in certain aspects. A direct exchange between workers took place, which was neither mediated by the union nor by RTL (private TV channel). In Germany such a circulation of direct experiences has been rare so far.

In such conflicts workers gain experience and they think about how to make themselves stronger. More and more people are fed up with fighting for "deteriorations", they want improvements. But on the few occasions where independent forms of struggle and demands developed the unions did not hesitate to call off the strike - by quick agreements even against the will of the majority, if necessary by using threats.

Many experiences are gained, but are they struggle experiences? What is a struggle? Generally speaking it does not matter if the struggle is lead within or outside the unions or other institutions, neither is its impact on public opinion of final significance. More important are forms and means of struggles. And the most important cri-

² See various other articles in prol-position news, e.g.

<http://www.prol-position.net/nl/2005/04/washing>,

<http://www.prol-position.net/nl/2006/05/appliances>,

<http://www.prol-position.net/nl/2007/08/bsh/bsh1>

terion is whether it is a movement from below, a collective move by people who step outside their daily life together, who break the rules collectively and even risk something by doing it.

New conditions - new subjects?

New working relations arrived in the factories as well. In many "high wage companies" fragmented conditions are the norm. Newly hired people work under significantly worse conditions. In the automobile industry, too, temp work is the normal transition phase to a permanent contract. Temp workers, who have seen and worked at assembly lines in different plants have different experiences and have different needs and wishes than the classical core work-force. Is it only that the old class figure is de-composed and appeased from within or do a new mood and new forms of resistance emerge? The strike at FIAT in Melfi (south of Italy) in 2004 demonstrated that conflicts at supplying companies can quickly jump over and spread into the whole work-force. It also showed that workers who are allegedly isolated within just-in-time production can actually fight together.

The end of globalisation?

Since the end of the last century it's become clear that wars (Afghanistan, Iraq) and the flight of capital from direct investments into speculative assets both turned into boomerangs (internet and real estate bubble). The euphoria of production re-location and outsourcing came to an end. Since 1999 in Seattle - when a WTO-meeting failed for the first time while the no-globalisation-movement and rank-and-file workers' activists protested in the streets together - many new subjects got involved in struggle world-wide: university and school students (Chile, France, Germany,...), unemployed (Argentina, Germany,...), precarious workers (agriculture workers, cleaners), migrants (the 'si se puede'-movement in the US in spring 2006 managed to kick off the biggest workers' demonstrations in the US history).

Previously struggles had been on the defensive for a long time, parts of the old working class resisted being cleared away but there were no strikes in the booming sectors. For example, in spring 2002 the "biggest strike wave for 50 years" shook the north-west of China (mining areas, oil in-

dustry). In Poland the struggles against privatisation of the mines and the heavy industry lasted from 1983 to 2003. The multiple movements in Argentina after the uprising in 2001 remained within these limits, as well: those who fought were the unemployed and those workers who used to have state guaranteed jobs.

This has changed: struggles take place where industry is developing rapidly, like in China, Vietnam, and India. But not in the automobile industry in Eastern Europe: there union-lead token strikes and quick agreements take place - exactly like in the industrial core sectors in Germany. Though in Eastern Europe we often see double-digit wage increases and the employers complain about 'wage pressure'.

Classically so-called free wage labour functioned in such a way that proletarians entered the wage work relation "by themselves". They were willing to leave their village behind and to accept a miserable living situation and hard work in order to lead a better life compared to their previous one, thanks to the wage they received. But once these "new workers" start to fight, they question the whole shit. This is true for the revolutionary movement 1917/18 and for the struggles of the mass worker in the 1960s. In both cases capital reacted with repression on the political level and a leap of development on the social level.

Today generally it is assumed that a leap of development, which would be able to raise the conditions of workers in Asia to a level comparable to the standard for the industrial workers in the western countries, is not possible within capitalism: due to technical, ecological and spatial reasons. Does that mean that only the repressive option is left? How long will workers produce mobile phones, computers or cars, which they will not be able to afford in the near or medium-term future?

- * By going on strike automobile workers in Russia manage to get a massive pay rise
- * Chinese workers in Romania manage to enforce a significant wage increase
- * After several weeks of strike textile workers in Bulgaria get a 27 per cent wage increase
- * Vietnam: the broad strike wave of 2006 was followed by another one in spring 2007. The government felt cornered and enacted a law on the

1st of August 2007 which prohibits strikes in the key sectors

Some random examples? Not at all: these are all struggles which run parallel to the axes of accumulation of international capital - struggles within an industrialisation process which is directly integrated into global production. Often the struggling workers are employed in "world market factories" or in production units which are closely interlinked within the international division of labour. After the big hype about the so-called BRIC-states (Brazil, Russia, India, China) now the so-called New Eleven are the focus of capital in its search for possibilities of valorisation: Egypt, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Iran, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Philippines, South Korea, Turkey and Vietnam. It is obvious that in most of these countries there are waves of struggle going on. We have to seriously tackle the following question: are we experiencing a new political re-composition since 2006 on a global scale? Do we see, for the first time in history, struggles of a worldwide working class?

The reserve army of labour is not unlimited. Widening gaps between an adequately qualified work-force, wages and conditions of valorisation emerge. A new leap forward in accumulation depends on recently proletarianised workers and the corresponding social infrastructure. For the boom regions in India and China experts forecast a near exhaustion of the reservoir of workers.

Migration is able to partly fill these gaps, but it does not lead to such severe class divisions as in the past. For example, the strong migration to the USA before the First World War practically resulted in the collapse of the workers' movement at the time. Today migration contributes to the formation of a world working class.

From the inside and from the outside

Some questions have to be asked anew here in Germany, as well. Despite the high unemployment the little economic upturn was sufficient to unveil the most surprising scarcity of recent years: the lack of a work-force. The official labour agency (responsible body for job centres, job schemes etc.), the government and the media only talk about a lack of skilled workers and engineers, but

behind this a general lack of a work force "qualified for industrial work" is hidden. From the Atlantic Ocean to the Ukraine there is a lack of people who are willing and able to fulfil the requirements of contemporary "normal" flexible working conditions: assembly line production, shift work, necessary abilities like reading, writing, technical understanding, computer skills. In Eastern Europe this lack of a work-force already has a negative impact on the growth of the GNP.

The work-force on which accumulation depends here in Germany cannot be replaced as easily as the employers, media and the simple unemployment figures might suggest. For how long will the unions be able to keep the wage pressure away from the "production location" Germany? Or to ask the question from a different angle: how can the struggles go beyond the control of the unions?

Workers' autonomy?

In German history independent strikes have emerged in two particular social contexts. They erupted as 'wildcat strikes' led by people who had no institutionalised representation for their urgent concerns, and as 'second helping strikes' of workers, who were able to enforce better outcomes than the union by leading their struggle independently. In this sense the strikes of the last three years were not "autonomous", but they became noticeable because of their creativity and their significant degree of self-activity. And in many mobilisations a driving force, voices and debates were expressed which pointed beyond the institutionalised embrace. Sometimes people do something, but they do not know it yet: the "Solidarity March" was the idea of the BSH-workers (see www.prol-position.net/nl/2007/08/bsh/bsh1). Nevertheless they did not manage to turn the strike into "their issue". The majority still thought that nothing could be achieved without the union.

People in struggle who cannot seriously harm the employer by refusing work are dependent on "publicity". So far as they have no publicity, they feel left alone and unnoticed. The union organises public attention for them, by inviting VIPs to the strike tent or by getting them into the media with the help of RTL film teams. In both ways dependence and deception rises to a new level. In addition the union monopolises all contacts with the

outside, with workers of other companies or plants as well. In order to be able to lead independent struggles the slowly developing "struggles' own terrain" mentioned above is of extreme importance.

Part of this terrain would be that it becomes common practice to go to strikes and to get involved oneself. We can help to create links to other struggles and struggling workers. Which experiences have been made in other struggles - leaflets, talks in the strike tent, film screenings,... BSH-workers have criticised explicitly the "autonomists" for not helping them to break the (information and contact) monopoly of IGM (metal union) and the MLPD (Marxist-Leninist Party of Germany).

In France since the 1980s there is a tradition to relate to strikes coming from one's own social situation: e.g. as "users" of public services (transport, hospitals, energy etc.). In combination with our "criticism as users" the strike terrain could be extended ("We criticise the health system... and especially therefore we support the nurses and their struggles"). The impact of consumer boycotts is often over-estimated, but in combination with a strike they can rock things! For example the stickers which denounced Siemens home appliances in MediaMärkten (important chain) as "scab goods", while workers of the BSH plant were on strike in Berlin. Leaflets distributed in shopping centres criticising the home appliances and which especially because of their criticism call for the support of the strike. There are many possibilities.

It is important that everyone contributes with their own work and struggle experience and to relate to each other despite those many differences, which are meant to make a common perspective impossible. We have to address the rapidly increasing differences of working conditions and conditions of reproduction. The struggles need an egalitarian drive. Against the segregation into many different "life styles", against the aggravating differences between wages, they have to emphasise the common, they have to produce the common. Only in this way can a space be created where people can reflect collectively on their experiences and on their collective action. Then we can talk about revolution again, instead of severance pay and bonus systems.

vw-auto

Interview with VW 'Auto 5000' worker, wildcat #79, winter 2007

"At some point you are not interested in the technology anymore, but in what the technology pressures you into"

During the crisis at the beginning of the 1990s the employers painted the picture of the end of the 'production location Germany'. The core of the German industry - the car factories - was allegedly about to be relocated to eastern Europe, like other industries before. This threatening picture formed the background for several 'innovative projects' of the employers - with the agreement of IG Metall (metal union) - which were meant to prove that labour in Germany can still be profitable for the employers. The flexible boundary for the union was the Flächentarifvertrag (regional sector-wide collective contract) and the survival of its institutionalised power. A typical 'win-win-situation' between the social partners, as marketing German would put it. The union was still accepted as a negotiating partner and the right of co-determination (within the companies) of the works council was partly extended. The wage level in the car industry was lowered significantly, but remained above the Flächentarif (the rate stipulated in the collective contract) though in some cases this is only because workers receive various bonuses (shift-work, productivity). The employers got a considerable reduction of the labour costs, mainly due to new working-time models and new forms of work organisation. IG Metall hailed the 'new chance' for the unemployed.

As in most 'win-win-situations' those who lose are the workers. The '5000x5000'- project, planned by the VW labour director at the time, Peter Hartz, got most of the attention. Most of the attention of the lefties, as well. For the first time on the former West-German territory new work structures were developed in the automobile industry. And there was another novelty: the introduction of new work structures did not happen on a green field, but on the factory premises of VW in Wolfsburg.

In terms of propaganda it was the best prepared and processed restructuring project, as well, with social-scientific backing from old professionals of a formerly critical sociology of industry such as Michael Schumann of the Soziologische Forschungsinstitute at the University Göttingen (SoFi).

Six years later SoFi makes the project's final report available to the public.¹ Like the VW management and IG Metall, the report still portrays Auto5000 as a model for the future. In his contributing article, Berthold Huber, second chairman of the IG Metall, calls the Auto5000 project a decisive reference point for the 'High-Road-strategy' (original in English) of the German car industry: "Quality of the products as a result of the quality of labour". The content of the reference point: an extended right to co-determination, a right to professional qualification secured by a collective contract, "enriched work content", "predominantly a great number of different work steps and varied work tasks" for the single worker.²

On the occasion of the book launch the union's left repeated the critique they had already raised at the beginning of the project six years ago. They point at the consequences of the "breach in the dam" (Auto5000) for the general policy of collective contracts and criticise the ideology of the 'modern type of employee' as a disguising of the class contradiction.³ Their criticism remains abstract because they confront themselves rather with the myth of the employer than with the reality.

In summer 2006 we met a female worker who is employed at Auto5000, in order to shed some

1 Schumann u.a.: VW-Auto-5000: Ein neues Produktionskonzept. Die deutsche Antwort auf den Toyota-Weg?, Hamburg: VSA-Verlag, 2006:

www.labournet.de/branchen/auto/vw/5000/index.html

2 "Through demanding and qualified work the self-confidence and the willingness to perform of the employees grows. They need a chance for their personal development. And they need a guaranteed right to a say and co-determination at the workplace. Both employee and company will profit!... The results of the SoFi co-study demonstrate: the majority of the employees are contented. They are willing to perform to a very high degree and they make efficiency their own concern. Without renouncing their own interests!" (p. 151)

3 Das Modell VW: Auto5000. Schön geredet und gesund gebetet. Stephan Krull, Sozialistische Zeitung, March 2007: www.labournet.de/branchen/auto/vw/5000/krull.html

light on the darkness and to get an impression of the reality in this model factory. During the conversation it became clear that so far the employer has succeeded in enforcing worsened working conditions. However this happened not by workers' agreement, but through pressure. This had the result that many illusions amongst the workers have vanished. They do not see themselves as a "distinct workforce" anymore, because many of their conflicts are traditional assembly line workers' problems. Extracts from this conversation form the main thread of the following article. In the introduction we put the assembly plant Auto5000 in the bigger context of the planned restructuring at Volkswagen (VW).

An "AutoVision"

Auto5000 is part of an attempt to re-structure car production completely at VW. The main idea is to fragment the VW workforce and their claims and to put the fragmented parts in competition with each other. The aim is to lower the labour costs on a general level.⁴ The main problem for VW was how to establish supplier companies with worse working conditions in the Wolfsburg (main plant of VW) region. The VW group sucked in all those people willing to work and had to employ them according to the company collective contract. The crisis of the car industry in the 1990s became the necessary lever. VW downsized its main plant. Production of certain parts were outsourced to other VW plants, VW stopped hiring people and started complaining about excess production capacities.

In 1998 the representatives of the management, the works council, the town Wolfsburg and company consultant McKinsey inaugurated the project AutoVision. The close link between town administration and company was supposed to get rid of 'bureaucratic barriers' which could obstruct the companies' wishes. The local job centre with all its means of putting pressure on people practically turned into a personnel department of VW. Wolfsburg AG, which is half municipally controlled, and its Recruitment Agency (Personalserviceagentur) were supposed to recruit workers for

4 After the mass redundancies and the restructuring in the Belgium Forest VW factory, a AutoVision site is now due to open there.

VW and the new supplier companies. The VW-owned temp agency AutoVision GmbH was supposed to transmit this concept beyond the town boundaries. In this way, in the period between 1997 and 2003 about 18,500 new jobs were created in Wolfsburg. The majority of these jobs were linked directly or indirectly to the automobile industry, with a smaller number created in the newly developed Wolfsburg Autostadt (Car City), a kind of tourist attraction. Some other jobs were related to engineering schools, for example the AutoUni (Car University).

In 1999/2000 the 'new production model' was crowned: an independent GmbH (private limited company) owned by VW was formed and named Auto5000. The unions were publicly blackmailed, to get the message across: the new model Touran would only be produced in Wolfsburg if labour costs per car were reduced drastically. Otherwise it would be manufactured in Portugal. After brief hesitation both the union (IG Metall) and the VW works council agreed to the deal. In 2001 the new company started work. In this way Auto5000 is only the final product of a newly created production chain. The Touran is "the first VW model based on a broadly implemented module strategy".⁵

The car is designed in a way that only few modules are necessary for assembling. These modules are pre-assembled at supplying companies. Characteristically for VW, the company is very cautious regarding external suppliers. Unlike other manufacturers VW hesitates to let external direct suppliers "work at the VW assembly line". VW receives the modules mainly from their own component plants. *"Clearly rejected were those concepts which would result in the supplier bringing the modules to the assembly line and assembling them themselves. Such interfaces are not compatible with a production model which deals with quality defect and production backlogs by forcing the employee to do extra unpaid work to compensate if there is evidence of his or her responsibility. Certain tensions would be sure to arise if employees of different companies had to cooper-*

ate over this issue of extra work to make up for earlier problems." (Klobes, S.179).

No amount of caution could prevent Auto5000 from falling victim to a strike at the Spanish supplier of rubber door seals. GDX Automotive, in June 2007. Three full shifts and 800 cars were lost.

The Hiring Process

Allegedly the first 3,000 employees of the model factory were selected from 43,000 applicants. Only 'modern' people had a chance... apparently.

"Then we sat together, in a circle in front of the computers. I counted the women - that didn't take long, there were two of us. That wasn't great. We were allowed to log in and go through all the points, answer all the questions. Stupid questions like 'Would you nick a ball-pen?' You could chose between 'Yes, sure! The company is loaded.' and 'No, I would never do that, that is theft!' Then they tested our reactions, you had to sort keys, like playing Tetris. Without a time limit, just to see how much you are able to sort. I had to laugh. The supervisor didn't get it and threatened me, she told me that I would have to leave if I did not stop laughing. But if they come up with questions like the ball-pen one, I just cannot keep a straight face. We did not get the results.

At some point they sent the invitation for the third test, but with hardly any notice. I was on holiday. I felt really special then, being chosen from allegedly 40,000 applicants... The third test was a practical one. You had to sit down in a car body, they gave you a plan and you had to fit various parts. You had to do it three times. Each time a guy with a stopwatch stood next to you and measured how long it took you. If you got faster each time they were contented.

Then they came up with a questionnaire, but not a multiple-choice one, no answers given. 'What would you do if... your colleague is ill?' They gave points for the answer, but you got no reactions to your answers.

I can only speculate about the selection criteria. Sometimes I think the test was only about to see how far you conform, how far they can pressure you without you resisting. My god, at the beginning you got your self-confidence from the fact that you were 'a chosen one'; later you got it from the fact that you managed to stick it through for three years."

⁵ Klobes, Frank: *Produktionsstrategien und Organisationsmodi: Internationale Arbeitsteilung am Beispiel von zwei Standorten der Volkswagen AG Hamburg: VSA; 2005; p 178*

High hopes - and disillusionment

Although the official propaganda is wrong in saying that mostly long-term-unemployed were given 'a new chance', nevertheless the applicants' initial expectations were high.⁶

"We first had a six week long course. They stuffed us with their company philosophy... You thought 'Wow, that will be something really new, something really great. They really want to qualify us and you will develop intellectually, as well'. The others had similar thoughts. We started with 35 cars per shift, in small groups. I was the fifth in the group. Like this we assembled everything, we were crammed in the car with five people. The feet of your colleague were right in your face and your elbow was in your neighbour's face. At that point in time the atmosphere was great.

At the beginning I was fascinated by all the technology. Cars gliding along the ceiling. You have never seen something like that before. Most of us came from more artisan-type jobs, brick-layers, bakers, plumbers, truck drivers... During the first days, when I left the locker-room wearing my Mao-Tse-Tung gear, I always watched the ceiling where the cars were floating by and I thought: 'Fucking hell, that's wicked!' But at some point you stop watching. At some point you are not interested in the technology anymore, but in what the technology pressures you into. You first have to find out what the score is - initially we walked into one trap or the other... Over there in the VW halls, those old geezers know where it's at, they tell you 'Take it easy!'. We didn't know a thing: 'Easy? What for?!'. Then they put more work on your back and you don't have a flipping clue why! 'You did a great job, here you got some more, there are always second-helpings when it comes to work'.

When I started we had two, three idle cycles, meaning that you had to work on a car, the next one you could stay idle and so on. Then the day came where there were no idle cycles anymore, but the line was still quite

6 "We have to ask whether 3,500 unemployed got 'a real life chance'. 18 per cent of the production workers were not unemployed before starting at Auto5000. 12 per cent were unemployed for less than a month. 15 per cent for less than three months and 21 per cent for less than six months. Only 16 per cent were unemployed for over a year. Only 5 per cent were not skilled workers, 52 per cent had a professional qualification as metal workers or electricians. It is noteworthy that only few women (7 per cent) and no handicapped people were selected for being hired", Stephan Krull, Das Modell VW (see footnote 3).

slow. That changed soon after. It was not enough that it went faster, it did not stop either! At the beginning, if there was a problem, the line stopped. Later this did not happen anymore, it just went on and on, no matter what... That's when things started to get stressful. One time I was so tied up that I didn't notice a damned thing: I was still doing my work step, the first work step of my team, when I bumped into a work-mate who was already busy with work in the third section, and I still had not finished my task! I messed up his rhythm and he got pissed off. A stupid remark from his side, a stupid return - woops, there we had the first rupture within our team.

The positive atmosphere at the beginning was also due to the fact that we all earned the same. I do not compare my wage to the wage of a VW worker, but to the one of the work-mate next to me. No-one felt privileged, money-wise. I rarely heard people comparing their wage to VW wages. But a lot of us were concerned about the fact that we were a thorn in the flesh of many VW workers, because we were seen as 'the cheap ones'. It was not our fault, but we had to bear the brunt of it. That was the mean thing: although we were not guilty we had to serve as the bogeyman. Right, the whole issue calmed down a bit after the company collective contract II; wage-wise, those workers who start working at VW now are more in our league than in the league of the old workers at VW."

The work does not fulfil the expectations, but a huge company like Auto5000 offers prospects which a small company is not able to promise. Apart from future (employment) prospects most of the workers welcomed the promise of 'qualification' eagerly - because it contained possibilities of further education and the chance to get a different kind of work in the future. And the learning process was supposed to be self-organised "organised for colleagues by colleagues". The company hoped that the self-organisation of learning would make it easier to generalise the individual and daily little tricks of single workers to a standard for all.

"Initially 60 per cent of the people thought they would make a career. They thought that the position of a team spokesperson could be a jumping-off place. But the career is not for all, it is impossible that everyone climbs up the hierarchy. If you had a professional business training you might get a job in the office, through internal vacancies. But if you did an apprenticeship as a chef in your previous job life? The expectations

clearly changed. Some guys still believed in the career, but generally speaking the drive was gone. This is why many, really many people fell into an abyss, they fell down the rock hard side of reality. Because reality was not like the official philosophy. Initially we were 20 people in the prep class. The first guy quit after three days, three more after two weeks. They could not stand it. Assembly line work is quite a thing.

At the beginning there was hardly any training. For a long time I thought that it was still to come. My father always told me: "Lass, just wait, something will be coming". Later they actually did some training. The topic of my first training session was: "The proper handling of an air-bag". That was half a year after I started working practically with those air-bags. They organised the training at a point when the line was not running, due to a failure. In order to avoid having people hanging about, that was why they called us for the training. "You already know how to do this work, great, all clear, just keep on doing it...". The next topic was "The health concept of Auto5000". I really started thinking about what kind of philosophy that could be.

Then the issue of shallow hierarchies: First us, the workers, of course; Then the engineers and the management. Three levels. That's how it was supposed to be. In reality they never put that into practice. It was supposed to be a kind of mutual cooperation, not from above. But the hierarchy is there, it is a simple fact."

The workers and the market economy...

A decisive element of the 'innovation' of Auto5000 is the attempt to bang so-called market economic thinking into the heads of the workers. On one hand this is supposed to be achieved by giving incentives to the total workforce (company profit-based extra payments), the single teams (bonus for team performance) and for the individual worker (performance bonus). The churning out of allegedly objective figures and stats delivers the matching ideology: the management presents itemized company accounts to the workers, and shows them Auto5000's own bids for VW contracts, with all the related figures. These are meant to prove that you have to offer this or that in order to survive within the market competition. If you have been on sick leave you have to undergo 'back-from-sick-leave'-conversations with your boss. During these conversations you are confronted with detailed calculations about how many

Euros and cents you have cost the company last year. This thinking is supposed to foster individualisation and competition between the departments of the work-force, the teams and the individual workers.

On the other hand the company applies enormous direct pressure if the brainwashing fails. If someone is often sick and does not seem to take the company's calculations too seriously, the threat of dismissal is on the agenda immediately. If you are sick too often you are obviously not 'fit for the industry'. If you make a mistake you can be forced to do unpaid extra work. The obligation to document each and every movement and performance is supposed to increase the fear: if you have cheated or haven't done a proper job, they can make you pay the bill even after years.

"The conflict about the signing is a typical one. Every work-step has to be signed by the person who did it, for documentation purposes. If, for example, the airbag does not open during an accident, they can check who it was assembled by. So far, this has not happened, but the pressure is in the air. Well, then somebody forgot to sign. At the end of the shift someone signs for the whole team. S/he sees that something is missing. If s/he signs anyway, then s/he is responsible. If s/he does not sign, then the air-bag will be rejected and make-up work will have to be done. What should s/he do?!

At the beginning there were enough people whose job it was to control the quality. At our line there were three of them. They used to check that everything was correct. If you had problems to keep up, they used to help you every now and then. When the line started to speed up, then they simply had no time to do it. They freaked out if someone made a mistake. Sometimes they had to run to the opposite line, where the next team was already working, and they tried to iron things out. There is a final line where you can park cars which need correction work. But the time for parking is limited to three hours. During that time the team has to work hard in order to make one member available for the necessary correction work, to set one free. If the team does not succeed then the car leaves the parking. Then you have to correct the mistake in your free time, up to two hours unpaid work. I had to do this unpaid correction work once, but usually the team manages to correct things quick enough. Depending on the mistake it might take you longer than two hours - it is possible

that you would have to do things you know nothing about. A messy situation, impossible really. You have to get it done in your team."

There are no 'fordist' time-keepers - but you have to justify yourself personally for why you are not able to do this or that work step additionally, given that other teams manage to do it. You are either not able or not willing - both is bad. Still, as far as the pressure from above makes it possible, the workers try to keep up comradely relationships.

"The speed-up came. They made the line run faster and faster, a performance test. At some point I said: 'I am done. It knocks me out'. When you say 'I can't take it anymore', then you stop working. My team had to perform 14 work steps. Between these 14 work steps you can change your work position, you can rotate within the team. The team has to arrange the work itself, it has to agree on how to do it. That went quite well, initially. Until the day when the first people went sick. The first work-mate had back aches. There are a lot of things he cannot do anymore. He talks to the company engineer. The engineer says: 'Listen, if you cannot do this, then you are not fit for the industry anymore'. So the guy gets scared, of course. The team tries to help out. Now the guy only does what he still can. The team sticks together as long as it is able to. Where do you put the second guy with back aches, where the third and where the guy with chronic wrist pain? At the end you are left with six work steps you can rotate, all the others are booked for those with special needs.

The problems cropped up when the line started to run properly. Some people suddenly made remarks like 'Someone is going to the loo too often'. Some looked around and counted how many people were on the loo at the moment. Arguments started like 'Do you really have to take a crap right now?!' Sounds ridiculous, but it's true. In the assembly department you cannot stop the line and there is no stand-in anymore, a guy who could do your work while you are absent. The team has to make up for it itself. Once, in summer, a guy collapsed, the ambulance came, work-mates had to support him and walked him out of the hall - and the line kept on running, they did not stop it!"

Team-Work

The fact that there are only a few hierarchy levels is achieved by delegating a lot of tasks to the 'master level' (here they call them company engineers)

and to the teams. Project groups from different departments and the works council sit together in order to solve allegedly objective problems as 'close to the production flow' as possible: how can we work even more effectively in order to get this or that external order? The calculation of the wage incentives works similarly: in the past the time-keepers and REFA-people (work process analysts) determined the piece work figures, today the works council takes part in defining 'target agreements' for the whole company and the single teams.

"There is no time-watch, but they test whether you are able to add certain work steps to your work cycle. They debate together with the team spokesperson at which position they want to try to integrate the extra work load. You cannot refuse the attempt. They stand next to you, observe you and take notes. After that they debate again and decide whether it works and then they note it done in the standard work documents: work step, time of the work cycle, how many people... etc. The 'target agreement' is then shown to the team. The 'target agreement' contains: numbers of finished cars or work cycles per day and per week, how many stop-pages, how many work accidents, quality instructions... The company engineer signs the agreement. They are his personal instructions."

During the team sessions the workers are only allowed to vote whether they think they have achieved the given targets or not. The 'target agreements' are determined from above anyway, this is why the workers call the allegedly democratic decision making ironically the 'traffic light game'.

"At the beginning we took the team sessions really seriously. That petered out after a while and then we only play the 'traffic light game': 'Quality - Who votes for green.' or 'Motivation - does anyone want to say something, does anyone votes red?' The same with the question of the numbers of pieces. These are the three points we can vote on. The really important point is motivation. For the two other points they have their own benchmarks anyway. If they think that the quality is bad then it doesn't matter if we all voted for 'green'. 'Motivation' is the only thing which they actually take in. The company engineer has to make sure that the motivation is fine. His extra bonus also depends on the question whether he is able to motivate his team or not."

The first strikes

The daily conflicts are argued out in the same manner as in traditional companies. Like in any other company those conflicts do not question the legitimacy of work, at least this is how they appear on the outside. The fact that people have to do extra correction or make-up work is not put into question generally, but by asking the question "Who is responsible?" the struggle is about at least getting paid for this work.

The sick leave rate has increased to a level which is not lower than in any other assembly plant. The dismissals due to sickness are rather a threat in the background, they only actually happen rarely. In most cases the people in question are pushed out by offering them severance pay.

At the start of the project the priority of the union was to extend its institutional influence. It succeeded. The works council has more of a say compared to other companies.

Not all the worker representatives on the works council are elected from within the Auto5000 workforce. Members of mother company VW's works council are delegated to that of Auto5000 in order to 'look after and counsel'. It is impossible to get people from your 'own company' on the 'first and saver' positions on the IG Metall (metal union) ballot list for works council elections. Initially there weren't any shop-stewards (Vertrauensleute) at all; later under the pressure of the workers so-called 'communication delegates' got elected. Up until recently the leadership of these delegates was not elected at all, the IG Metall leadership just appointed them. The IG Metall officials don't believe that the 'former unemployed' (that's what they often call the Auto5000 workers) are capable of taking care of their own issues themselves.

On the other hand IG Metall is not able to dissociate itself completely from the Auto5000 workers: in 2006 - when the collective project contract ran out and the workers debated intensively and developed their own demands - the union was at first caught napping and then they decided to let the workers do their thing, though kept them on the long lead of the union. The workers organised several token strikes involving up to 4,000 workers. Some VW workers took part, as well. The main concern of the workers was - apart from a

wage increase - to lower the pressure within the teams: the workers managed to fight back against the demands of the management to link the team bonus and holidays to the general sick leave rate. Afterwards IG Metall tried to regain control. They suggested to the workers to put the leadership back into professional and experienced hands... "You guys, being former unemployed, are not really able to do this job". Single activists were put under pressure. Currently the mixture of pressure and entanglement in dull union board activities seems to have choked the enthusiasm to a large extent.

There was no open split between workers and union, the workers rather took the claim of IG Metall to be a workers' organisation at face value and thereby came into conflict with its leading structure. There were no independent forms of organising, therefore it was not too difficult for the union to contain the engagement. Nevertheless, the mere fact that the workers took the collective contract conflict essentially into their own hands argues against the picture, painted amongst others by Stephan Krull,⁷ of a 'disarmed' work-force, lulled into passivity by a new work organisation and the accompanying ideology.

The relationship between VW workers and Auto5000 workers changed, as well. The VW workers have seen that the new work-force is not a bunch of 'demoralised unemployed'. In addition, in autumn 2006 the VW works council has signed a collective contract which says that future wage increases at VW are linked to the regional metal sector collective contract. The VW workers keep their (better) company collective contract, but they will not get any independent wage increase till 2011. This fact limits the corporatism of the works council, at least in terms of wage policies. We can hope that this will result in the VW workers opening their eyes to the situation of other workers - in the region and within their 'own' company group.

Appendix

In-house Company Agreement II

With the employment pact of 2004, a second in-house rate was agreed on for new employees. It

⁷ See footnote 3.

was based on the regional collective agreement for Lower Saxony and was therefore significantly worse than the old Company Agreement I.

The collective project contract 2001

Working Time

The working time is 35 "value creating" hours per week. The so-called qualification and communication time is not included in these 35 hours. That means a minimum of 1.5 hours weekly (meetings, team-sessions) are not counted as official working time. Theoretically three hours per week are dedicated for these 'administrative meetings' (e.g. developing time schedules for holidays etc.), only half of the time is paid. The maximum weekly working time is 42 hours. Workers work in a three-shift model. There is no extra payment either for the early Saturday shift or for the night shift Sunday to Monday. Any overtime (35 hours +) is accumulated in a work-time account (max. 200 hours), there is no extra payment for over-time.

Wages

Works council and management agree on a 'program', determining the numbers of pieces to produce. Whoever does not achieve the determined numbers has to work longer. This time is only paid if the company is 'responsible' for the failure.

The basic wage is 4,500 Deutsche Mark (about 2,300 Euros) before tax, plus 6,000 Deutsche Mark guaranteed annual bonus (including night-shift bonus), plus various individual non-fixed bonus.

The new collective contract 2006

Apart from a wage increase of 3 per cent the other achievement is a re-organisation of the bonus system. Instead of having a lump annual bonus night-shifts are now paid at 20 per cent extra and Sundays/bank holidays at 100 per cent extra. There are two additional bonuses of 1,000 Euros each in summer and winter. On the negative side: working-time is now more flexible, the work-time account can be extended to plus/minus 400 hours.

auto supplier

Published in Express, Zeitschrift für sozialistische Betriebs- und Gewerkschaftsarbeit, 5/07. Successful strike at TRW automobile supplier in Krefeld, Germany, April 2007

"Hardly anything comes out of the blue"

On Sunday, the 1st of April the night-shift at the car parts supplier TRW in Gellep-Stratum refuses to start working. They just gather in front of the factory gate. There is no call for industrial action and there is no need for an official strike ballot. No production worker - neither foreman nor technicians - goes to the machines or assembly line. The next day, the morning shift and then the late shift remain in front of the gate, as well - until at the evening, after the beginning of the night-shift, the company withdraws the dismissals of ten workers and announces that it will not restrict the work of the works council, as it had threatened to do. The workers of the night-shift turned up with blankets, food and drinks, they would have continued the strike. If that had happened assembly lines at some car manufacturers would have come to a halt.

This remarkable action of solidarity and self-organised resistance did not make it into the news, only a few regional daily papers reported about it later on. But these small seeds of resistance, which might appear unspectacular at first glance, point a way out of the powerlessness and weakening of the workers' movement. Therefore we met up with four workers, some of them members of the works council. We talked in more detail about how it happened that the company's work-force as a whole overcame their fears of the employers' policies of intimidation and black-mailing and instead showed their own strength.

"There was no trace of fear. Some years ago we had some negotiations and we had to give away things. One and a half years later the same happened. At some point... we just had had it. We always had to tighten the belt and they cannot get enough". This is how a Turkish worker, who has been working in the company for twenty years,

described the atmosphere before the strike kicked off. Such an action was in the air for a long time. "There have always been these kinds of thoughts cropping up: We will just throw down tools, that's it, we are stuffed, it cannot continue this way. But there was never the right occasion in order to do that kind of thing". The attempt to intimidate all workers by dismissing ten of them triggered the opposite reaction, because everyone felt targeted. "We did not know who would be next, after these ten work-mates because the employer wanted to dismiss more people. They said that there will be more people to go". Despite the fact that there had been smaller 'remaining doubts' during the preparation of the action and despite the mutual confirmation of not having had a sound sleep during the night before the strike, the carefully examined general atmosphere was simply too unambiguous: "Everyone said, also in the white-collar departments, that they have had it up to here. You first thought, alright, this is a single voice... But then more and more people came and said: 'No, these guys think the same; they also think that at some point this all has to stop'. And when we stood outside the most common argument was: 'We should have done this much earlier on'.

Earlier on it was about rescuing the production location

The factory in Gellep-Stratum near Krefeld, where 454 employees manufacture crank shafts and steering links for BMW, VW or Iveco, belongs to TRW Automotive, one of the biggest global automobile suppliers. At the production location in Krefeld, half of the workers are from a migrant background, there are very few women employed. Worldwide, 63,000 people work for TRW, in 26 different countries. In Germany, TRW employs about 12,000 workers at 17 different production locations. In 2003, the company was taken over by the investment capital firm the Blackstone Group. At first things did not change much, but during the market decline in 2003/2004 TRW started to black-mail workers with production re-location and to force concessions from employees at all locations. Meanwhile in the Czech Republic, 3,000 workers work in eight different TRW factories. Particularly in the mass production segment, the increasing pressure is very palpable.

In January 2004, in the plant in Gelsenkirchen-Schalke, which employs 1,000 people, TRW announced the re-location of the ball-and-socket joint production to Dacice in the Czech Republic. By cutting holiday pay and by establishing a 35-hour working week out of which only 32 hours are paid, a contract was settled which gave job security to 770 jobs in Schalke. TRW proceeded in similar ways in their other factories. In May 2005, the IG Metal (metal union) in Heidelberg (south of Germany) stated: "TRW attacks the collective contracts, increasing pressure on the jobs, wages and working times. Like many other automobile suppliers, TRW increases the pressure on their employees in all plants. Everywhere it is the same story: the company is not running badly, some production segments make double-digit profits - but the parent group is still not satisfied. Therefore plants are closed, production lines are re-located to low wage countries and the remaining employees are asked for concessions in the form of wage cuts and longer working hours. In some plants - Schalke, Alfdorf, Radolfzell and Düsseldorf - TRW has already forced such 'location agreements'. In St.Leon-Rot, Aschaffenburg, OSS Radolfzell, Blumberg, Barsinghausen, Krefeld, Koblenz and Neuwied, TRW issued similar demands or announced concrete measures."

At the end of 2005, a 'location security agreement' (an addition to the existing collective contract) was settled for the plant in Krefeld, which had been relocated from Düsseldorf to this 'green field' in 1994. For four years the workers renounced their claim certain wage entitlements which sum up to 8.6 million Euros. In return, a number of 454 jobs was fixed, and the company could only fall short of this number if it got the agreement of IG Metall. For the workers the settlement resulted in an annual wage cut of 5,000 Euros. The workers could cope with this wage cut only because previously people earned relatively high wages. "In the administration district the workers in our company pay the highest membership dues on average (for their union membership, which is calculated as a percentage of the gross wage). We do not earn badly here. And this is what we want to sustain", a works council member declares.

At the same time the work load and pressure increased: "Of course, the pressure to perform has increased enormously. Now the employer organises work-shops in our company. Machines have been shifted and re-composed, so where formerly six people worked; now their number has been reduced to five and the pressure has been put on their shoulders". A work-mate insisted: "Where previously three people worked, now one is left."

Paradigm Shift: "Hunting Season"

What triggered the anger and finally the action was the attempt of the newly installed management to further down-size the work-force despite the 'location security agreement' - and the impudence with which the management tried to do this. As early as autumn 2006 they negotiated with the IG Metall and the work council about the cut of 45 jobs. "We re-calculated and came to the conclusion that there we are short of exactly 45 people - if we compare the norm fixed by the company with the actual production, what else is a fixed norm good for. Nevertheless they continued to increase the pressure; they offered voluntary leave schemes, part-time for the older workers. They increased the pressure to cut down the core staff. This is a strategy which does not necessarily originate from this local production unit, we rather assume that it comes from the group headquarters, according to the slogan: 'Make sure that you replace people.'" The company wants to hire more temp workers. According to a company-based agreement the company cannot employ a temp work-force of more than six percent, which amounts to 27 temp-workers. Given the current market situation, the management thinks that this number is not sufficient, but they would need the agreement of the works council to increase this number.

In order to by-pass the agreement of the union, which would be necessary to cut jobs for 'company-related' reasons, the management used the proven way of dismissing people for 'personal' reasons. At the end of March 2007, the company passed five applications for dismissals 'due to illness' on to the works council. A works council member called this new policy of the company a 'paradigm change'. Part of this paradigm change was that the company negated on the company-

based agreement on the exemption of a second works council member from work (according to company size, a certain share of works council members can be exempt from work). The company-based agreement fixed the exemption of two members. When the numbers of workers employed sank under 500, it meant that legally only the exemption of one member could be claimed.

The works council refused the dismissals and reacted by publishing a series of notice-board announcements under the appropriate title 'Hunting Season', because the works council saw a systematic relationship to the 'back from illness'-conversations (obligatory meetings between workers who had been on sick leave and managers after their return back at work), introduced by the new HR boss, who had taken up office in 2006. On the 20th of March 2007, the works council announced: "The 'back from illness'-conversations which has run for some time now, organised by our employer only due to his 'duty of care', has shown its first results. The works council has received five applications for dismissals due to illness-related reasons, which bypasses our additional collective contract. Other dismissals have been announced without giving concrete reasons. The general reasons given by the employer were: 1. the number of work-force is too high, 2. the sick-leave rate is too high. As you would of course expect, the works council will react 'appropriately' to this, despite its restricted rights of co-determination".

The notice 'Hunting Season 2' two days later mentioned a total of ten illness-related dismissals and pointed out the relationship to work strain and its consequences: "Among those who are supposed to be dismissed are some employees who recently have ruined their health, also due to working over-time. According to the will of the employer they are now supposed to be 'placed at the disposal of the labour market'. This means soon being on Hartz IV (currently 345 Euros/month)!" The works council announced that they would only agree to overtime under the condition that the dismissals were withdrawn. From then on they refused all over-time - which would turn out to become an important factor of success for the strike. On the 23rd of March, the 'Hunting Season 3' announcement added that among the ten dismissed work-mates are five severely handi-

capped workers. "Our employer seems to stop at nothing. No one seems to be safe anymore!" This is true even for the white-collar staff, because in their department, as well, the new management has re-structured and replaced people.

The works council hoped that the refusal of overtime would build up enough pressure because the market situation is good and production is already lagging behind. But the management displayed itself as being unimpressed and intended to enforce things violently. On the 30th of March, they again verbally applied for the approval of over-time. They offered to put the dismissals on ice for the time being, saying that they could be debated after Easter again. The works council first wanted to consult among themselves. Five minutes later, an older Turkish worker called and said that she had found a dismissal letter in her post-box. Being questioned the senior manager confirmed the dismissals and announced that he would pronounce two more on the very same day. The notice 'Hunting Season 4' published these incidents. Two members of the works council went to the senior management and told him that there was no common ground for 'trusting co-operation' anymore.

Organised Spontaneity

"Hardly anything comes out of the blue", said a worker when we asked him how the strike came to happen. On Sunday the works council and the shop stewards met in order to discuss about what they could do. That things could reach this point was clear beforehand. "We debated about it for a while. What will we do once the first dismissal actually comes up because application for dismissal does not yet mean dismissal? Theoretically, the employer can proceed with the legal dismissal procedures up to the hearing of the works council... the employer does not have to pronounce them. Yes, what will we do in this case? At this point our legal means as a works council are exhausted". Another worker remembered the Sunday meeting. "The idea came up: Let's inform the work-mates who arrive for the Sunday night-shift. That became a self-propelling mechanism that was not an actual debate. It was the last straw. If you see the context: we accepted wage cuts and now they try to fuck us over from behind

our backs. We accepted the wage cuts in return for job security and now we do not have job security after all. What for, then?" Before the night-shift arrived at work, the word spread: "Particularly our foreign work-mates, they always have a mobile on them, and when we realized that the atmosphere was like it was... then half of them already had their mobile in gear. Some of them arrived straight away, wearing the IG Metall cap, here we go! In these situations particularly amongst the foreign work-mates a certain enthusiasm breaks out. The Germans are a bit more... doubt-raiser types."

Already during the afternoon the preparations started. Given that the token strikes of the IG-Metall collective contract conflict were about to happen, the full equipment was already on the spot, the red union banners and caps. Symbolism was taken care of as well. When the union banner was hoisted it first hung under the TRW flag - the workers insisted on correcting it. When the night-shift arrived it was already a sure thing that all would remain outside the factory.

Due to the tense order situation (production lagging behind) the workers had thought that after some hours at the latest, negotiations would start and an arrangement would be found. But the management did not budge. They appeared only the next morning to the regular working hour and acted as if they were unconcerned. "Through their body language, as well... at one point we gathered people down here in order to up-date them about the current stage of things. Then our boss opened this window up there widely, stood at the window with a cup of Cappuccino, leaning against the frame and stirring his cup, and the whole gang stood in front and looked in his direction. They took it as a provocation."

Surely, the workers had also reckoned on the management taking more drastic steps against the action - which did not happen in the end. No calling of the police, no personal intimidations. In the afternoon, when the late shift also remained outside the factory, a phone call of the IG Metall comes in. The employers' association considers a collective grievance claim against the union or a legal process aimed at the removal of the works council from office. But finally negotiations with the IG Metall and the employers' association took place.

The deciding factor was the effective production bottleneck. The trucks queued up in front of the gate, but it would have been of no use for the company to clear the way to the factory premises by police force. The workers found out that there were hectic calls from clients who were waiting for their parts. "During the night we had a look at the stock. There was nothing, because for the two weeks prior over-time had been refused. They actually lived from hand to mouth". And the truck drivers in front of the gate took it easy. One of them assured a worker: This happened to him some weeks ago in front of a TRW plant in France, as well, and he had to stay there idle some days due to a strike, too. The truck drivers were provided with rolls and drinks by the strikers, who at first still got the food from the private canteen in the factory. In a ridiculous action the management put pressure on the guy who ran the canteen not to provide the strikers with food - as if he could starve out the action.

During the course of the day, the atmosphere at the gate got better and better. Quickly some beer tents were organised, and the nice weather promoted a festive mood. "The climate change makes striking in Germany much easier", as a worker puts it in dry humor. The discussion came up again about why they had not done this earlier. The experience that it actually worked to stay outside together fostered self-confidence: 97 percent took part in the action, and 60 percent of the total work-force is unionised. Now the workers are not willing to compromise anymore. At the first moment the management reacted with a counter-demand: the share of temp workers is supposed to be enlarged, but this is rejected as insolence.

"This was remarkable: During the course of the afternoon we had a situation where the employer said: We took the dismissals back, they are not valid anymore. We also took back the cancellation of the company-based agreement on the exemption from work of a second work council member. This meant that the company-based agreement would still be in force, so they would have been able to cancel the agreement again. At this point the workers reacted brilliantly. The employer did not expect this: they said that as long as this is not arranged, we will not go back in. Despite the fact that it was clear that he would withdraw the dis-

missals. Then it took another two hours before we arrived at a new agreement... Partly the employer was a little bit bizarre. When we announced the provisional results that the dismissals would be withdrawn, we stood outside with a loudspeaker to inform everyone, and this was the first and only time that the employer came outside, with the whole leading management. They came out, six, seven, eight of the management and our impression was that they, as well, wanted to say something about the topic, something like 'The dismissals are off the agenda now'. But when they saw the reaction of the workers - 'we are not interested at all, we have two demands to be met!' - they looked quite crestfallen and buggered off."

After the beginning of the night shift the works council announced the result: 1. All ten dismissals are withdrawn, 2. the second exemption from work will be guaranteed till the next works council election, 3. the demand to be paid for the time on strike can not be enforced, but the workers can compensate for the strike hours from their working time accounts. "We think this is well invested money for such a solidarity action!", the works council wrote in their announcement. 4. There would not be any disciplinary measures against any employees. Then work resumed after 25 hours of strike.

Questions of Power

At the end of the strike the workers were close to a mass embrace, "at the end the atmosphere was euphoric". On the shop-floor the new self-confidence is palpable. The workers had taken part in token strikes and in demonstrations before, but an action of such kind is something new for them as well. Only during the 70's had this kind of thing happened, an older worker remembers. On the shop-floor people ask at any occasion, 'so when do we walk out again?' A works council says smilingly that they have to hold people back: "Guys, I have the impression that some people think that we had taken over power here!" During the token strikes at the end of April, beginning of May, the TRW workers walked out several times - and this despite the fact that due to the location job security agreement they would only benefit partly from a wage increase in the collective contract. If it had come to a full strike, the IG Metall would have

been able to put them on top of the list of the plants dedicated for strike action.

During the eventful times they did not manage to inform the media and public as they left it to IG Metall. But the other TRW plants were informed in the very same night. "Of course, solidarity messages arrived: Great, this helps us, as well, if you lead the struggle in the name of us, too. Recently works council elections took place and works council members made the strike a topic, mentioned it in their reports, and in all plants the reaction of the management was: 'Don't you dare!'"

The workers at TRW still have to face up to the currently most important conflict in the metal industry throughout the country. As part of the location job security agreement the implementation of ERA (new wage group model which assesses work places on an individual basis and triggers a lot of discontent everywhere) has been postponed to 2010. But they know what they will have to confront themselves with: "This will surely become a topic of big struggles. The employer sees this (ERA) only as a measure to cut costs. At TRW in Gelsenkirchen-Schalke 700 objections have been filed against ERA-ratings - out of 780 workers employed in the factory!"

occupied bike factory

From wildcat #79, winter 2007: Impressions from the occupied factory hall in Nordhausen.

How long will the 'bureaucratic course' last?

The news was posted on Labornet at the end of July: a bicycle factory has been occupied in Nordhausen (Thüringen, east of Germany). On their own accord the entire permanent work-force (125 workers) organise the day-and-night occupation of their company which is threatened with immediate closure. They want to fight against being dismissed without a Sozialplan (a contract normally negotiated by the union: e.g. dismissed workers get severance pay or a guaranteed one year employment in a qualification scheme). The news on Labornet already had links to seven newspaper articles which report about the dedication of the

workers to act against the plans of their profit-hungry (still) employer. They will stay together like a family, if necessary till Christmas. "Wow", we thought and started our first trip to the factory at the beginning of August.

The plant is easy to find: We only have to turn into Freiherr-von-Stein Street when we hear the honking of passing cars and the whistles of the occupiers. They stand or sit around on the pavement, they have attached banners at the fence. Warm welcome, good atmosphere, several people immediately come to say hello to us, offer cake and coffee ("the cake has been offered to us as an act of solidarity by a collective from Hamburg").

Until recently there have been three different bike factories in the region: the Mitteldeutsche Fahrradwerke (Mifa) in Sagerhausen (422 workers), the Sachsen Zweirad in Neukirch (240 workers) and the very same Bike Systems in Nordhausen. In 2000 Bike Systems was threatened with bankruptcy for the first time. Back then the BIRIA Sachsen bought the company and integrated it in close cooperation with its plant Sachsen Zweirad in Neukirch. The purchasing department, service department and the dispatch were re-located from Nordhausen and over two-thirds of the former 400 workers disappeared. Only the production department and its 125 workers remained. "At that point the hiring of temp workers started", a Bike Systems worker tells us. During the main season between January and June up to 160 temp workers hired by Mifa have been employed in Nordhausen. In December 2005 the plants in Neukirch and Nordhausen were taken over by the US-investor Lone Star. One year after the takeover the Sachsen Zweirad factory in Neukirch was closed and all 240 employees were dismissed with a Sozialplan (see above). The severance pay was 21 Euros per one year of employment with the company (after 20 years you get only 420 Euros!). Lone Star sold the bike orders of Sachsen Zweirad for a 25 per cent company share to Mifa which up to that point had been the main competitor of Bike Systems. During the last months Bike Systems had no clients of its own anymore, they only produced for orders from Mifa. The workers received a reduced basic wage, they worked at weekends and on bank holidays and their holiday and Christmas pay was cut completely.

On the 20th of June 2007 a shock hit the remaining 125 workers: despite all the concessions made by the workers Lone Star will close the plant in Nordhausen, as well. The production was supposed to run for another ten days, in order to finish the final orders, after that negotiations over a Sozialplan would start. Till 30th of June the workers assembled the last bikes, then they themselves dismantled the assembly lines and emptied the storage halls - expecting an acceptable Sozialplan. They did not wake up to reality before 10th of July, when it became clear that Lone Star will neither offer severance pay nor stick to the legal notice period for dismissals.

"For years we accepted any deterioration and now all 125 people occupy the factory together. The idea came up on a company assembly and everyone thought that it was good." The occupation was formally declared as a permanent company assembly (works council members have the legal right to call for such assemblies) - initially until the 30th of August.

Immediately after the company closure became known the main Mifa manager came to the plant and tried to head-hunt 60 to 90 people: he offered permanent contracts and the same wages as at Bike Systems. But only three people took the offer and thereby lost their claims concerning Lone Star. At Mifa workers earn even less, they work 40 instead of 38 hours like at Bike Systems and they get 24 days annual holiday instead of 30. If you add the travel expenses to Dangerhausen you will be better off receiving unemployment benefit than working. In addition the working conditions are said to be bad, the plant is very old, people are not allowed to talk at work and all attempts to form a works council have been blocked by firing the workers involved.

A worker shows us the factory. The halls are empty, the storage halls for material are empty, dismantled machines and tools are stashed in boxes. A few bikes are put away in a corner. "They will be fetched soonish, they all belong to Mifa anyway." Most of the workers only unwillingly remember the proposal made by various lefties to produce bikes under self-management: such ideas do not meet their interests and possibilities - at least if the proposal of self-managed production is put forward as a long term solution. We say that

even if they wanted, under the given circumstance they would not be able to continue the production: "That's right, we would not be able. There is no material left here." The Mifa has taken away all material and some machine parts and after consulting a lawyer the workers decided not to obstruct the looting.

"Bloody hell, so you really let them rip you off!" He agrees: "Yes, we are with our asses against the wall. We cannot go on strike anymore, so we had no other choice, but to occupy the plant. We have got nothing to lose anymore. But we stick together like a family." The relations amongst the workers are actually very warmhearted. They all agree on what they are doing, they all know the score and feel a great urge to communicate it to others.

The workers say that they have a very able lawyer and that he is trusted by everyone. "He has already represented us in the negotiations during the bankruptcy." It was Mr. Metz, as well, who elaborated the claims concerning Lone Star: set up a Sozialplan, created a so-called Auffanggesellschaft (employment scheme for dismissed workers) and examined the possibilities to save jobs.

In cooperation with the work council Mr. Metz assesses the legality of proposed actions. Any actions which 'would get us into trouble' are avoided and all the other actions are registered with the police and the respective administrations. The workers are grateful that someone does this job. You cannot keep an eye on the general situation if you are on the street and on demonstrations the whole time while negotiations take place inside. Someone has to do this. "We are workers. We don't have a clue about what we can do legally. At least most of us don't..."

The metalworkers union IGM is present, but hardly visible. The whole premises are decorated with self-made banners and card-board signs. Here and there you can see an IGM sticker, but there is no obvious evidence of union activities. Only about a third of the work-force is in the union.

The most important target is the public now. Several actions aim at public relations and opinion: a visit to the Landtag (state parliament), a party for children, a concert on the premises, a collective blood donation at the Red Cross ("Before Lone Star sucks out our last drop of blood we'd

rather donate it"), a stall at the town festival, a town round-trip in a historic tram, leaflets,... other actions are supposed to follow. Workers tell us that RTL (private TV channel) filmed at the factory, but it was not broadcast. First of all the workers in Nordhausen want to get the attention of politicians and potential new investors. The workers are angry about the fact that so far verbal addresses of solidarity were the maximal reaction of politicians. "We want that finally someone takes some money into their hands and does something with it". Or that we at least get a proper severance pay and a *Transfergesellschaft* (transit employment society)."

When we left after some hours we are impressed by the enthusiasm, the good mood and the openness of the occupying workers. But we were unimpressed by their unreflected trust in regional politicians and the impact of the media and by their fear or hesitation to develop their own activities and to leave the path of mere friendly and legal public relations.

Two weeks later we went to Nordhausen again. In the meantime Mr. Müller had issued the bankruptcy declaration. For the workers this means that they get up to three months bankruptcy compensation payment (*Insolvenzausfallgeld*), then they get the sack by 1st of November 2007 at the latest. The company assets available in case of the companies' wind up were increased from 830.000 to 1.5 million Euros. In addition the company offers transit employment and qualification schemes til 2008.

Despite this the occupation continues. We arrived with the proposal to drive to Sangerhausen (50 km) together with some of the workers, in order to distribute leaflets to the Mifa workers there. No one showed interest in the proposal and apparently there was no idea of contacting the workers in Sangerhausen. "The whole thing is not their fault."

Compared to our last visit the atmosphere had changed completely. No cars beeping, no people gathering in front of the gate. On the factory premises the majority of the very few picketers played cards or darts. Whoever was able to had taken holidays, unfortunately most of our previous acquaintances, as well. The remaining strike shifts are sat out. No one seemed to be interested

to talk to us, even those who we had talked to during our last visit. On one hand the few people we talked to said that they were happy to receive the bankruptcy payment now. On the other hand no one made the impression of being at all happy. The drive was entirely gone. The workers said that they are bored, but that they stay on the premises only because the lawyer told them that it would be better from a legal point of view. "I'd rather be inside there and assemble bikes for ten hours a day than hanging out here outside. At least you would have something to do", one worker says. We want to know the reason why they do not leave the plant in order to make their demands known and whether they have any leaflets about the current stage of the conflict. "Nope, we do not have any leaflets". Whether the works council and the lawyer inform them about the negotiation process. "Yes, they keep us informed". What's the score after the negotiation meeting yesterday and what is the current state of negotiations? But no one has exact information. "Somehow everything goes according to the bureaucratic course of things". Allegedly there is a new offer for the take over of the company, according to the lawyer the chance that a new investor will buy the company has increased to 35 per cent. One has to wait for further results of negotiation. Whether they have watched the (so far unreleased) documentary on the Bosch-Siemens-Hausgerätewerk (see *prol-position news #8*: <http://www.prol-position.net/nl/2007/08/bsh/bsh1>) which was made available for them. "I think someone watched it", says a woman and points towards some benches, "I think some people have watched it". Next to the documentary DVD someone has put joining forms of the metal union IGM.¹

When it comes to struggles against company closures the following questions become central: can workers (still) develop any power at all, and what is the basis of this power? What would be success for such struggles? In most cases, like in the case of Nordhausen, it is a struggle for a 'dig-

¹ When we made our first visit, a few of those from Nordhausen already knew how the IG Metall had stalled at the BSH strike, just before the high-point of the solidarity marches. Two thirds of the workforce of BSH were not happy with results that IG Metall had negotiated and felt betrayed.

nified exit'. This 'dignified exist' can be worth fighting for if those people in struggle gain self-confidence and develop solidarity in the course of struggle and if they experiment with and experience their power in a collective process. We had the impression that this did not happen in Nordhausen (so far). During the whole period of occupation the old company hierarchies were left untouched and active (e.g. the shift-manager was responsible for the decision of who was put on which strike shift, there was a hierarchy regarding access to information and regarding decision making). All workers stuck together, no doubt about that - right from the start the struggle was about a common solution. But instead of using the first weeks of occupation in order to discuss about regional and wider networking and about actions to hit Lone Star effectively, the workers relied solely on their legal representatives. At the end they felt as mere pawns in the legal battle amongst lawyers. They felt that they had no impact on the events themselves and that they had handed over the responsibility to others. They were afraid that they might lose the little they were entitled to once they intensified the struggle for a Sozialplan. This fear reduced their scope of action to a mere symbolic level and thereby paralysed them completely.

A struggle for severance pay can be interesting, too, once it overcomes old hierarchies and divisions, even if the struggle is only about defining the degree or terms of a defeat. But in order to achieve this the struggle has to be lead by the workers themselves. Often (and in the case of Nordhausen, too) the discussion about severance pay - the last thing you can lose - serves the bosses as an emergency brake during negotiations and as a means to immobilise potentially rebellious workers. Though initially the workers in Nordhausen made a very determined impression, it seems that this mechanism worked out in their case, too.

Update

Three weeks after our last visit, on the 6th of September about 80 workers went to Frankfurt/Main in buses organised by the IGM metal union. There they protested in front of the Lone Star head-quarters, fitted out by the IGM

and accompanied by many supporters from, amongst others, Nordhausen, Frankfurt, Hamburg and Göttingen. They demanded the withdrawal of the bankruptcy decree and the continuation of production. Meanwhile the workers in Nordhausen had to apply for unemployment benefit ALG I, because - unlike what they had hoped for - the bankruptcy compensation money was not paid immediately after their last proper wage. For a few weeks at least this will mean a significant deterioration of their financial situation for all workers.

What happened since then

The demonstration in Frankfurt is the first initiative taken by the workers to tackle the company directly in order to put pressure on it. During a meeting in Hamburg two Bike System workers gave following interesting information: the temp workers at Mifa earn only 5.77 Euros before tax hourly wages. These workers are the majority at Mifa. They gave following reason for why parts are manufactured in China, but assembled here: despite higher labour costs assembling bikes here is still 20 Euros cheaper than transporting fully assembled bikes from China to Germany. 20 Euros is not much, so they see only little space for putting pressure on the employers... The struggle in Nordhausen is not finished yet.

Update Two: 19th of September in 2007

Staff of occupied bicycle factory in the Thuringian Nordhausen take up production in self-management again. For this aim 1,800 binding orders on bicycles must be received till 2nd of October. So the colleagues are working together with the anarcho-syndicalist union FAU (Freie ArbeiterInnen Union – Free Workers-Union), which formed for this campaign the internet-page www.strike-bike.de.

Contact: fahrradwerk@gmx.de

Short Clips on You-Tube:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dk1HfKffHcE>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fxBmxViFcAI>

Mehalev, Workfare in Israel

In between raiding, shooting and leveling in Palastine and engaging in war/pre-war situations with Lebanon and Iran, the Israeli state is busy introducing its version of workfare and benefit cuts. The Hebrew name of the scheme is Mehalev, which stands for "from social security to secure employment". The movement against this scheme, calls itself Yad Al Halev - a word-play meaning "with a hand on the heart". The Mehalev scheme is currently in its trial stage in four areas of Israel and is facing huge opposition across the political spectrum - from the liberal politicians and NGO to the working class activists. This report outlines the new laws and gives an overview of their implementation, then outlines the opposition to it in general, and most specifically looks at the grass roots opposition being taken by a group of self-organised claimants and activists in Ashkelon, one of the four districts. But firstly a little background...

Background to Israeli situation

Since 1986 there has been a big push at privatisation. Since the 1990s the number of people receiving state unemployment benefits has increased two or three times. The percentage of the population working is relatively low due to a very high unemployment (officially 9 percent but much higher for certain sections of the population), a notable slice of the population in the army, students and a large under 18 population. Until the Intifada many Palestinians worked in Israel, but now this happens much less. There are some foreign workers from South East Asia and Romania; and illegal South American and African workers. Perhaps the scheme is best understood as a mechanism to cut back exploding expenditure on unemployment benefits.

Class Divisions in Israeli Society

The Ashkanasi Jews, mostly originating from Europe, make up the ruling class and the middle class professionals and intellectuals. The majority of the working class of Israeli Society are made up

of four groups: Arabic Jews, Palestinian Israelis, recent Jewish immigrants and Orthodox Jews (from various origins).

The Arabic, or Mizrahi, Jews originating from Arabian countries, have traditionally made up the working class of Israel, along with the Palestinian Israelis.

These Arabic and Muslim people with Israeli passports and full citizen status (unlike the non-Israeli Palestinians) make up 15 to 18 percent of the population. Huge numbers of these people are doing cash-in-hand work whilst signing on. Their strong family and community bonds mean that they alleviate their housing problems by building upwards and living together in houses. These buildings are however illegal and get periodically torn down again.

Since the 1990s there have been waves of Jewish immigrants from Russia, Ethiopia and other countries - adding up to 1 million new immigrants, and playing their part in the population increase of 5 to 7 million.

Orthodox Jews make up 18 to 20 percent of Israeli society - mostly children. They tend to have very large families, the men often don't work because they are 'studying' and the women work hard in low paid jobs. These women also tend to be reliably highly educated and companies know this and deliberately exploit this combination of the need for work, skill level and religion. Very recently Orthodox women started to work in the high tech industries for a minimum wage. For example Matrix, a large high-tech company set up a new factory near the orthodox settlement of Modiin Ilit, checking, modifying and coding computer programmes. They widely advertised their new jobs in a rabbi-approved workplace suitable for orthodox women, with Kosher food in the canteen etc. The pay was minimum wage and the working conditions were incredibly controlling in cooperation with the local rabbi. Some activists objected to this and did an action to close the factory by blocking the gates of the main office in Herzelia and doing a banner drop. The action was also exposing the links between the corporations and the West Bank colonisation.

Mehalev

The History of Mehalev

The scheme was devised by Netanyahu in 2003, when he was the finance minister under the Sharon government, 2002 - 2005, following Thatcher style policies. He was also Prime Minister of Israel and head of the right wing Likud Party from 1996 to 1999, Despite being introduced by the Prime Minister, the notoriously corrupt Olmert, and backed by his friend, the previous Minister for Employment, many parts of the government were officially opposed to the scheme. The Minister for National Security - who is actually responsible for the benefits system - spoke against the scheme, as did the new Minister for Employment, an Orthodox Party member. Many of the left-wing NGOs were also vocally against Mehalev. They objected to the privatisation of the social security services and the fact that the main target is people with disabilities and other vulnerable sectors of society.

However it was approved for a two-year trial in four areas, Ashkelon, Jerusalem, Hadera and Nazereth. It is being delivered by international private companies from the UK, Holland and the US, in partnership with Israeli temp agencies. They are namely: Maximus, an infamous US company; A4E-UK, a UK company successful in such schemes in Britain making it's first international contract; and Calder and Agens from the Netherlands.

What the law means

It is targeting the long-term unemployed, the drug addicts, people with health problems (physical and mental) and the ex-prisoners. If you are in work and lose your job you get a certain kind of unemployment benefit, which has been drastically reduced over the years - both the time you can receive this benefit and who is eligible. Those claiming the UK equivalent of Income Support, or the German Unemployment Benefit II are put compulsorily onto the Mehalev scheme. In Shderot they took all those claiming income support. In Ashkelon they took people from specific area and put them on the scheme. The job centres are angry and aggressive places with fights breaking out every week - Israel is a small country and this tension makes things hard.

Currently those people are often getting 200 Shekels a month, the equivalent of about 30 Euros. An average secretary or electricians wage would be something like 7000 Shekels a month. An Israeli activist and part time worker for Commitment said "I have to say, I don't have a clue how these people survive". The cost of food alone would come to more than this. Under Mehalev to continue to get this measly amount you have to go to a temp agency five days a week for 30 hours!

After this you can be forced to work for free (you only continue to get the original 200 Shekels, not even the 1 Euro per hour extra offered under Hartz IV in Germany), Originally this 'skills improvement work' was supposed to be community work that others did not want to do. But of course it functions to lay off council workers and replace them with workfare people. There are people forced into work who are over 60 years old and who are physically and mentally sick. The scheme began with work such as park maintenance - then they started cleaning hospitals and streets, and finally the workfare people were sent to the army bases - despite there being little for them to do there.

Sending more people to the army is illogical. With all men doing three years and women doing two years in the army, and many people doing one month a year, there is simply not enough for everyone to do. Women mostly do not do active combat so they are already huge sections of the army doing administration, training, IT etc. One response of the workfare people sent to the army is to try to steal guns in order to sell them on. There were actions specifically against the army being part of the workfare programme - including a visit to Minister of Security's house. An old unionist and anti-privatisation lefty politician, originally opposed to Mehalev, he let them in and finally stopped the army placements.

The rhetoric is that the scheme helps people find long term work, but even those who do find work through the scheme go to temporary contracts. It is a small country with a lot of nepotism and hence networks between the local politicians, those running the Mehalev schemes and the companies benefiting from the new supply of forced cheap workforce. The Mehalev workers hold a lot of power over the people now, if you are rude to

them, do not co-operate or cause and trouble or agitation your benefit could be stopped. You are expected to smile whilst getting shafted. This fear, as well as the individualised way people are targeted and bullied is one of the limitations of the struggle against Mehalev .

The companies profits come from how many peoples benefits get stopped. Their target is at least 30 percent . Of course the rhetoric is that these people have found work, but actually what is often happening is that people are simply signing off. Basically, the amount of pressure and time Mehalev demands is not worth the money that one can receive. Some get as little as 200 Shekel, with extra on top if you have children, a disability etc. A normal income level might be between 1200- 3500 taking, for example a part time legal job to top up the income level.

Survival strategies

There are a lot of horror stories what it had done to people, of people signing off and having to make ends meet - by ducking and diving, turning to crime, taking low paid cash-in-hand jobs. The benefit level is so low anyway - that most people already had illegal work. They got scared of being found out, or of not being able to meet the scheme's requirements and work - and so were forced to sign off. Previous to the scheme many people bounced from one very low paid cash-in-hand job to the next, using the dole money to stabilise their situation - to help them survive - rather than living a life of ease at the expense of the tax payer. At least a little bit of guaranteed income - now those people are having to live on the meagre wages of the cash-in-hand work. This work is on construction sites, cleaning, child care, market stalls and small businesses. There is a common mentality of not paying taxes or declaring your work or business unless you have to. However, even this cash-in-hand work could often only bring in 3000 Shekels a month - ie not enough to live on. The minimum wage is set at 3800 Shekels and a full time semi-professional salary would be between 6000 and 8000.

There is a big gap between what the money one needs, and the money one gets in this situation. This is further compounded by the decreasing amount of public housing.

The fight back

Mehalev has been hugely unpopular and "everyone hates them, but they can't stop them because they are afraid of losing their dole money". There have been actions inside the centres and Town Halls - complete with graffiti.

There are various national NGOs who started a campaign to end the Mehalev scheme. As the trails go on the radical self organised groups are still taking this approach, but some of the NGOs are trying to campaign for changes to the details of the scheme, to make it a little less harsh. Some of the NGO are aware of the conflict between on one hand having too much to lose to really support the unemployed if they want to be very radical and on the other hand not wanting to advocate or push people into actions that might result in their benefit being stopped.

Jerusalem

Some of the groups active against Mehalev in Jerusalem are:

- Community Advocacy - a community support and campaigning organisation who have been active on a neighbourhood level for 14 years.
- Commitment for Peace and Social Justice [Commitment] - an independent campaigning and research NGO run by lefty, social democratic intellectuals. They have also been playing a key role supporting some of the grass roots groups - although not without the usual complications of merging the legal NGO and the radical autonomous groups.

Nazereth

The long-term unemployed in Nazareth are mostly Palestinian Israeli. There is a strong workers organisation, headed by communist activists. Their spontaneous response to Mehalev was to burn down the office. Ironically the local municipality is run by the official Communist Party. The workers organisation of Nazereth is however no supporter of the community municipality. Ironically these communist local politicians actually lobbied to have Mehalev - arguing that not introducing scheme in their area was anti Palestinian discrimination. However, once it did start in their area they too became very critical.

Hadera

The main resistance to Mehalev in Hadera is headed by a few NGOs. One is Alon, a group focusing mainly on education in schools. The members are often young people doing Civil Service, before or instead the army. They are supposed to go to the army after the civil service for a while, but most don't.

Another is Rabbi's for Peace and there is Hakeshet hademocratit hamizrahit (Arabic Jewish) group focusing on human rights and cultural issues.

Ashkelon

Ashkelon and Shderot are small cities close to the Gaza border, Sderot is regularly bombed by Palestinians. It is the trial area that has enjoyed the most vibrant and self-organised struggle against Mehalev. There was a big action on the first day of the Mehalev programme, gluing shut the doors to the office and leafleting outside.

The scheme is based in this neighbourhood made up of Arab-Jews and some Russians. It is an area based on fishing and most of the working class poor are fishermen in the summer. Some of them are also junkies, but overall it is a strong community. These community links formed the base of the struggle - and new connections were formed on top of this. A self-organised group of activists, calling themselves Ma'ane Enoshi [Human response] has emerged - forming new solidarities in the neighbourhood.

The group has been inspired by one woman, Ronit, who is spearheading the community actions. One of the fishing community, she was forced onto the scheme. She struggled hard at each turn and the Mehalev office came down heavy.

Along with others they looked for ways to struggle - but in Ashkelon there were no NGOs taking up the campaign. They founded Ma'ane Enoshi. The group does a lot of work helping people make appeals against their benefits being stopped - such as writing letters. Some people are afraid to make appeals as they don't want to be seen as trouble makers and thereby jeopardise all their benefits. The problem is that the struggle is too often reduced to this individual level - the individual appeal and the individual confrontation

with the Mehalev agency. Ma'ane Enoshi have links to the Commitment NGO mentioned earlier - giving them a legitimacy and access to certain resources and legal frameworks.

Ronit's appeal for 1000 Shekel (about 140 Euros) has proceeded past the tribunals to the civil courts and she has ended up losing her home. She was taken in by another member of Ma'ane Ehoshi and has received huge support from everyone.

Also in Ashkelon the true colours of the scheme were revealed when the deputy mayor made a deal with the owner of a local textile factory. It was situated 80 kilometres away and people were forced to go and work for free for two weeks - before all being fired again. The group did a little action against this factory too. One strategy of those involved in Ma'ane Ehoshi is simply to cause trouble in their allocated work places until they are kicked out again.

What next?

The two years trial period for the scheme is soon over. The NGO lead campaigns trying to stop this program or at least making some radical changes - for example stopping the right of private companies administering the scheme to stop people's dole money. They say only the government agencies should have that authority. 80 out of the 120 Members of Parliament have signed supporting these changes.

The groups in Nazereth and Askelon are clearly saying fuck off to Mehalev and using their own community networks to fight back and to support each other. Of course the awareness of how much worse things are just over the wall in Palestine (where the Israeli army is once again using Palestinian human shields for cover during raids - including old men stripped naked) affects the feeling of any such struggle in Israel. Never the less - solidarity and radical activism with the Israeli working class could be a more affective way of not only achieving a better living and a break on the next offensive against the working class, but also of a achieving peace.

strikes in poland

Two reports about current class conflicts in Poland translated from wildcat #79, winter 2007. The first report describes the nurses' mobilisation in June and July. The article was written a few weeks after the events and attempts a critical evaluation. The second article about the two and a half week sit-down strike of the Kielce bus drivers was written directly after the end of the strike.

These struggles have received totally different coverage: From the outset, the nurses' tent village was in the centre of media attention and enjoyed huge popularity in the entire country while the bus drivers' strike - one of the toughest class conflicts in the last years - took two weeks to be noticed outside of Kielce. There are many reasons for this: The nurses' movement was organised on a nationwide basis while the bus drivers' strike was locally limited. The tent village in Warsaw was not far away from journalists in the capital while Kielce is a difficult-to-reach provincial town. The nurses were attacked by the police right at the beginning. The bus drivers too received nationwide attention when they were attacked by security guards after two weeks.

Paradoxically, one of the reasons why the nurses became so popular was the fact that their protest remained symbolic. Instead of attacking the National Health Service, the hospital administrations and - as collateral damage - the patients, the nurses relied on their union to gain something for them at a higher political level. But also the bus drivers have struggled within a union framework and let themselves be instrumentalised for the union's political games. Currently, there is fierce fighting between the different fractions of the Polish ruling class. The unions are quite clever in using their alliances with one or the other faction to gain advantages for their clientele. According to official figures, the number of workplace conflicts in Poland in 2006 has increased by 274 per cent compared to the year before. This trend has not yet translated itself into a new workers' autonomy in relation to the unions.

The nurses' tent village

This summer, several thousand nurses from Poland's state hospitals camped out in tents in front of the prime minister's office for four weeks.¹ Their protest was aimed at raising their poor wages of 1,200 to 1,300 Zł (approx. 320 Euros) a month.² The tent action itself was triggered by police violence against participants of a large nurses' demo on June 19. Subsequently, several nurses from the leadership of the OZZPiP union³ occupied a room in the PM's office for a week in order to force the PM to talk to them, while outside the building the "white town" quickly grew to about 150 tents in which an average of 300 inhabitants took shifts over the weeks. Most of them were OZZPiP activists who came on their free days, took holidays or union leave for the action. The nurses quit their camp without concrete results when the PM left for his holidays on July 15th.

Everyone loves the nurses...

The "public" received the protests very positively. A great majority in the country supported the action and agreed with the wage demands, according to polls. Many people came along spontaneously and brought food, blankets or sleeping bags. People were impressed with the women's determination and optimism. Many seemed to

1 The German press reported extensively as well. It is not clear how many nurses actually participated. According to the union, more than 2,000 participants were registered after the first week. According to a report by *Gazeta Wyborcza* on 23 June, the police visited hospitals all over Poland on 22 June in order to ask how many nurses had gone to Warsaw or intended to do so.

2 Information about wages varies widely and is sometimes anecdotal. This figure is taken from an interview with an OZZPiP unionist in the Workers' Initiative's current bulletin (ip.hardcore.lt/ip14.pdf). The actual wage depends on a number of factors including years of service and type and location of the hospital. According to Springer's paper *Dziennik* from 28 August "a nurse in Czetochowa" currently earns 1,729 Zł net.

3 Ogólnopolski Związek Zawodowy Pielęgniarek i Połżych (All-Polish Nurses and Midwives Union). It belongs to the third largest union federation Forum Związków Zawodowych. Die OZZPiP's leadership has close personal links to the "post-communist" parties SLD, SdPL and PSL. For an overview over unionism in Poland, see "ArbeiterInnen in Polen seit 1989" in wildcat #74.

have been waiting for this movement which exemplified the concerns of a large part of society: Poland is modernising and turning into one of the EU's extended workshops, but wages have remained low.⁴ The nurses also made the connection to the current emigration exodus: "Stay healthy, we're leaving!" or "We want to work not emigrate".

Support came not only from almost all left-wing groups and grouplets⁵ but - at least verbally - also from the neoliberal opposition who likes anything that gets the religious-right-wing government into trouble. PO⁶ leader Tusk condemned the police brutality just like Warsaw's PO mayor, former central bank boss Gronkiewicz-Waltz. Stars and starlets from the cultural scene gave concerts and/or spent a night in a tent.

Even though other unions like left-wing Sierpień⁸⁰ tried to get their foot into the door of the action, their influence remained limited to participation in the tent village's assemblies which discussed practical questions like protection from attacks. The OZZPiP seek their allies among neoliberals - for instance they asked the boss of the private employers' association, Bochniarz, to negotiate for them - but politically their monopoly was never questioned.

4 The following figure may be an indicator for how the relation of production and consumption has reversed: While the number of new cars sold in Poland has been sinking since 1999, the number of new cars produced in Poland has been rising for years. According to the Polish Agency for Information and Foreign Investment (PAIiIZ), in 2005, 235,000 new cars were sold and 527,000 were produced. In 2007, production is expected to 800,000 (Gazeta Wyborcza on 27 August).

5 The OZZPiP argued that the protest was not to be "politicised" in order to keep out left-wing groups' banners and symbols. Some of them therefore came within the ranks of the left-wing Sierpień⁸⁰ union. An anarchist workshop on non-violent resistance and civil disobedience was prohibited just like the Young Socialists' banner "Yes to wage raises, no to privatisation". Prime minister Kaczyński claimed that the tent village was infiltrated by "satanists and anarchists" but it was actually very clearly dominated by the OZZPiP.

6 Platforma Obywatelska (Citizens Platform): largest opposition party with a good chance of winning the upcoming elections. Right-wing and national like the governing PiS, but less clericalist and more neoliberal.

... But what exactly was it about?

Despite all the positive public feedback hardly anyone knew what actually happened in detail. For instance, many declared their solidarity with the "nurses' strike" although the nurses did not strike at all.⁷ There was no lack of strikes in Poland this year, however, like warning strikes for wage rises at Fiat in Tychy and Bielsko-Biala, at Opel in Gliwice or repeated wildcat strikes at the Cegielski machine factory in Poznan. The bus drivers in Kielce...

The nurses' concrete demands were as little known as the fact that there was no strike. Somehow they're asking 30 per cent more, right? In reality, the OZZPiP did not demand a direct pay rise but demanded the extension of the *law concerning the rise of subsidies to personnel costs* from 2006. After a doctors' strike in early 2006, this law made additional subsidies for the National Health Funds NFZ available in order to raise personnel spendings by 30 per cent in the period from July 2006 to September 2007.

Polish hospitals are permanently skint⁸ and regularly receive similar financial support. The public Polish health system is chronically under-financed (Poland spends about 4 per cent of its GDP on its health system, compared to 10 per cent in Germany and 15 per cent in the USA). There are lobbies in all parties who would like to commercialise the health system in order to open up the potentially huge health business for clinics, private practices and the pharmaceutical and medical technology industries. However, nobody knows

7 Internationally as well. A typical example was the "Declaration of solidarity to the striking hospital workers in Poland by the Networking Initiative of the Union Left (IVG), determined on the 9th IVG congress in Stuttgart on 1 July 2007": "The congress of the Networking Initiative of the Union Left with 100 participants shows its solidarity with your strike for a 30 per cent wage raise. (...) Long live international solidarity." (www.labournet.de/internationales/pl/polensoli_ivg.html).

8 For example, in Kostrzyn on the Odra river a bailiff has repeatedly blocked the local hospital's bank accounts, blocking also wage payments to the workers. There have been several union protest demos to the bailiff's office. Meanwhile, the consulting company Deloitte has worked out a restructuring plan which basically proposes to lay off 500 non-doctoral employees. See the image "Patient, let the bailiff cure you. Signed: Politics."

how to finance this. On the one hand, raising the current health insurance contributions of 11.45 per cent or making the employers pay (in Poland contributions are paid exclusively by workers) are seen as politically not acceptable. On the other hand, an official return to budget funding would effectively block the road to commercialisation. So further small steps are being made on this road, like the introduction of private supplementary insurances (so far only between 1 and 2 per cent of people in Poland have something like that) and the creation of legal possibilities for doctors to make money on the side (so far they take an estimated 1 to 3 billion Euros of bribes a year from patients).⁹ At the same time, the current system is kept on its feet with temporary exceptional regulations.

The OZZPiP demands to extend the above-mentioned law for several years after 1 October 2007. They want to raise health spending - no matter whether through subsidies or through rising contributions - i.e. they want to enlarge the cake and thereby also enlarge the total wage year by year. On the other hand, nobody has ever talked about a 30 per cent wage increase, neither in the future nor in the past. According to the OZZPiP, the 30 per cent cost increase through the 2006 law has resulted in an average 17 per cent wage increase.¹⁰

In the background: the doctors' strike

The fact that the 30 per cent cost increase was written into a law at all was due to a doctors' strike. And in 2007 they are fighting for their interests again. Because the biggest strike in 2007 - the longest, and with the biggest participation - was the doctors' strike which started on 21st May. Current wages are very diverse and some of them below 1,500 Zł. The doctors' union OZZL has made clear nationwide demands: they want three times the national statistical average wage for specialised doctors, double for the others. Thus doctors not only talk about concrete amounts but also mark the social distance they would like to keep. The union left the decision about strikes to local

⁹ Rynek Zdrowia, 13 August 2007.

¹⁰ According to the union, this 17 per cent average covers a span from 0 to 40 per cent (interview with the OZZPiP vice president Logina Kaczmarek on 22 August 2007 in Warsaw).

strike committees in individual hospitals - just like negotiations and agreements. According to the union, there were strikes in different forms in about 230 of Poland's 800 state hospitals. In some places planned operations were cancelled, in others there were only emergency services, still others boycotted the settlement of accounts with the NFZ. Additionally, about 3,500 of 120,000 doctors in the Polish Health Service gave notice of termination. By now (late August) most hospitals have signed different agreements - and many doctors have called off their notices of termination. OZZL leader Bukiel - also advisor of the ultra-neoliberal party UPR - used the attention created by the strike - and the nurses' protest - to keep reiterating his main demand: privatisation of the Health Service!

Unlike the nurses, the doctors haven't endeared themselves to the public. On 21 August patients even occupied a hospital in Radom to protest against the doctors' strike. The doctors have neither shown a lot of consideration for patients nor tried to struggle together with the nurses.

Similarly, the OZZPiP see themselves as a representation of certified nurses and keep their distance from other hospital workers (assistant nurses, ambulance drivers, cleaning workers etc.). Instead, they attach themselves to the doctors and their representatives who were frequent and welcome guests in the "white town". They still do not plan any strikes although their demands have not been met. In late August, the union put up some tents again in front of Parliament and talked to the press. They also promise continued protests in September.

And the nurses?

Although many nurses in Poland liked the action this does not necessarily mean that they share the union's view about doctors or about the privatisation of the health system. But they have not spoken out nor organised any actions of their own. The "white town" looked a lot more lively than the usual plastic-bag-dress union rituals in Germany but still the action was organised from above - even though it must have been great for the participating nurses to get out of their usual lives, get to know colleagues from other cities and bathe in the "public's" sympathy for a few weeks.

Maybe the nurses in the country simply reckon like this: The average 17 per cent wage increase they received in 2006 still mean low wages in absolute figures (about 200 Zł more) and compared to other occupational groups. But they are among Poland's highest percental wage increases in the last years. Workers in the automobile industry got less: After years of almost no wage increases at all, this year the union (Solidarnosc) felt obliged to stake a stand and organise warning strikes and then signed quick and poor agreements: For example, Solidarnosc at Opel in Gliwice had demanded 500 Zł more per month and then signed a single payment of 2,500 Zł (approx. 200 Zł per month) with an average monthly net wage of about 2,300 Zł. In the postal service a spectacular wave of wildcat strikes last year resulted in a disappointing increase of 110 Zł monthly.¹¹ Therefore the nurses may speculate that the union will get them a good result again. By attaching themselves to the doctors who receive all the anger, they do not even have to spoil their moral position with the "public" and the patients. It remains to be seen whether this speculation will work out.

Bus drivers' strike in Kielce - workers' self-management as a victory?

After 17 days the bus drivers in the South Polish city of Kielce have surprisingly won their strike. The sale of the communal bus company MPK planned by the city's mayor was stopped and MPK given to the workers instead. The strike had been preceded by months of confrontation. One day before the end of the strike, one of MPK's operation yards had been brutally evicted by private security guards and then recaptured by the striking bus drivers on the next morning.

MPK employs 630 people, including 380 drivers, one of who is a woman. The 160 buses are old and keep breaking down. For years, the company has been incurring losses, according to the workers not least because some years ago the city divided up the company into the actual bus company (MPK) and a traffic planning authority (ZTM).

¹¹ See wildcat #78: "Wilde Streiks der Briefträger bei der Polnischen Post".

ZTM is supposed to manage the public traffic "market" by organising tender procedures, issuing requirements and writing timetables. In reality it only controls the MPK and pushes it into debt with unfavourable conditions.

A collective agreement conflict has been going on for two years. The last wage increase was six years ago. Five years ago, Solidarnosc and the two smaller unions in the company agreed to lower wages by relinquishing bonuses and extra pay in order to "save the company". After 30 years of service, drivers earn about 1,600 Zł net, newly employed drivers earn less than 900 Zł net. Most workers are between 40 and 50 years old. According to drivers, few young people apply. Over the last few years, many have resigned and gone to England or Ireland or have become truck drivers. Now Solidarnosc is asking 500 Zł more for everyone.

Apart from wages, workers also demand improved working conditions: According to the drivers, ZTM's timetables are unrealistic which means that on the one hand buses are never on time and on the other hand drivers have practically no breaks between tours. Drivers also complain that the bus which took drivers home after the last tour has been cancelled; which means that some of those who can't afford a private car have to make long walks home at night.

Last year the issue of privatisation was added to the agenda. Before his re-election last year with 72 per cent of votes, Kielce's autocratic mayor Lubawski had promised not to sell MPK, but after the election he put all his weight behind selling it to the French Veolia corporation (which also operates train and bus lines in Germany under the name of Connex). The unions were not against privatisation as such but demanded a "social package" with five years of job protection, high compensations for lay-offs and wage increases. Veolia wanted to guarantee only job protection, and only for employees with unlimited contracts.

The conflict began to escalate when the mayor announced that the Veolia deal would go ahead.

Chronology

4 June: 480 employees participate in a strike ballot organised by Solidarnosc (without the other unions). 450 vote for strike.

19 June: The city signs a preliminary contract with Veolia. At the same time it tries to increase the pressure: ZTM organises a new call for tenders for the next ten years. Veolia says its will only sign the final contract if MPK wins the tender. The tender is tailor-made for the Veolia deal because it calls for high investments. In press interviews, the mayor says that MPK does not stand a chance against its many competitors. His bluff is called when MPK finally wins the tender in early August: There had been no other competitors at all.

21 June: MPK workers demonstrate in front of city hall and then enter the building and molest city councillors.

22 June: Warning strike from 4 to 8 a.m. Only 6 out of 160 buses go out into the streets. MPK management and mayor call the strike illegal because warning strikes may only last 2 hours. ZTM imposes a 300,000 Zł fine on MPK and threatens to cancel the carriage contract with MPK in case of further strikes. MPK management charge the 300,000 Zł to the account of MPK's Solidarnosc leader. The mayor threatens to immediately liquidate MPK and contract out the bus traffic to another carrier in case of further strikes.

28 June: Another 4 hour warning strike - but from 0 to 4 a.m., ie. outside traffic hours. No reaction from management and mayor.

Late June to mid July: Several rounds of negotiations of the social package between unions and Veolia. No result.

2 August: MPK drivers collectively donate blood which means they may take the rest of the day off.

10 August: Solidarnosc announces an unlimited strike starting on August 14. The mayor threatens to liquidate MPK immediately.

14 August: Not a single bus goes out into the streets. 200 drivers stand in front of the operation yard and refuse to let managers enter. The workers' assembly votes for an unlimited strike and elects a strike committee. The mayor refuses to talk to the strike committee because he deems the strike illegal.

15 August: A catholic Mass on the premises of the operation yard. It has been difficult to find a priest because the bishop - the mayor's brother-in-law - has prohibited his priests from saying Mass in MPK.

18 August: The city and Veolia have hired 80 replacement buses with drivers from other cities. The buses are supposed to park in the Pakosz operation yard, the smaller one of MPK's two operation yards, but cannot enter because 150 workers block the gate. In the end, the strike-breaker buses park on a lawn outside town.

19 August: Veolia's strike-breaker buses service the city's most important bus lines.

22 August: 17 members of the strike committee are terminated without notice. Unknown persons throw bricks at a strike-breaker bus.

23 August: City police write tickets because strikers have set up a small table for collecting signatures in the city centre without permission. The mayor and the Solidarnosc leader meet without a result. MPK's president complains that workers have settled down in front of his office with bricks and cement.

25 August: Another strike-breaker bus is pelted with bricks.

28 August: Loud and angry MPK workers' protest in front of ZTM's downtown offices. ZTM claims that four new companies have assumed Kielce's bus traffic starting on 1 September. ZTM triumphantly claims that Veolia already has 40 applications from drivers, Polski Ekspres even has 60, but these figures smell of bluff again.

29 August 1.19 a.m.: There are about 30 workers occupying the Pakosz operation yard. Most of them sleep in buses or private cars. Suddenly two buses arrive in front of the gate. About 70 security guards in riot gear jump out. They run onto the operation yard, pull sleeping workers out of buses and cars and chase them off the premises - hitting some of them with truncheons. Workers compare this action with police actions during 1980s martial law. The mayor says he ordered the action in order to prevent flammable fluids from catching fire. According to the workers, there are no fuel tanks on the premises. The security guards tell the press they were supposed to prevent a "terrorist arson attack on a bus". More likely, the operation yard and the buses which are parked there were to be handed to the strike-breakers.

8 a.m.: In a co-ordinated action, over a hundred workers storm the operation yard through the main gate and through two other entrances (a side gate and a hole in the fence on the back of the

premises). The security guards are completely taken by surprise and flee to the office shack after brief and futile resistance. Meanwhile large numbers of police have been brought in but they only watch and tell the workers to use "no violence". Afterwards, the president of the security company hired for the attack complains to the press that nothing like this has ever happened to him before: to have the police stand aside without supporting him. Nationwide public opinion turns against Kielce's mayor: unions and left-wing groups issue protests, even politicians and media criticise him. National newspapers which have hardly paid any attention to the strike so far turn it into their lead story for the next day. Broadcasting vans with satellite dishes pull up in front of the Pakosz operation yard.

10 a.m.: The voivod holds a press conference and attacks the mayor from behind: "There is still a chance that all MPK workers can keep their jobs."

3 p.m.: The security guards leave the office shack under police protection and the workers' whistles. They enter their buses and leave.

Afternoon: Talks between the mayor and the strike committee. Afterwards, MPK's Solidarnosc leader smiles to the workers: "Everything is going in the right direction." According to him, the mayor has promised that last night's event will not repeated - with two bishops as witnesses.

30 August, 1.19 a.m.: On the operation yard in Pakosz, there are about 70 workers and some left-wing supporters who have come from other cities and have received a friendly welcome after short hesitation (this hadn't been entirely clear considering the cultural gap between 45 year-old catholic mustache wearers and 25 year old antifa dreadlock wearers). Some sleep in buses and cars but most are awake and stand around in groups on the premises, some wielding iron rods.

10 a.m.: Continued talks between mayor and strike committee.

12 a.m.: MPK's Solidarnosc leader has successfully ended talks with the mayor. He jumps out of the car and beams at his workers: "Everything is going in a very good direction." A press conference is being prepared on the outside while the workers meet to discuss and vote in one of the bus hangars. The result seems to be certain in advance.

2 p.m.: The mayor's, voivod's, bishop's and regional Solidarnosc leader's limousines pull up. MPK's president is missing because he has already resigned. Then the result is announced: The strike is over. MPK will not be sold to Veolia but transformed into a "workers' company". According to Polish privatisation law this means that 15 per cent of shares are given to the workers for free and that more shares up to a total of 60 or 70 per cent but at least 51 per cent are sold to them. There is no mention of the price or other details. The mayor takes back the sacking of the strike committee members and the liquidation of the MPK and exclusively contracts the city's bus traffic out to MPK. The workers shout their thanks after the end of the press conference.

A victory for the workers?

It still remains to be seen what this result will mean for them. When I asked a member of the strike committee after the press conference about the wage increases the answer was: "We'll see about that later." The fear of lay-offs due to the Veolia deal is no longer an issue. However, the relation between ZTM and MPK is still an issue. So is the MPK's debt, the need for investment in new buses and general necessities which the self-managed company will now pass on to the workers. There are already some signs of the future atmosphere: MPK's Solidarnosc leader who now sees himself in a responsible position has proposed to treat half of the strike days as unpaid holidays.

Still, this result is a victory. The workers have fought, stuck together and forced the adversary to accept a result which he did not want. If everything had ended with the security guards' attack in the night of 29 August the workers would have had the entire nation's sympathy but they would not have prevailed. By recapturing the operation yard they won back the initiative. Then the mayor (the MPK's acting capitalist) would have had to evict the workers again, and they would have been prepared. He did not have the guts to do that.

One of the reasons was the fact that big politics had already attacked him from behind and withdrawn police protection from him. Poland is facing elections and the ruling PiS party is making a last-minute attempt at looking "social" compared

to the the neoliberal opposition. On 29 August, prime minister Kaczyński met Solidarnosc and signed a social agreement. Without even informing the other unions or the employers, the minimum wage was raised by 200 Zł to 1,126, and public sector wages will also be raised. The agreement was explicitly designed to evoke the famous August 1980 agreement between Solidarnosc and the state! This would have been spoiled by a rough police attack on Solidarnosc activists. Instead Kaczyński chose to rain on the mayor's parade. In the end, the workers will have to pay the bill anyway.

chinese in france

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Chinese Immigration in France

Evolution and general situation of immigration in France

France was a land for immigration for a long time.¹ Before WWI, it also became the first nation to establish bureaucratic control of its population through identity cards and to define a specific model of controlled immigration capable of responding to the rigidity of the labour market.² After the Paris Commune of 1871, the basic interior policy of the French bourgeoisie was to avoid an exodus from rural areas in order to maintain

1 Contrary to some current ideas, censuses tried to estimate the scale of immigration as early as 1830. One census officially counted 180 000 Germans out of 380 000 immigrants in 1843, and 380 000 immigrants and 250 000 crossing the borders were recorded in 1851. In 1901, the presence of 400 000 Italians caused local conflicts -- sometimes violent ones -- with French population, mostly in period of crisis, particularly in the South of France. In 1911 the same census counted 1 1320 000 foreigners.

2 A law voted on the 8/8/1891 institute a "register for mobile activity" with the obligation to declare one's presence in any town or village. According to this law a 1895 census counted 400 000 tramps and 250 000 gypsies "living in gangs". A new law voted on the 16/7/1912 obliged "nomads, tramps and foreigners" qualified of "population potentially dangerous" to get a special anthropometric book. This law was modified only in...1969.

the political support of peasants and the middle class, counterbalancing and containing the dangerous proletarian class. At the time this immigration policy was the contrary of, for instance, the US policy, which aimed at populating empty territories, or the British policy, which through drastic measures (the enclosures) obliged peasants to become industrial workers. Since then it has remained the core of successive French immigration policies. The first law on immigration defining such a policy was voted as early as in 1880.³

Despite these bureaucratic tendencies to manage and control immigration, an accurate estimation of the different currents of immigration was and still is difficult: one of the main reasons is the impossibility to stop people moving uncontrolled through the French terrestrial borders (flat or mountainous territories practically without natural obstacles). Therefore all the figures we will give in this text have to be taken critically, the actual number of illegal immigrants being of course impossible to know.

This remark is certainly even truer for Chinese immigration in France, because it didn't and doesn't fit into the government policy defined above for controlled immigration, and because of its specific characteristics of strong family or regional connections which allows these immigrants to partly escape the usual problems of illegal immigrants. Considering the number of immigrants in France for a century, Chinese immigration has not been on that large a scale, and it hasn't followed the same pace as immigration by other groups. As a whole, general immigration grew up quickly just after WWI and WW II to compensate for the stagnation of the population, in response to a shortage of agricultural and industrial labour aggravated by the casualties of wars. The importance of this immigration can be given by the fact that today, ¼ of the present population is issued from immigration (about 15 million). By some estimates about 1 million of these French residents are of Asian origin, of whom 2/3 would be of Chinese origin. To give a comparison, during the century up to 1996 more than 4 million Italians settled in France. According to some official estim-

3 In 1880 some protectionist decrees were taken to stop the rural exodus for the sake of the political bourgeois domination and organising controlled immigration.

ates 450.000 Chinese live in France, plus more than 50 000 illegal immigrants (in fact more than 100 000: in 2003, 22 000 asked officially for asylum), with an estimated 6 000 more crossing the borders every year. According to the Council of Europe, in 2000 Europe counted 200 000 documented and between 600 000 and 900 000 undocumented Chinese immigrants, most of them in France.

The vanguard of temporary immigrants: training Chinese intellectuals in western democracy

Chinese immigration was not intentionally encouraged and was not at all organised except during WW1. Apart from this exception, it was more of an opportunistic phenomenon, a consequence of political events according to their origin, their location and their economic activities. Because of these characteristics, until recently the different waves of Chinese immigration in France did not mix together, just as they did not mix with other immigrants or with the French population.

Before WWI, the low number of Chinese living in France can't be called immigration. A 1911 census estimates the number at 283, most of them students. They were sent to be trained for democracy – western style - by Sun Yat Sen, after the proclamation of the Chinese Republic. Although the monarchy was re-established in China in 1916, the Society for Franco-Chinese Education was established and lasted until 1921, sending students to France. Most of them were young intellectuals from the middle class; in France they were "worker-students" either in Paris or in some other towns in the country (400 stayed in a small town south east of Paris working in a rubber company).⁴ When they lost all financial support in 1921, most of them went back to China but some settled in France (500 perhaps).

4 Some of these " worker-students" later became very famous. In Montargis there are still traces of the residence for some years of Zhou Enlai, Li Fuchun, Chen Yi, Ba Jin, Deng Xiaoping, Cai Hesen, Xiang Jinyu where they could also see Ho Chi Minh and Pol Pot. The small town has become a place of pilgrimage for Chinese tourists in France.

There was in fact another less evident source of immigration from China to Europe including France. Although if it was of limited importance at the time, it was the beginning of what became one of the most important immigration flows, consisting chiefly of immigration from the Wenzhou region. In 1876, several foreign countries including France obliged China to sign an agreement opening five Chinese ports to international trade. Wenzhou (about 150 km south of Shanghai) was one of these ports, and the business men of the region used this facility to send to Europe some 3 to 4 000 tradesmen to sell stone sculptures produced in Qingtian (60 km from Wenzhou). It was the first permanent channel for immigration to France.

Sold to support the war effort in Europe: cheated volunteers have to "work" under bombing

Another very different instance cannot be regarded as immigration, but in a certain way can be considered the involuntary beginning of the first wave of immigrants. These Chinese workers were recruited in China during WWI, theoretically as agricultural or industrial workers to replace French workers mobilised in the war. They were enrolled separately by the French and British government after an agreement with the Chinese government in 1916. They were supposed to be 25 -35 years old and be fit for hard working; they would have to stay for 5 years; they would be paid and given free passage back to China.⁵ 150 000 young Chinese came to France; most of them were assigned to very dangerous work connected to the war: industrial production of explosives or bombs, rebuilding roads and railways near the front line, clearing corpses, wounded and mines from the battlefield, etc. Some of them would even be incorporated into fighting units in spring 1918. There is a total silence on the strikes and mutinies by these workers, who were angry because of these broken promises; for instance, the fights of Chinese dockers in Dunkirk left several killed: in

5 It was specified that the "volunteers" should come from the North of China, as they will suffer neither from the cold nor from the heat". But counter-propaganda (which some people think spread from the German concessions in China) forced the authorities to drop these conditions and to recruit the "volunteers" all over China and of course from Wenzhou where some network already existed.

Le Creusot there was a strike and an incident in an ammunition factory. Most of the workers were parked in something akin to concentration camps. Quite a lot were killed, some other died of diseases, mainly from the flu epidemic at the end of the war.⁶ Then they were sent back to China in 1919, but some managed to stay in France (perhaps 3 000).

These "survivors" of the "war effort" managed to settle in a small district near the Gare de Lyon station from where they would have taken the train to Marseille – the port to sail to China. This small district of slums was then called "Châlons Island" or "Chinese district". They were soon followed between 1925 and 1935 by some "real" immigrants coming mainly from the Chinese province of Zhejiang (on the east coast in central China), especially from the town of Wenzhou, certainly through family connections; these newcomers were pushed to immigrate because of a small economic crisis in this district. Most of them were industrial workers, the same kind of job they could have performed during the war. But the economic crisis of the 30's obliged them to find other means of surviving (certainly as foreigners they were the first ones to be fired and some were sent back in full trains to their country). The Chinese had to resort to the kind of work they were used to in China: selling goods in the streets or peddling, generally imported goods from Japan distributed by Jewish wholesalers settled in the III district of Paris. As the Jews were deported by the Nazis during WWII, there is some suspicion that some of these Chinese used this opportunity (pushed as well by the necessity) to take the place of their providers. What is sure is that their material condition was transformed and somewhat improved. Anyway just after WWII, most of them had moved from their previous settlement to this III

⁶ Quite a lot of these "war volunteers" are buried in a special cemetery near the small town of Noyelles-sur-Mer (Somme in the north of France) also a place of pilgrimage for Chinese tourists (information about these involuntary immigrants on internet on the site "Noyelles"). A missionary having worked in China and used as an interpreter in the camps of "Chinese workers" has written in his memories that the camps were so close to the line of battle that the bombs came inside regularly, of course with dead and wounded (quoted in "Chinese in France, Homes et Migrations n° 1254, mars-avril 2005, p 10).

district of Paris (Arts et Métiers district). They moved also to another production of all kinds of items in leather or plastic leather substitutes, establishing workshops, wholesale and retail shops in the area. Some even moved into garment production. Some of them were the boss, some others were workers in small workshops. A complete economic structure was built, then, in which we could find, coming from the same Chinese region small businesses, shopkeepers, workers exploited in small workshops as well as craftsmen or home-workers.

This situation lasted after WWI, in spite of the chaos arising from the fighting inside China and the Japanese invasion, because in any case Wenzhou remained an "open port" according to the international agreement; the political instability and bloody repression pushed more people on the way to immigration through this Chinese region. But the Chinese conquest by the Communist Party of China in 1949 meant the closure of all the borders and of course of the ports. Chinese immigration was practically stopped up to 1978. From this point it started again but more for economic than political reasons.

So through the continuation of the same development of strong and tight clan and family relations, new Chinese immigrants from Zhejiang (most of the Wenzhou district) came in a regular flow to be exploited in this workshops and trade. The III district (Arts et Métiers) expanded up to the North and East following specific streets (rue du Temple, then rue du Faubourg du Temple up to Belleville and boulevard Voltaire –X and XI districts) and from the nearest railways stations (Gare du Nord and Gare de l'Est) up to the North East and East suburbs of Paris. Quite a lot of the small sweatshops moved in these suburbs where the police and labour controls were less tight than in the inner city and with a loose and discreet neighbourhood. The "Wenzhou" as they are called numbered 20 000 in 1974. Now there would be between 60 000 and 100 000 of them (1/3 perhaps of illegal immigrants). As we will see with the other immigration waves, in order both to provide services to their community and to expand their economic activities, "to a certain ex-

tent the Wenzhou left their economic traditional field to invest in restaurants, food, jewelry, etc., sectors where they were in competition, perhaps mixed with the other immigrants waves. The garment, restaurant and leather and plastic goods businesses are usually called in the Chinese milieu "The Three Knives». Today, this "Wenzhou" immigration is becoming more important, draining people from the near provinces and expanding its territory in the Parisian district. Accordingly, if they are the most important part of the Chinese immigration in France, they are also, as a whole, the poorest one, harshly exploited in their own community by bosses coming from the same province.

A refuge for Chinese people from South-East Asia fleeing war and political repression

The second wave of Chinese immigrants was very different from the first. They are called "teochew" in connection with the Chaozhou dialect spoken in the part of Guangdong which they came from a long time ago. In a certain way, it was a consequence of the de-colonisation and of the coming to power of the Communist Party in China and in Vietnam. These people fled the wars or the threat of ethnic repression connected with the domination of the Communist Party in mainland China. It started around 1955 with people from the South East Asian Chinese Diaspora fleeing all the disturbed countries of South East Asia (mainly Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia but also from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Thailand or inland China). Most of them were not "poor people" moving for economic reasons but for political ones and fear of ostracism. Part of them had some money and they were already involved in some trade connections in their original country. It is difficult to tell if they were given, in addition to political support as victims of war and of "communism", more material facilities to settle in France than other immigrants, but the fact is they could quickly settle in another specific district of Paris, the XIII district which is now called the "Choisy triangle" (from the name of the main street of the district) or again "China town". In the 60's and 70's, this former very industrial and working class district was totally restructured: industries have moved elsewhere and in-

stead huge towers of flats (the architectural concept of the time) were built. It was a social failure and the coming of these immigrants gave the immigrants and the government the opportunity to fill these almost empty new buildings: some of these immigrants could buy their flats (some speculating on that basis), others have to rent; quite a lot of shops or rooms were convenient for any kind of small trade or workshop.

These new Chinese immigrants didn't come all together at once but according to the political and military events of the South-East Asia. The first ones came after France evacuating Indochina in 1954-1955, the second wave after US troops evacuated Vietnam in 1975; after that others succeed in fleeing their country: they were the famous "boat people", some coming from inland China following the vicissitudes of the Communist Party domination. So this population was rather socially heterogeneous: if some had some money, entrepreneurial minds and experience of commerce, some others had to be workers and have to pile up in small flats up to 8 to 10 in a small room, obliged to be exploited by the first group under any conditions. Because of such a local concentration of socially structured Chinese society, the district became a real town with all facilities for this Chinese community, attracting a Chinese population from other surrounding districts of Paris (and new immigrants) as well as a French population looking for "exoticism". Chinese as well as non Chinese can find there all the necessities for a "Chinese" life: not only the traditional shops but also banks, doctors, lawyers, travel agencies, etc., even Chinese supermarkets, Chinese mafia gangs and local newspaper in Chinese. In the back ground are more and more sweatshops, not only providing what was needed for all these trades but also working for outside districts, mainly for the garment industry.

The "Choisy Triangle" expanded in the nearby suburbs of Choisy, Ivry and Vitry (south-east of Paris), and to some extent integrated the third wave of immigrants because, as the first one, it was already strongly structured. Of course most of these new comers were overexploited work-

ers. The French authorities did not intervene in this district as they did in other Chinese districts of Paris in the hunt to undocumented Chinese immigrants: they rely, for peace and control in this "China town", on this ad hoc organisation which had been build by the Chinese community itself.

A very different third wave of Chinese immigrants...

... more similar to the great number of immigrants coming from other countries. Contrary to the two first waves of immigrants, this third one was not structured: it was more heterogeneous and has often had to look for integration into the existing Chinese communities, sometimes with some problems of discrimination. Quite a lot of them have a different regional origin and a different social background. Essentially they were victims of the industrial restructuring in today's China and were not fleeing their country for political reasons but, as is generally true of most immigrants coming to France, for economic reasons. Most of them came from the North of China (hence they were given the name "Dongbei"—north east in Chinese). Chiefly from Liaoning and Jilin (formerly Manchuria), old industrial provinces (heavy industries), they were more educated than the peasants from Zhejiang and had performed in China functions like technicians, clerks, foremen, etc.. The number of immigrants coming from other parts of China but mostly from the Wenzhou province is also taking more importance, diversifying Chinese immigration as a whole, with a tendency towards domination by the "Wenzhou" immigrants. Of course even if they came to France with some money, they were nonetheless obliged to take any job for survival, very far from their previous qualification in China (some women even have to resort to prostitution). Geographically, in Paris, contrary to the previous immigrants, they could be found in all the previous Chinese locations, though a lot settled around Belleville or the corresponding suburbs where they found themselves in competition with the "Wenzhou". Perhaps more than others immigrants, because they had no clan or family connections, they were easier prey for the sweatshops of the other communities. Their have come increasingly since the 80s but in more

significant numbers recently, even if it is difficult to estimate their number. What looks certain is that they are the main victims of the police hunt for undocumented immigrants as they are not "protected" by their community.

So, more than previous immigrants, all the new Chinese immigrants are doomed to become workers for the earlier-settled Chinese workshops in France and for those who, for various reasons have had the opportunity to be entrepreneurs, often connected with trade networks either in mainland China or in South East Asia and able to exploit this proletariat as the essential element or the complement of their global commerce. With the growing number of immigrants, we can see Chinese immigrants, both old and new, taking the kind of commerce deserted by the French for various reasons, because they have to work harder, longer hours for less money (cafés with tobacco shops, restaurants, garment import-export trade connected to sweatshops having to adapt to the mainland Chinese competition. Of course they can expand in such a way, on one hand because they can get money through the usual Chinese credit connections, on the other hand they can easily find amongst the new immigrants the labour obliged to accept to work harder and harder to make the business profitable.⁷ Exactly as they come to invade certain sectors of the economy, their growing number needs to expand into to new locations, outside Paris because of the cost of accommodation: recently, Chinese immigrants can be seen in the North and North east suburbs of Paris (Aubervilliers , La Courneuve..) where the recent riots have created a "void" from inhabitants fleeing because of insecurity: it is certain that in such locations life is harder and it is difficult to know how these Chinese newcomers will be welcomed in these Babel towers. Some inquiry tried to find out what, in the recent period, was pushing these Chinese to immigration. They were separated into three categories:

- tao zhai : escape the debts
- tao hun : emigrate after a divorce

⁷ Financing all kind of operations by immigrants is provided by special financial Chinese system called tontine working unofficially out of the official banking circuit based on cash, on non written promises and implying the use of violence if something is going wrong.

- tao jin : sieving gold (meaning looking abroad for a better living condition)

As everywhere in the world, "recruitment" of immigrants can point to a wide range of possibilities, besides the "voluntary" immigrants (not so voluntary because they are pushed by personal, often social problems); some could be lured by the mirage offered by immigrants already in France, or by people belonging to a recruitment network for business in France (personal contacts or ads in local papers for instance). Cheating vulnerable people is not the only way: threats, blackmail, kidnapping could be seen as well. Anyway, these immigrants have to yield to the common fate of immigrants from everywhere

But, for all these people, notwithstanding their hopes, their situation more or less corresponded to the different ways of coming to France. Some lucky ones could come directly by plane having got a tourist visa and the required money for such a travel. Most, however, have to resort to the usual network of illegal immigration, most of the time international gangs. The networks for people leaving from the North of China differed from those for emigrants from the South. The latter have to follow individual networks often connected to clan or family connections. The former have to go to specialised companies where, like at a travel agency, you can "buy" the passage to France. (For instance, in 1998 the French police discovered 18 international networks shuttling illegal immigrants to France). But for both categories, travel to France is a real ordeal.⁸ Nobody knows in advance what countries they will cross (according to the efficiency of repression and control the initial itinerary could be changed, for instance now Chinese immigrants could come through Africa), how long it will take, even if they will ever arrive in the Promised Land; they could be robbed of all their

⁸ What one immigrant would have to pay could be 12 000 Euros for one person or more according to length of the travel and more if some problems occurred on the way. For a family this amount could rise up to 60 000 Euros. All systems of payment could be seen, often half before leaving and the remainder by the family in China after safe arrival in France. But it is far more complicated in case of borrowing or if the payment of this remainder is delayed, in case of problems, often the result is slave work for years in France.

money and belongings, beaten, starved for days, raped if women..., their family could be blackmailed for more money(4). They are constantly in a very vulnerable situation.

Working in France: sweatshops and Co.

Like many other immigrants, the Chinese have to take three different kinds of trips to get to their destination. They can be classified according the danger they involved:

- the direct trip with a tourist or commercial visa (a true or a fake one) by plane, the least dangerous but the most expensive
- the "parachute" trip which means coming into any country in the Schengen territory with a passport (true or fake) and from there getting to the right country
- "pa shan" (climb the mountain) with a long trip by land by any means of land transport in the hand of "guides" , the real masters of everything

This problem of money can be a heavy burden. If they had to borrow money before leaving to pay the "travel" or if they have paid only part of this cost, they have to pay the remaining debt with free work, only provided sometimes with food and accommodation (both often not even the strict minimum). There are examples, discovered by chance, of Chinese immigrants held prisoners in hidden workshops where they have to work hard for years in order to repay their debt, of course at the mercy of their "employer". The gangs pressuring them this way could also threaten the family in China. Of course omerta is the rule and revenge could be awful.

So, once they are in France, the ordeal is not over for most of them: not only do they have no choice but to repay the debt; if they are " free" of that, they have to hide in order not to be caught by the police (hunting for people with a different face), and because they are illegal they have to yield to any conditions for their exploitation. Two examples amongst numerous ones:

- "...in April 1999, a SWAT⁹ team found seven sweatshops in a cluster of housing projects in the Paris suburb of Seine –Saint-Denis (north of Par-

⁹ SWAT was special repressive team of policemen, tax and labour inspectors able, to list all kinds of violations of the law in these workshops.

is). By day, the small-scale factories operated legally, employing regular workers. By night, however, machines continued to hum, operated by illegal Asian immigrants, some of whom are compelled to work 105 hours a week".¹⁰

- "...From his arrival in Paris, Mr. Go is starting looking for a job. A garment workshop engaged him. As he knows nothing on this job, he has to be trained for one month without being paid. The second month, his wage is 460 Euros a month; he has to work from 8 am up to 3 am the next day morning. They are three to work in these conditions and they are forbidden to go out. Every time the boss is absent they are locked in the shop. Often, his nose is bleeding. For 23 days he was allowed to go out to phone to his family only once. Fed up with this situation, he left this job. He managed to find another employer who engages him for six months confiscating his passport. As he refuses this deal, he finds another job in a restaurant to do the washing up. He works 12 hours a day 6 days a week for 300 Euros a month. He can eat and sleep in the restaurant. His hands are totally destroyed and he still owes 9 000 Euros for the 'travel'..."¹¹

It is impossible to describe the working conditions of these Chinese immigrants often exploited by other Chinese (a matter of language), working long hours, seven days out of seven, living in the appalling conditions of sordid accommodation, not earning enough to provide food for them and their family, having to move from one job to another, from one sordid accommodation to another. They might not only work in underground sweatshops, they could also be obliged to take piece work at home.¹² Recently the Chinese entrepreneurs

in France, mainly in the garment industry, had to confront the competition of textile from inland China. As an important part of the garment trade is based on import-export through clan, family and business connections, the sweatshop garment underground factory had been transformed to become only the adapting factor of this general trade which means worse working conditions (mainly longer hours of work for a short time and periods of unemployment) because orders had to be satisfied immediately and an extension to piece labour at home. This gives the measure not only of the hardship of labour but of its precariousness. Of course, their appalling conditions of working and living leave the weakest immigrants open to any disease (not to mention injuries at work); if they can go to the hospital for the most serious injuries or diseases they have to find a makeshift solution and often they are fired immediately with no possibility to ask for anything.

The economic sectors where the illegal immigrants could find work are only the sectors where Chinese entrepreneurs have developed their business; this situation obliged these workers to stay in limited districts more like prisoners in the town or the suburbs. These sectors are respectively: garment, restaurants and catering, domestic services and building trade. Historically, the concentration in some specific sectors of activity was connected to the labour market, to the social segregation and to administrative barriers. It is more the consequence of economic opportunities and of sectors forbidden officially and for reasons of prejudice to foreign people, legal immigrants or not. So the illegal immigrants, if they have some qualification in their country, have to take any job only in these sectors, not being able to make a living with their professional skills, their situation even more restricted because of the narrow choice of sectors where they can find a job.

With the reinforced police hunt for undocumented immigrants, perhaps the number of immigrants could wither but on the other hand it allows the Chinese bosses to use this constant threat to impose even harder working conditions and low wages, with these exploited people being in a more vulnerable situation and therefore weaker.

morning up to midnight every day.

10 Business Week, 27 November 2000, www.business-week.com/2000/00_48/h3709036.htm

11 Le trafic et l'exploitation des immigrants chinois en France, Gan Yun et Véronique Poisson, BIT, 2005

12 It is difficult to know exactly, not only the wages of "permanent" workers but also the rate of piece work because all the illegal immigrants have to "accept" what the boss imposes on them and chiefly how much they are paid. For day work, the wage can vary from 300 Euros monthly up to 5/600 Euros for 12 hours six days a week. Piecework could be textile work but also production for restaurants for instance raviolis. To get the same minimum money an immigrant on piecework has to work from early

This problem is also reinforced by the question of language: immigrants from Zhejiang speak the local dialect; generally those coming from south East Asia speak Cantonese and those coming from the North of China speak Mandarin. Beyond these three big divisions there are also some other linguistic limited communities, such as some shopkeepers coming from the province of Xiamen (South East of China) speaking a local dialect – Chaozhou.

Social life and resistance

The same question of language regulates social life (when working conditions and lack of money allow the minimum of social life). Naturally, the first and second waves of immigration have seen the rise of some traditional Chinese social organisations: associations, churches, rituals, traditional celebrations, schools etc. If this social life gives certainly the opportunity to weave some contacts and some solidarity, it is difficult to know how it works, the size of the organisations and their consequences on any resistance to the exploitation as a whole.

More important are some attempts to organise undocumented Chinese immigrants in order to help them to get a regular permit to stay in France. Some committees were established for this aim. Generally they did not mix with illegal immigrants from other origins. Even in the demonstrations to try to influence the government, they stay between themselves in a group not mixing with the other demonstrators. In a certain way it is the beginning of a kind of class struggle, somewhat helped but not very much by some unions. If we can see in all that a certain form of class solidarity, on the other hand we could see as well the consequence of the need imposed by their peculiar situation to remain strongly connected to their specific milieu, the one providing all the conditions for their surviving in France.

The second generation of young Chinese is squeezed between the influence of the life in the country welcoming them and the cultural inheritance of their parents, a conflict reinforced by the strong cohesion of the various Chinese communities. The weight of the family customs is stronger because of the necessities of survival and the exploitation of labour, the immigration being seen

only as a family and financial business in which every member has to comply. In this respect, education through public schooling is not seen as a means of integration but only as a means to help the family to settle around its professional activity. Often when the compulsory schooling period is finished these kids have to be inserted into the professional activity of the family, regardless of their school success.

Recently there was some solidarity for immigrants and especially for Chinese in very specific situations. Children of illegal immigrants are allowed to go to the French public schools, and as long as they are pupils they can't be expelled from France but their parents can. A spontaneous rank and file organisation of French parents was established around local schools to oppose the arrest of parents coming to collect their children at the school gate (the "Education without borders network"). Violent clashes with the police sometimes occurred. This network of active solidarity is taking care of any immigrant but, as in the Chinese districts of Paris, the police hunt mostly affects Chinese immigrants, it is they who are mainly involved in the resistance to it. In the other cases it is obvious that a whole local population was opposing the extradition of illegals living and working in France for years.

In all this we can't think of class solidarity because this activity is more about humanitarian aims from all classes of the French society, even if this network has quickly spread all over France. It is not only about undocumented Chinese immigrants but about all kinds of immigrants. But this active intervention of part of the French population can help them in their own struggle as exploited workers.

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The unions on new grounds: When the work-mate becomes a client

Militant Research, self-interviews, workers' centres, campaigning and organizing: currently there is a part of the left that gets enthused by 'undogmatic approaches' which tackle the question of resistance within waged work. Study trips to the US, visits at workers' centres and at organizing campaigns all give the impression that these new instruments of union struggle will shake up the rusty white-dominated union landscape in Germany because the target of these initiatives are principally young immigrant workers, women and employees in the service sector. Is a completely new and different union in the making? Or, to put the question differently: does the crisis of the institution "union" open up spaces for new forms of organising? Does the union apparatus provide help for opening new doors or do lefty activists let themselves be instrumentalised in order to provide the institution with a new and up-to-date outfit?

The crisis of the industrial unions expresses itself in four main ways: shrinking membership; unions 'down-sizing' their own workforces; the collapse of the shop-steward structure in most areas; and the fact that trade union organisations relating to specific professions are on the upturn. All this results in the union becoming 'disarmed' and unable to put a halt to company closures, falling wages and increasing working hours - a vicious circle.

The crisis of the workers' movement can be attributed to one main problem: the movement finds it hard to acknowledge the slow demise of the institutional mediation of the conflict between labour and capital and is failing to develop new, self-determined forms of resistance. Despite increasing resistance, time and again the unions manage to enforce their politics of 'belt tightening' and 'save the production location'.

Some within the left see this as a chance to 'democratize' the unions and in order to do that they continuously attack the union leadership.

Others are clueless and cease to go to the picket lines. Others see a new 'openness' within the unions towards 'social movements' and they participate in these various new organising experiments, either as volunteers in the campaigns initiated by the unions or as their paid employees. In the next section we discuss the latter group.

Weakness of the unions - Organizing as an answer

The union redefines its role. As an organisation unions stick to a sector-wide collective contract - a contract which is not 'enforced' against the employer's will but which is meant to serve as a frame-work to centrally 're-balance' the different employer's interests. In short: the unions offer themselves as an instrument to enable the employers to handle the further fragmentation of the production structure with the least friction. In this process conflicts are necessary, but these conflicts are less and less fought out on the shop-floor level. Instead they are fought on the political stage. Which means that struggles are 'simulated' and mobilisations initiated in order to influence political decisions. Two of the most recent examples are the 'strikes' of the GVK-workers (health insurance), arranged in coordination with the bosses of health insurance companies, or the 'strikes' of port workers in 2005/06 against the EU service directive, which were coordinated with the employers as well.

In those cases where struggles are 'really' fought, the unions only mobilise for the mitigation of deteriorating conditions and wages. This is true in general for the whole of union activities. In spring 2006, during the strikes against work-time increases, the Verdi union (a services union) was rather open towards new forms of industrial action - but the content of the struggle was not to be questioned in any way. Afterwards, the frustration amongst workers who knowingly were sent into a struggle for the deterioration of their own conditions was accordingly high,

What is the meaning of 'Organising' and 'Campaigning'?

Organising and Campaigning have been important elements of union activities in the US for a long time. These terms relate to two different

strategies, which are often combined. Campaigning refers to centrally planned campaigns, e.g. against certain companies in order to enforce demands. These campaigns mainly focus on changing or reinforcing public opinion. They are meant to create pressure in those sectors where (allegedly) there is no possibility to enforce things on the shop-floor level alone. Verdi describes it this way:

"In a classical company-based industrial action nearly all activities - be it a strike, work to rule, complaint procedures, etc. - take place within the relation between employee and employer. But this is only one of several important business relations relevant for the employer. The relations to financial institutes, government and governmental administrations, suppliers, competitors, clients, mother-company and subsidiaries, civil society etc. are of the same importance for them. For employees and unions these relations offer opportunities for activities which can be effective, particularly with regards to multi-national companies".

Campaigning examples are boycott calls and image or brand damaging media work for which allies are supposed to be won over. For example, letters are sent to clients pointing out the (bad) activities of the company of concern (the anti-sweatshop campaign for example). Or other organisations of 'civil society' are asked to join the campaign from their specific perspective, e.g. Greenpeace takes part in the union's Lidl campaign (Lidl is a big supermarket chain) by publishing a survey on the contamination of Lidl food with pollutants.

Examples of union campaigns in Germany are the Lidl campaign (since 2005), the McDonald's campaign aimed at the establishment of works councils (2004), the Citibank campaign against the out-sourcing of call centres (1998 to 2001) and the Schlecker campaign (drug store chain) against the violation of the collective contract and against harassment of employees (1994 to 1995).

Organising refers to the active recruitment of union members by professional recruiters. Given that the service sector is characterised by many small companies dispersed across a city or town, organizers either go to the work-places (e.g. the IG BAU organizers - construction workers union - go to the work sites, and those of Verdi in Hamburg

go to the offices where the security guards in the city work) or to the worker's respective communities (Ken Loach's movie 'Bread and Roses' shows this type of organizing amongst cleaners in Los Angeles). The aim is then to convince people of the advantage of a union organisation, and to organise meetings or to direct social processes towards the establishment of structures of representation. The latter means that the organisers particularly look out for people who have a 'natural' social authority amongst their colleagues. These people are then meant to get specific union support in order to make them able to function as 'multipliers' of the union. This is supposed to result in the newly built-up union structures being able to maintain themselves in the future.

In most cases organising and campaigning are carried out at the same time. The idea is that the union first undertakes research in order to find out which sectors or areas are of strategic importance, or in which of them contracts or conditions can be enforced. The centrally planned campaign is then put into action by the organisers. They explain the aims of the campaign at the various work sites and, if necessary, take the specific problems of the workers into account.

In this way the main issue is the professionalisation of union work; not only of the union administrative apparatus, as it happened with the 'old unions', but also professionalisation at the shop-floor level. In some bigger companies the shop-stewards might already have had certain privileges and the union engagement offered a possibility of career within the union apparatus. But essentially the position of power of the German unions was based on the activities of an 'idealistic' rank-and-file structure. Instead of 'democratisation', the organising concept leads to a further centralisation of decision-making. Before conflicts are actually instigated, the union assesses their chances of success. Organizing and campaigning does not aim at creating or fostering conflicts on the shop-floor, but draws its strength from the lobbying activities and its self-promotion in the media. In addition, Verdi has chosen a professional group for their show-piece organising project in the Hamburg security sector, namely the private security guards: night guards, doormen, etc... people who's work is very isolated and is not dir-

ectly important for any other work processes, but who are on standby for emergency situations and incidents. Fortunately for the campaign, they feel weak and on the base of this weakness a sympathy-campaign against 'pittance wages' and for 'respect' can be built. These workers are not the objects of public moral suspicion either, like, for example, the private security aboard the local trains is. Lobbying means that decision-makers like client companies or at least their works councils are strategically included in the campaign.

One of the most important features of the organising campaigns is the fact that they see and approach the reality of the shop-floor only from the perspective and interests of the union and its aims. This might sound paradoxical given that in their organising literature and material they put a lot of emphasis on 'networking' and 'the reality of daily life'. Actually, the alliance with 'civil society' is only a means in order to strengthen their own role in the organisation of the 'wage labour' sector - as works councils or as partners of the collective contract. The concepts themselves do not touch upon the question of work hierarchies (or sectors in society in general), rather it fosters hierarchies: the 'social hierarchy' is confirmed when 'existing authorities' amongst workers are used for recruitment and given hierarchies are instrumentalised for their own aims, e.g. when branch managers are addressed as the main contact persons of the Lidl campaign or when politicians and clerics are asked for 'sponsorship'.

Those situations where self-organisation is confronted with union organizing are revealing. One example is the movement of truck drivers in the docklands of Los Angeles. There, the union organisers did not get a foot in the door. The difference in tactics is indicative of the difference in characteristics of the two: while the 'self-organised' truck drivers developed tactics to put pressure on companies and bosses by going on short and selective strikes, the organising campaign of the Teamsters union was based solely on cooperation with the 'sensible' companies, meaning those companies who are willing to sign a contract with the Teamsters. Those struggles that are not integrated into the union framework, weakened the negotiation position of the union - if the union is not able to keep things calm then it is of no use to the com-

pany. The resulting fight against any forms of self-organisation by the union should put into question the optimistic view on the union organizing strategy as an instrument for the extension of social conflicts. An article published in 'The Nation' begins with a similar example of Silver Capital, a car parts supplier in Chicago.¹ And the Forbes magazine for economics² states: "Lean organizational structure: Unlike the AFL-CIO's complex departmental and geographical structure, Change to Win is a simple, hierarchical organization. It focuses its work around campaigns, rather than internal departments. It is also developing Internet-based approaches to putting pressure on employers and the government. Outreach to employers: CTW is not led by labor militants. Although the unions engage in contentious organizing campaigns, CTW's goal seems to be establishing partnerships with management".

But still, the workers do want it that way...!

A reoccurring pattern in the presentation of organizing projects by the unions is the characterisation of the activists as a 'blank slate', on which the workers can project their needs. Interviewing workers in order to find out areas of conflict at work or their issues actually sounds promising. Too bad that the results only ever seem to confirm what the bosses of the Verdi leadership already knew beforehand. There seems to be no other aims than a minimum wage, working times of less than 300 hours per month and no other forms of organising than company-based structures of representation à la Verdi and no other forms of struggle than the public begging for 'respect'.

On the side of the left activists, who let themselves be roped in by the unions, the fact is obviously underestimated that you are never a neutral 'complaint box', neither as a scientist or activist, nor as a work-mate. Despite all good intentions, if you address people as a representative of a union you will always only get to hear from people what, in their opinion, a union is able to do for

1 "Teamsters: Changing to Win?", The Nation, 12th of June 2006, www.thenation.com/doc/20060612/johnson

2 "Breakaway Union Pushes Organizing", Forbes, 17th of April 2006, www.forbes.com/work/2006/04/17/afl-cio-unions-cx_0418oxford.html

them. Meaning that it is not possible to do something on behalf of an institution (and be paid for it), but to fill it with 'your own ideas'. The short-comings (of the workers' movement) cannot be mended or overcome from the outside. In order to help to overcome the old-fashioned and rigid union structures and to tackle the 'whole range of problems and issues that is the precarious life', it would be better if the activists would tune into the real conflicts of the workers - and these conflicts are not only fought with their boss, but also with their own representatives.

strikwave in egypt

This is a brief summary of articles in English and German newspapers over the past months.

Egypt - Ghazl El-Mahalla textile factory

When in December 2006 workers went out on strike at Ghazl El-Mahalla textile factory, they probably did not expect what they would cause in the following months.

The factory is one of the oldest and biggest in Africa. In its beginning years, it was the symbol of Egypt's industrial drive and with strikes in its 20th and 30th years. The factory complex is state owned and the industrial union leaders are appointed by the state, but this is common with all 13 industrial unions in Egypt.

Most of the workers have been working there for over 35 years. Working conditions are humiliating and difficult; the last pay raise was in 1984, to keep state-employed workers wages in line with inflation. In recent interviews workers said that they worked for 14 years at the company and earned only £E 400 per month (31 E, 40 US\$), but their rent was £E 300. For others, the rent takes half off their wage, those tiny apartments have no sewage system and electricity and phone lines were brought in by the people themselves.

In the last year, prices for basic food have risen by 48 percent according to the government statistic bureau, and fuel prices, which are subsidized by the state, rose 30 percent (Economist news magazine). While the Investment Minister Mah-

moud Mohieldin announced that 100 state-owned companies are going to be privatized in 2007, the World Bank deemed Egypt the best prepared economy for foreign investors.

About 14,000 textile workers of Ghazl El-Mahalla textile factory went out in December. Their demands were pay raises, health care and opportunity for promotion and the impeachment of the factory union committee, which is dominated by union bureaucrats.

In the following weeks and months a number of other workers followed and went on strike:

- 700 train drivers in Cairo, because of non-payment of bonuses
- Workers at Cairo Poultry Company went on a two-day strike and got a promise for bonus pay
- Workers at Mansoura-Spain started a hunger strike (unpaid wages and ill-treatments)
- 1,000 workers of the textile company in Kafr El-Dawwar squatted the plant
- garbage collectors demonstrated in front of Cairo's cleaning authorities
- 500 hospital workers went on strike at El-Haram hospital in Giza (unpaid wages)

This is just mentioning a few, who tooled down and protested, more than 35,000 workers were protesting in a country where open protest is illegal.

In February, about 4,200 workers of the Misr Shebin Al-Kom spinning and weaving company (SSWC) went out to demand the pay of the bonuses which the workers of Ghazl El-Mahalla had been promised by the Minister of Investment after the strike in December. After several strikes, the government gave promises to raise bonuses. But the strike wave went on.

In September, when promises weren't kept by the government, the workers of Ghazl El-Mahalla textile factory occupied the plant. Around 27,000 workers with their families lived in a tent village on the plant ground surrounded by security and police. Everybody in the plant participated, the workers, the office workers, the engineers, and even those from the management building. The action took only a few days and high level negotiations started. The main topic was the payment of bonuses, which were promised last december. The

point was, the agreement that the company was supposed to pay 10 percent as bonuses to the workers if the profit was more than £E 60 million. actually, the profit was about £E 245 million, but the company paid only a little of it to the workers. That led to the complaint of corrupt management and their impeachment. The situation changed as management, government and official unions feared a new protest and strike wave. It also shifted from economic demands to political issues. the attempt to declare bonuses and benefits are only for state-employees (ministers and so on) failed completely and might have pushed the political dimension of the strikes. In interviews workers declared that the strike was no longer about wages, but about dignity. Workers at Mahalla are well aware of their power of inspiring others in similar conditions.

After a week of occupying and negotiating, the workers had almost all of their demands met: the bonus payments are going to be on the level they demanded. The system to pay the bonuses is going to be changed in a way that management doesn't control. They received increased wages and housing and food allowances. The strike days will be payed as holidays. The transportation problems will be solved with a cooperative transportation service. No striker will be victimized. The company's board chairman and also the factory union committee officials are going to face impeachment. A committee of the strike leaders is going to be formed to continue negotiations.

After this successful action, new strikes have popped up already. At two factories the government has already met the workers demands, at a textile plant in Damietta and a linseed oil factory in Tanta. Both in the same region of the Mahalla textile factory.

The demands are still around payments, benefits and working conditions, but there are also those about the union system and the overthrow of president Mubarak. There were discussions about an independent union organization for quite some years, but now it is becoming obvious for so many people. Activists expect the government to fight this demand very strictly, but discussions and also actions are on going.