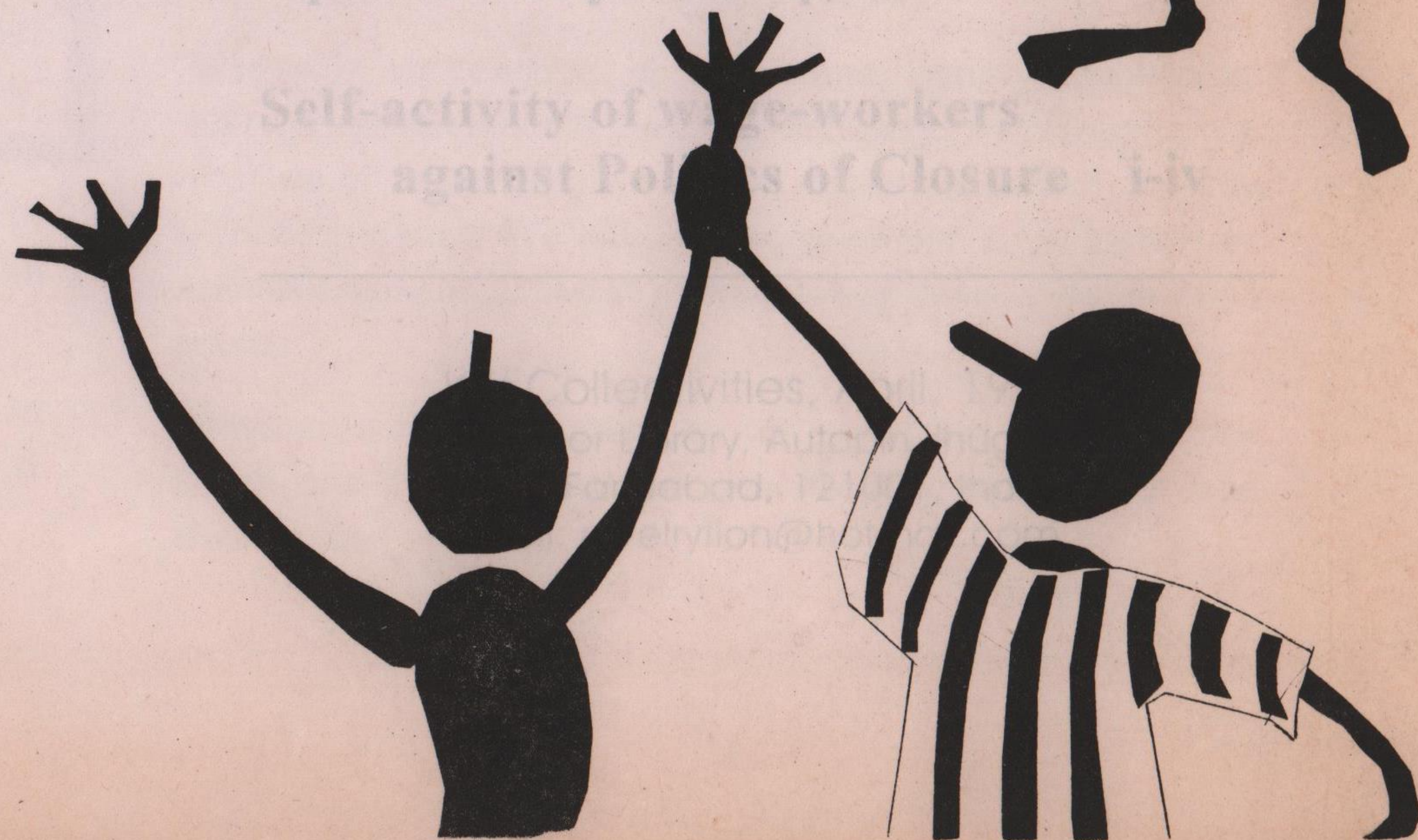


SELF ACTIVITY OF WAGE WORKERS

Towards a Critique of Representation & Delegation

KK \ Collectivities
August 1998



SELF ACTIVITY OF WAGE-WORKERS

Towards a Critique of Representation & Delegation

Theories and practices of representation & delegation are a stumbling block in the self-activity of wage-workers. They hinder wage-workers' resistances, refusals and steps of change. What follows is a part of a larger critique of representation & delegation that we are engaged in. We invite you to join us in this attempt.

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SELF ACTIVITY OF WAGE-WORKERS

Towards a Critique of Representation & Delegation

Lead-ry

For over four years now we have encountered numerous arguments and counter-arguments in conversations amongst wage-workers on the role of leaders in routine factory life. The backdrop to these conversations has been the unfolding of events in factories where workers find themselves trapped. What is attempted here is a systematization of numerous experiences and observations to obtain a better understanding of shop-floor life in order to confront it more effectively.

"On the shopfloor we are at all times in direct antagonism with the supervisor/ foreman. This antagonism is because of the supervisor's constant attempt to maintain work flow."

"Supervisors constantly keep their eyes on us. They threaten us with chargesheets & suspension, placate us with overtime &

advance payments and use outright deceptions to keep us in check."

"Supervisors constantly nag us to fulfill production quotas and maintain quality. They perpetually hassle us to ensure a minimal rejection of products. Raw material utilization is another never-ending bone of contention."

"We never tell supervisors what is in our hearts. No supervisors can know what we are thinking and planning. They are actually in constant fear of us."

"Routinely we engage in slowdowns, quality slackening, wastage, breakage and clogging. Breakage and clogging are what we all do, all the time - but never talk about it, even with each other. We never even voice our appreciation or acknowledgment of what someone has done ... its an open secret."

"Whenever the discontent on the shopfloor becomes very sharp and the atmosphere surcharged, supervisors lose their voice."

Routine Lead-ry

"Leaders are from amongst us. We have an ambivalent relationship with them."

"Because they are from amongst us, leaders know a lot about us, about our inclinations and our thoughts. Leaders do not work themselves. They tell us to ensure that production does not fall and promise to take care of the rest as they claim to be our watchdogs (*pahredar*)."

"Leaders have financial clout. This is not just from union dues & other collections. A lot of money comes from cuts & commissions in the purchase of uniforms, shoes, festival sweets, festival gifts like blankets, almirahs, suitcases, watches and kitchenware. Cuts from canteen contractors and scrap-dealers. Lumpsums from managements for long term agreements. Control of cooperative societies and welfare funds."

"Contenders for leadership spend a lot of money during elections (in the factory). Because leadership means financial clout."

"Being a leader entails no work in the factory and much money. This is enough to sway a lot of workers."

On small benefit networks

"Leaders, ex-leaders and potential leaders create and maintain intricate networks spread throughout the factory through incentives like advances, loans, lighter jobs, preferable shifts, employment to kith & kin, gate passes, tours, better food from the canteen without any payment, grants from welfare, first preference."

"Networking by leaders also uses caste and regional identities."

"Leaders and ex-leaders are often found ensconced in the offices of the personnel manager or some other official. Persons with close links to this or that managerial faction can provide facilities to their close followers (*laquea-bhaguea*). Leaders and their camp-followers makeup ten to fifteen percent of the factory's workers."

"Those who constitute the networks are articulate in various ways — from muscle power to slippery tongues."

"These networks which are constituted on the basis of material incentives and favours are very intricate. They make a "*tantra*" and "*jaal*" (apparatus and mesh) to keep constant tabs on, as well as affect the weather and temperature on the shopfloor."

"Those who constitute the networks are conduits for the circulation of rumours, baits, airy-fairy promises, and even

lies. These networks make constant efforts to justify and valorize leaders and their powerful social & political links."

"Leaders are basically middle-persons. And like all middle-persons they sometimes get small things done for us on an individual basis."

"We have everyday fears of disciplinary actions, chargesheets, suspensions and physical attacks. Leaders' networks routinely highlight, heighten and exaggerate these fears to keep us pacified."

During shopfloor confrontations

"Supervisors run away from the shopfloor whenever worker discontent grows and workers take an openly confrontationist stance. In such cases management refuses to talk to workers directly. It sends leaders to the shopfloor."

"Most of us weigh the situation again and again, and hesitatingly take steps back and forth on contentious issues. Leaders' networks try to pacify us by exaggerating our fears. Meanwhile, the networks of ex-leaders and potential leaders try and instigate us to an openly confrontationist stance in an attempt to establish their leaderships."

"Leaders' pet rant to pacify us is that — 'you start the work, we'll take care of the matter'. When workers refuse to listen and open confrontation continues, selective suspensions and dismissals begin."

"In such situations, suspensions and dismissals force workers to talk to the leaders. The leaders then scold workers for having taken steps without their advice. They present the suspensions and dismissals as a consequence of not heeding them."

"The issues of contention are effectively sidelined by the leaders. They shift the focus to suspensions and dismissals."

"Routinely, when workers demand small relief on individual or group basis, the management does not act. When leaders say the same thing, the management acts. This increases the power of the leaders."

Some conclusions

"We used to give union dues on the understanding that we would get benefits in exchange. Wages will increase and our jobs will be safe. But during the past twenty years things have been just the opposite."

"For twenty-eight years I have been witnessing a reduction in the number of workers and an increase in production."

"Earlier we used to give union dues but now the management deducts union dues from our salary."

"Trapped by one assurance or another, we contribute union dues. It is only later that we find that all these assurances were hollow."

Lead-ry: department of conflict management

Lead-ry is an art and a science, mastered only by a few, and used to sit on our heads. It requires:

- Sharp skills in discontent measurement and the ability to arrive at swift quantitative solutions i.e. 'at what' and 'at how much' will the workers accept the disagreeable. This involves a wide spectrum of activities ranging from passing on sums of money to slapping a supervisor's face.
- Highly developed rhetorical skills, which are used to sway, to create prejudice and to convince.
- Organising skills, which are used to build and sustain well-oiled networks at minimal cost. These skills involve astute psychological reading of individuals and groups of individuals. They also require a down to earth grasp of identity politics and maneuvers.

Managements' regime of work, productivity and discipline is routinely confronted and opposed by wage-workers. Routine activity of lead-ry is to coax, cajole and threaten wage-workers into accepting these regimes.

Lead-ry routinely negotiates agreements with management and attempts to implement them by overcoming wage-workers' opposition. – "Whenever a new machine or fixture is brought workers refuse to work on them. Leaders are the main instruments to implement these changes. Placation, suspension and fear are used by leaders for this."

The main activity of lead-ry is to actively discourage the routine self-activity of wage-workers. Individually and in small groups, workers are always taking steps on their own that disrupt the work-routine. These seemingly minor irritants are a major threat to production and discipline. Leaders and their networks, i.e. lead-ry, is constantly engaged in hindering, devaluing and hijacking the self-activity of wage-workers.

To put it bluntly: higher management makes strategies, leaders & personnel managers act as tacticians, and supervisors & leaders' networks execute these strategies.

Self-activities of wage-workers

Perhaps not universal, it is still true that most people have the capacity as well as the ability to act and participate as "NOT AS UNEQUALS" in small informal groups. The layering of experience, the excitement and the unpredictability associated with what takes place each day is not because we participate as 'equals'. Instead, it is because each of us carries our individuality and is able to express it freely in such groups.

This participation as "NOT AS UNEQUALS" is spread over various facets of life and an individual is often a participant in more than one informal group at most times.

The wider implications of these informal groups of "NOT AS UNEQUALS" stand out clearly when we look at their play in some detail in institutional structures, whether factories, offices, banks or the media.

The moment of entry into a factory is the moment of entry into the disciplinary grid of work & productivity, as well as a jungle of informal groups. Strict entry schedules set up by managements are transformed into stretchable entry times. The act of punching-in is often put into disarray by proxy-punching or transformed by kicks that literalize the machine into a punching bag.

'Entry time' is made distinct from 'commencement of work' by long handshakes - backslaps - chitchat. It is often that work commences after 9 o'clock tea in an 8 A.M. shift.

Management strategies like changing the placement of the punch-in' from factory gate to departments, the imposition of fines, like a fifteen minute wage-cut for being late by one minute, are visible signs of managerial desperation.

Proxy-punching in the Goodyear Tyre factory has forced the management to issue identity cards containing computer floppies, even though it has meant an increase in cost. Workers' kicks in the Bata Shoe factory repeatedly dysfunctionalized the punching machine and forced the management to appoint an attendance clerk to go to each department and mark workers' attendance.

Using lead-ry networks, management conducts time studies to work out grids of intensification. These are the periods when the wink of an eye and the utterance of a phrase put into practice well thought-out schemes involving co-ordinated steps by small affinity groups of seven-eight workers. And, whether they are premised on time studies or on agreements with leaders, the biggest stumbling block to increases in the workload are the informal groups of workers.

Keeping the immediate supervisor in check is a task that all workers have to take up. It is a very common sight to find five-six workers heckling a supervisor when s/he is trying to boss over some worker. Immediate supervisors are often nervous, tense and anxious despite the brave face they put up. In a hand tools factory, a supervisor who bullied and humiliated workers was lucky to survive. On a cold winter night shift, the machines lay idle because of shortage of material and the supervisor went to sleep in his cabin with a coal fire to keep him warm. Workers slept on as a factory ghost locked the supervisor's cabin door. It was the routine round of security personnel that led to the breaking open of the door and the saving of the supervisor's life.

Helping one-another does not remain confined to affairs dealing with the company. Discussions of events in one-another's residential locality, schools, hospitals, etc. are very common amongst groups of workers during breaks which are often extended, to the constant chagrin of managements. Intricate inter-linking amongst workers coagulates them into entities where a member is never alone. This plays a major role in keeping the bossism of management or the goonery of lead-ry in check, whether in the factory, on the road or in residential localities. Anyone mistaking an individual to be only an individual is immediately shown the real side of things. In fact, the affinity groups in factories are a continuation of affinity groups at large in society.

Innumerable actions, immense diversity and an extremely high unpredictability of affinity groups keep management and leaders in check. A phrase often floating in management-lead-ry negotiations is "Will the workers accept this?"

Rules and regulations are easily made. Agreements can easily be signed. Workers not accepting or fulfilling given production targets can have their services terminated. Given the universal co-option of unions and leaders by managements, there seems to be nothing stopping managements from doing what they want. Then, why the ever-present, ever-troubling question "Will the workers accept this?"

In a factory manufacturing wires, management stream-rolled workers from one job to another. Anyone saying 'NO' was shown the gate. The coolness and quietness with which small groups of workers accepted this and interchanged operations, from acid to water to oil back to water, oil and acid, only infuriated the management when they discovered that ninety tonnes of wire

was sent back by a consignee as being defective. Arbitrary job changes came to an abrupt end.

To counter the delay in wage-payment, a handful of workers working for a contractor in a textile factory simply went to the canteen and sat there. The workers' silence in response to the haranguing of the chief executive completely unnerved the management.

A management of a tractor factory increased production quotas using agreements with the union. Workers operating computerised machines responded by changing around the tapes that governed work sequences. The management had to very quickly replace the machines.

Anyone blowing the whistle is shown his or her place. In a hand tool-manufacturing factory, new machinery even further cut down the time between two operations. In order to obtain some breathing space, two cranes were made to move from opposite sides, clash and cause a breakdown. A maintenance worker complained to the management. One day, cranes were in operation but were said to be not working. The maintenance worker was called for repair. He climbed a crane and when he was checking it, the other crane began moving towards his crane. His shouts for mercy braked the other crane, but they proved to be a brake for management schemes as well.

And then, things like not greeting a boss. The management of a factory stopped overtime payments to pay clerks. The five pay clerks responded to this loss of dues by moving like automatons whenever they came across their boss. The silence of the clerks got on his nerves and the management had a nervous breakdown. Overtime dues were restarted.

It is these constant innumerable, insidious, unpredictable activities by small groups of workers that underlie the stress that managements give to representation - articulation - long term agreements.

Representation - articulation - unity - long-term agreements versus wage-workers' silences - mumbling - incoherence - constantly nagging non-unitary demands are expressions of the functioning of a large number of small informal groups in an institution. They are the signs of expressions of the individualities of workers.

In a factory, workers in small groups would often go to the general manager to put up their grievances or seek relief. The harassed manager met this self-expression of workers by posting a guard in front of his office and issuing explicit instructions that workers would not to be allowed to enter his office in groups and only one worker would be allowed to go in along with a leader. In this way, not only was his paternal mask shattered but also the upkeep of his position demanded new costs.

Management responds to the adamancy of these small groups of workers by harping on the threat to harmonious industrial relations. Lead-ry denounces the actions and demands of these small groups as a selfishness that poses a threat to workers' unity. Sixteen hot chamber workers in a factory left their place of work on a hot summer day complaining of excessive heat. Operations involving five hundred workers came to a standstill. Hot chamber workers had been demanding relief during summers through a lowering of temperature, but the management was not willing to agree, as this would lessen the pace of drying and therefore slow down the chain of work. Assurances had been aplenty and many a long-term agreement had completed its tenure. This step of the hot chamber workers was met by the leaders with such epithets:

"All these years they did not feel the heat, it is only today that they have acquired this delicacy. They want to spoil our relation with the management. Wheat advance is around the corner - now the management will refuse to give it. They only look at themselves. Their selfishness is harming all the other workers. The management listens to us because we represent you. But if small groups do not listen to us and take steps on their own, then why will the management talk to us? It is only our unity that is holding back the management, otherwise it will do whatever it wants. These hot chamber workers are harming our unity, and if tomorrow the management takes action against anyone we will not be responsible."

In the Escorts Yamaha motorcycle manufacturing factory, disenchantment with and denunciation of leaders was similar to innumerable other places. In a confrontation with the management, 300 workers on the assembly line refused to have anything to do with leaders and jammed the assembly line on their own. Leaders denounced these workers and reciprocated by saying that they would not intervene on their behalf - this would teach them a lesson. Workers in other departments did not lay down their tools in sympathy with the assembly line workers. Instead, what was observed was that management and leaders were conspiring for a lockout/strike to launch a major attack on the workers. There are two thousand five hundred workers in the factory. All the workers side-stepped the leaders and decided to continue production in other departments while the assembly line workers would keep the line jammed. Meanwhile, money would be collected department-wise to compensate their financial loss. As the assembly of a motorcycle per two minutes stood still, management and leaders bid their time, confident that the past would repeat itself and workers would have to accept the mediation of leaders. A week after the jam, overtime payments of

the previous month were made. One hundred rupees was contributed by each worker, and collected in a rota department-wise. It was decided that a like amount would be contributed when monthly wages were to be paid. This step of the workers unnerved the management as well as the lead-ry. Leaders on their own started holding talks with the management and an ex-parte agreement fulfilling the assembly line workers' demands was made to get the assembly line moving.

Refusals

Self-activities of wage-workers also encompass layers and layers of routine refusals. A few such refusals are:

" Never make a complaint against a co-worker to a supervisor or to a manager."

" Never to give evidence in favour of management against a co-worker."

" Not to get entangled in competition. To give more production in competition with co-workers is unacceptable."

" Refuse to be carried away by managerial appreciation & recognition to give more production."

" Even the shadow of money is unacceptable in inter-personal relations."

Seismic lead-ry

It is not un-often that competitiveness in the market demands sharp rise in productivity. This entails a major attack on wage-workers. Major attack means large-scale retrenchment, big increase in work intensity, sharp cuts in wages besides other cost cutting and efficiency drives.

In these conditions managements plan new strategies and lead-ry adopts new tactics. The unfolding of events is very intricate. To discern the intricate web of strategy and tactics we take as an illustration the unfolding of events in Gedore Hand Tools, Faridabad in 1982-1984 of which we have a first hand experience.

Background

Gedore Hand Tools, headquartered in Germany, had three plants in Faridabad exploiting 3500 wage-workers. U.S.A was a major market for its produce. Hand tools enterprises located in China and South Korea were Gedore's market competitors. Shrinkage of production in the auto and engineering industries in the early 1980s sharpened the competition in the hand tools market. In this scenario, in order to maintain its competitiveness, Gedore management planned a major intensification of work through automation and large-scale retrenchment. For installation of an automatic plating plant Gedore management took a loan of Rs. 2.5 crores (~ \$2.5 millions) from the Industrial Development Bank of India, a government of India enterprise.

The unfolding of events

In the beginning of 1982 incidents of chargesheeting, suspensions, transfers from one department to another, shifting workers from one job to another, wage-delays, downgradation in canteen quality, insistence on quality in production, strictness about production targets, time strictness, no rest during shift hours etc. increased noticeably.

In a gate meeting on June 7, 1982 union leaders spoke at length about capitalism, global crisis, company in crisis, and then asked the workers to make sacrifices in the larger interest. They put forward three alternatives to choose from:

- 25% reduction in wages.
- Go on special leave for six months at half wages.
- Retrenchment of 600 workers.

Workers rejected outright all these options put forth by the leaders. At this rejection, managements' escalated their strong-arm tactics and instigation. Leaders and ex-leaders oiled their networks and accelerated mobilisations around caste and regional identities.

Workers disenchantment with leaders increased rapidly. Their self-activity became more pronounced. Large number of workers stopped paying union dues, attending union meetings, side-stepping leaders in day to day activity and began to deal directly with management individually and in small groups. Graffiti inside the plants increased.

A group of workers belonging to, or influenced by, the fringe left posed inconvenient questions in a signed handbill on June 12, 1982. The handbill read "... management says that it does not have money even to buy raw materials – then where are the crores of rupees (millions of dollars) for automation coming from?

Is it not because of automation that 600 workers are being told to resign? Soon, will you not talk of the need to retrench a thousand workers? Instead of struggling against it, haven't union leaders become advocates of the management?"

The confidence of the leaders was shaken. Management was put on the defensive. Uneasy questions in the workers' minds became points of widespread discussion. The tactic deployed by leaders and management – of announcing their attack in the gate meeting – had turned out to be a blunder. For damage control, the leaders adopted silence and the management took steps – show cause and advice letters were issued to the signatories of the handbill.

Through a circular, management warned workers to beware of disruptive forces. It said that automation was for the health of the workers. The management claimed that it had never had any intention of retrenching workers who would be made surplus by automation. If the management had wanted, it could have retrenched half the workers as it had been paying full wages to idle workers for one and half years. The circular ended with a rhetorical flourish: "Increase production OR perish!"

A twisted version of the management slogan: "Increase production AND perish!" became popular amongst the workers.

The sequence of events at this point is as follows : there are prolonged delays in the payment of wages, machinery for automation reaches the plants, leaders maintain a strict silence, and ex-leaders attempt to form a rival union. There are physical attacks, by leaders and their network, on workers who still try to focus discussion on the looming retrenchment. To silence these voices, management uses suspensions. Besides the delay in wages, the issue of the annual bonus is used as another diversionary entanglement. Further on, the management goes for

work suspension at half wages for three days and says that this may continue for quite some time.

Leaders complement these steps taken by the management for an open confrontation by ordering a tool down strike on February 12, 1983. Fiery speeches at gate meetings became a regular feature. Dissenting workers who have been trying to focus attention on looming retrenchment are denounced as disruptive elements and attacked. On February 21, 1983 leaders announce at a gate meeting that they have reached an agreement with the management. In the agreement it is agreed that no further work suspensions would take place but wages of January '83 would be paid in January '84. The workers reject this agreement. The management then tries, unsuccessfully, to instigate violent confrontations amongst workers through ex-leaders.

The same agreement is again put for approval at the gate meeting of February 28, 1983 after a number of thundering speeches challenging the management to lockout the factory if it wanted. The workers again reject the agreement.

After the second rejection, the leaders announce that the way now is to go for an 'open struggle'. A meeting of factory delegates (who had been elected in 1980) and other militant workers is called and suggestions asked for. Leaders then reject the suggestion for demonstrations on the plea that the conflict was with the Gedore management and not with the government. However, as soon as the question of steps against the management comes into focus, the leaders somersault and announce a demonstration & a sit-down at the district administration chief's office to be organised on Mar, 21.

On March 20, leaders call another gate meeting. Besides members of their network in the three plants, leaders bring their supporters from other factories and spread them out strategically. The same agreement is announced yet again. It is immediately hailed by the

strategically placed supporters! And before the workers can react, leaders and their henchmen jump the factory gate and rush in to the plant to switch on the machines.

The leaders had here used a time tested and most effective strategy. By switching on machines and restarting the plants, the workers would now be split into confronting groups, where one section would demand a continuation of the tool down strike while the other would be in favour of resuming work. This clash amongst the workers, and the concomitant unfolding of violence, would then facilitate large-scale retrenchment.

But in this case this strategy failed miserably. Enraged, the 3500 workers rush into the plant, shut down the machines and then beat up the leaders who are forced to run away. The President of the union who was also beaten and had to turn tail, had been the president of the union for ten years and was also the President of CITU, Faridabad district unit of the central trade union of Communist Party of India (Marxist).

Production does not resume. There is now massive police deployment. Leaders again try to start the machines at night. They are again forced to retreat. Tool down continues.

Some workers belonging to the fringe left call a general body meeting on 23rd March, the weekly rest day. All the workers attend it. A committee proposed by militant, articulate workers and ex-leaders to obtain the resignation of leaders is not opposed. In view of the mounting discontent of workers, the leaders have to resign. After the resignations, the struggle committee, however, does not materialize and the ex-leaders take over.

Tool down continues till April 14, 1983. The workers reluctantly accept the agreement that they had rejected earlier.

Stalemate. The issue of retrenchment has got bogged down.

The cycle of shopfloor instigation and wage-delays reemerges as a part of renewed attempts to retrench workers. Police are now posted inside one of the plants. Mobilisations being made on the basis of region and caste come to the fore. There is now a delay in the payment of wages to supervisory and clerical staff.

The management obtains government approval for retrenchment of 300 workers. Leaders hide the list and deny that there is any retrenchment on the cards. They start talking about a new long-term agreement and preparation of a demand charter for it.

At this juncture, management steps up attempts at violent confrontations amongst workers. Old leaders form a committee with the claim that they will negotiate a good agreement with the management. Mobilisation by the two lead-ry networks on the basis of caste, region and plant identity became frantic. The management flames the fire by locking out the third Gedore plant in February 1984. Enraged workers attack the existing leaders and the committee of old leaders uses this opportunity to take over leadership. Lockout in the third plant is lifted.

The finishing off

And then began joint action by the management, leaders, police, state administration and the media, to retrench workers in Gedore Hand Tools. A gang of 15 to 20 leaders and their musclemen freely roam the three plants. They pick workers from their machines, take them to the plant time-office and force them, through physical violence and threats, to sign resignation letters. In this way, up to 50 workers are forced to resign in a single day. Workers coming to factory for work and those leaving after shift hours are attacked on the roads and forced to resign. Workers are threatened at their homes and forced to resign. Workers who had lodged complaints with the police find that the police have framed cases against them. Government administration merely

files away the complaints made at the District Administration office. Newspapers do not print any news of these events. Not even letters about a fellow worker who committed suicide on the rail tracks after he was forced to resign.

In these circumstances hundreds of workers sought shelter in their villages for months.

And the environment at Gedore? Armed police in tents inside the factory, armed police in trucks making rounds of the three plants.

This is how the stalemate was broken and retrenchment implemented. Even then, it took one more year to retrench 1500 workers out of the 3500 in Gedore Hand Tools, Faridabad.

Fallout

The inability of the management, lead-ry and state administration to entrap wage-workers in time tested snares, forced them to divest themselves of their constitutional garbs as well as leader militancy. They had to resort to brute force to implement their policies. This repression, however, could not bring with it the myth of "glorious defeat" with its martyrs and heroes as well as the attendant mortgaging of wage-workers' critical evaluation.

But not getting trapped was not sufficient for the workers and they were disabled by the methodical repression of the management. This could happen, fundamentally, because management repression did not create sufficient ripples and repercussions amongst other wage-workers. Workers' self-activities had remained disjointed, unlinked and uncoordinated even within the enterprise. A dynamic expansion of wage-workers' self-activities is critical for linking wage-workers of one enterprise with those of other enterprises. But the unfolding of workers' self-activity was impeded by their not questioning of representation & delegation.

Seismic lead-ry - at a higher level

The frequency of extensive area-wide, region-wide, nation-wide attacks on wage-workers, compressed in ever-shortening periods of time is increasing. The attacks entail huge wage-cuts, enormous increase in work-load and mass scale retrenchments. And they are implemented, primarily, in two ways.

One: through instigation to mass violence by playing the politics of identity, and

Two: through the foisting of credible, militant leaders.

In Indonesia, 1997-98, through the massive attacks on wage-workers, one can see these strategies being played out:

- I. Media highlighted riots between 'ethnic Indonesians' and 'migrant Chinese';
- II. "Confirmed reports say that the US has been pressuring Jakarta to release one of the top political dissenters from imprisonment. 'The US move is to enable Jakarta to cool the rising temperature down to some extent', say sources". [HT, Delhi 29 March 1998]

Activities of a fringe left

The fringe left that was a participant in the events in Gedore Hand Tools in 1982-84 existed around a monthly workers newspaper. Some workers of Gedore were members of this fringe left and we have emerged from this background.

The activities of this fringe left had been geared:

- ▣ to unmask the collaboration of leaders with managements.

- ▣ to keep in focus the issues that managements and leaders seek to hide.

- ▣ to unmask formal and phoney steps like one-day token strikes, token demonstrations and formal mass meetings that are organised by leaders.

- ▣ to create and establish an effective alternate leadership to be constituted by militant, credible leaders from amongst the workers.

- ▣ to unify workers around this alternate leadership.

- ▣ to launch organised, conscious struggles under this alternate leadership.

- ▣ to push for demonstrations, mass meetings & strikes.

A critique of a fringe left

- The process of unmasking management-leader collaborations brought into focus contentious issues that management and leaders seek to hide. This centre-staging of otherwise hidden agendas helped unleash the self-activity of wage-workers. Management notices and leaders rhetoric, demand charters and agreements, all came under constant scrutiny by wage-workers. "What to do?" and "How to do?" became topics of routine discussion. Routine self-activity of workers as individuals and in small groups increased.

The medium of circulation of information around these activities was through a regular monthly newspaper, frequent handbills, wall-letters and conversations. These simple acts created considerable hurdles in the implementation of the retrenchment policy at Gedore Tools.

- But it is the alternative proposed by fringe left that is problematic, in fact, fatal. The mobilisation of wage-workers envisaged by the fringe left, in fact, is premised on the erasure of the self expressions and self-activities of wage-workers at large.

The problem of militant & credible leaders

In the latter half of the 19th century and the first quarter of the 20th century, fierce polemics raged on the question of real and phoney representations/ representatives of the interests of wage-workers.

The polemics spanned ideology, strategy and tactics. 'Reform or Revolution' was often the high point of the debate. The reality that has unfolded since has, however, made the very premises of this debate redundant.

Towards the last quarter of the 19th century, requirements of production enterprises for accumulated labour reached such dimensions that individual ownership of production enterprises became unfeasible. <Joint stock> to <large number of shareholders> to <loans> as the major source of funding for production enterprises are what has unfolded in these one hundred years. Individuals as owners/ part owners of production enterprises have increasingly become insignificant. Acts forcing bankruptcies of individual owners have lost their cutting edge. Enterprises have acquired institutional forms. With enterprises becoming monoliths of massive amounts of accumulated labour, head-on collisions of living labour with these institutional monsters are counter productive for living labour, whether in the form of an individual wage-worker, a group of wage-workers or a mass of wage-workers. And, working for head-on collisions is the *raison d'être* of the fringe left.

In this scenario, the blurred boundaries between phoney, formal and real struggles have melted, become indistinguishable, giving way to a continuum. Formal-token, phoney-instigated-provoked, militant struggles, despite some differences of form, have in essence become indistinguishable. It is through repeated experiences that large numbers of wage-workers have learnt that these are harmful for them. It is this that underlies the unwillingness of workers to struggle – the word 'struggle' is here being used in the sense of the dominant meanings that it has come to have. And it is this that underlies the fringe left's activities to 'agitate workers' in order to overcome what it decries as the apathy and passivity of wage-workers. It is in this context

that the fringe left creates the polemics of militant & credible leaders.

In general, the alternate leadership, the militant & credible leaders for whose creation the fringe left is geared, is a fringe phenomenon like itself. It is only in the event of major attacks on wage-workers that the alternate leadership of militant & credible leaders can and often does acquire leverage amongst large numbers of workers. And it is only then that the 'dead-endness' of militancy, and the fact that it actually causes serious damage, becomes obvious.

Unity and unifocality are the mantras of state and proto-state apparatuses. Even those fringe left groups that are explicitly anti-state have as their axis activities that are geared to unity and unifocal forms. This is what makes even such fringe left groups proto-states.

In fact, it must be stated that it is very doubtful if representation was at any time in the interest of wage-workers. A hundred years compel us to engage in a critical retrospective analysis. With all that wage-workers have experienced in this time, history proves that any and every representation is counter-productive for wage-workers.

Demonstrations, mass meetings and strikes are all events premised on unity and unifocality, and implicit in them are both representation and delegation. The logic for these events is that these are shows of strength and thus in the interest of wage-workers. Facts, however, point to the contrary.

Demonstrations

Demonstrations involve an elaborate plan of date, time, route, destination, pace, slogans, demands, those to lead, those to maintain order, those to address and those to talk 'on behalf'. Organisational infrastructure is a prerequisite for a demonstration. Ninety-five percent of wage-workers cannot organise demonstrations themselves, they can only join in as followers. For a worker to become a part of a demonstration, the worker has to in effect erase any idea of self-activity and self-expression, or, has to deceive him or herself by parroting the pre-written script as self-expression.

Demonstrations are means and occasions for displaying the strength of organisations and leaders. The index of strength is numbers and the index of militancy is the number & intensity of skirmishes with the police, which range from charges by mounted police, water cannon charges, tear gas shelling, arrests, and firing. The success of a demonstration is measured by the grandiosity of the spectacle it provides to the media. What are erased are the injuries and the long court cases inflicted on wage-workers. Those who are killed are made into martyrs and transformed into icons to shackle any criticism or questioning.

Workers, by and large, are aware that demonstrations make them easy targets for police attacks besides gagging their self-expression. This is evident from the distance that workers maintain from demonstrations. In fact demonstrations often have to be organised during shift hours with the connivance of managements.

Mass meetings

Most frequently, mass meetings that wage-workers have to encounter are gate meetings at the factory and office. Gate meetings are held by leaders. The rule is that only leaders will speak in the gate meetings. The logic put forward is that any other vocalization will show disunity amongst workers to the management and weaken bargaining power. To see to it that the rule is implemented, lead-ry musclemen are strategically placed in gate meetings in order to summarily deal with any worker who tries to speak. Recognition of a new leadership happens with the successful holding of a gate meeting, because holding a gate meeting constitutes a challenge to the existing leadership.

The most encountered mass meetings, i.e. gate-meetings, exclude wage-workers self-expression both by logic and force.

The fringe left often called for general body meetings (GBM) away from the factory premises in order to overcome the prohibition of any expression of dissent at gate-meetings. However, an elaborate organisational apparatus is also a prerequisite for holding general body meetings. These are occasions that require venues, agendas, stages, stage-managers, order keepers and elaborate time management. By their very nature, general body meetings are arenas for fights between leaders, ex-leaders and potential leaders with their lists of articulate speakers and cheer groups.

General body meetings demand from wage-workers time bound (two to three minutes) coherent presentations on specific agenda. These presentations have to be speeches to audiences of hundreds or thousands. This demand on the workers by itself excludes most

workers from expressing themselves in general body meetings. Those who are not thus excluded have to filter through the lists of speakers of contending lead-ry networks.

Workers have seen through general body meetings for what they are. Now the norm is that out of a thousand workers, approximately 150 will attend them.

There are other kinds of mass meetings that play on higher scales of representation. An illustrative example:

From 1977 to 1979 in Faridabad, there were sporadic multi-nodal outbursts of workers discontent in hundreds of factories. In October 1979 unions jointly called a mass meeting. Around 100,000 workers assembled and the atmosphere was very charged. The huge number of workers spilled out of the meeting ground and road and rail traffic was forced to halt. Well-prepared police and paramilitary forces then began indiscriminate firing. Factories functioned normally from the next day. This incident ensured a smoother functioning in the industrial belt for the next few years. And a martyrs' column was duly erected.

Strikes

This fringe left's activity regarding strikes was on two planes. One – phoney strikes called by leaders for the implementation of management policies and formal strikes to make their presence felt, were denounced. Two – The call was given for real strikes, and for militancy in real strikes.

Denunciation of phoney and formal strikes opens greater possibilities for workers self-activity as questions regarding what to do, what not to do, how to do, how not to do are unleashed.

However, calling for real, militant strikes has disastrous consequences for wage-workers.

Vis-a-vis management, work stoppage at either factory or larger levels is no longer a powerful weapon of wage-workers. On the contrary, lockouts by managements and strikes by leaders are powerful instruments used to launch major attacks on wage-workers. In the last twenty years we have not come across any strikes, anywhere in the world, that have not resulted in large-scale wage cuts, retrenchments, work intensification or closures.

A few illustrative examples:

Bombay Textile Strike of 1982-83 in 60 textile mills. 250,000 workers unified under a militant leadership on a charter of demands. Management policy was to retrench 90,000 workers and close down old mills & sell the premium land. Under normal circumstances, such large-scale retrenchment would have taken more than ten years. Through the strike, however, this policy was implemented in one year.

East India Cotton Mills, Faridabad, 1979. Automation was to be implemented. Management needed to retrench 3000 out of 6000 workers. A strike was called by the union for a one-percent increase in bonus. Militant strike, and a lot of violence. Three thousand workers dismissed.

Lakhani Shoes, Faridabad, 1983, 1988, 1996. Three major strikes by three different unions. Each time there is violence and militancy. Each time all workers are dismissed. Lakhani Shoes has registered a very fast growth rate in output. Number of factories of the company has increased from 3 in 1983 to 22 in 1997.

Requirements of a strike

The requirements of a strike are factory-wide issues and an elaborate organisational structure. Also, mobilisation of workers through persuasions, deceptions, hopes and threats.

The activity of fringe groups during strikes that are not organised by them is geared to make the strikes increasingly militant. In factories where they have a physical presence and they are able to get an echo they may be able to take over the leadership of the strike by forming struggle committees of militant workers. What are the courses open to these struggle committees?

Prolongation of the strike does not help. Rather, the longer the strike is stretched, the weaker becomes the strength of the workers vis-a-vis management. Such being the reality, struggle committees are forced to resort to:

- Direct confrontations with state administration to pressurize the state-apparatus to act on the management. The steps are big and volatile, be they demonstrations, mass meetings, road jams and railway stoppage. These steps provide easy and visible targets to repressive organs of the state-apparatus. Given past experience, workers rarely follow those advocating these steps.
- Mobilisation of media, artists, stars, influential persons, other representatives, parliamentarians, grass-root activists to persuade state administrations to act on management. Wage-workers are initially hopeful spectators to these performances and then slowly disperse as disenchantment sets in.

Both these action-courses lead to an immobilization and dispersion of workers and ensure an implementation of management policy.

Unified militant struggles, whether in the form of demonstrations, mass meetings or strikes, are akin to military operations with their generals, captains, sergeants and, of course, foot soldiers. Organisations linked to the management or organisations that are proto-states are alone capable of running such operations.

a preliminary sum-up

In general, when wage-workers resistances, refusals and steps of change are discussed, the imagery that crop up is that of mass demonstrations, mass meetings, strikes, pitched battles, insurrections. The corollaries to these are the non-mundane qualities of heroism, sacrifice, bravery, martyrdom, courage, wisdom, articulation, discipline and unity. By these very definitions, the self-activities of most wage-workers are excluded. This imagery inherently posits a spectacular arena for lead-ry to deprive the wage-workers of their voices.

More painful still is that big, mass, spectacular movements make easy targets of wage-workers for managerial apparatuses to control, manage and, if necessary, crush.

Big implies mobilisation on a mass scale. Conducting and directing committees are intrinsic to such events. Seemingly a large number of people become active, but actually it is representatives and leaders who think, decide and issue orders whereas numbers at large have to march to the tunes trumpeted. Mobilisations by representatives are for representatives.

Defeats are camouflaged as victories in order to legitimize the re-creations of these representational forms. Repeated experiences with 'big' have led wage-workers at large to keep aloof from them. This is often characterized as passivity and apathy of wage-workers.

When wage-workers daily routine oppositions become too much for a management or when a management has to go in for a major restructuring, retrenchment, wage-cut or intensification, it often resorts to spectacular work stoppage. Since production enterprise is no longer the private property of individuals (i.e. capitalist), prolonged stoppage of production is no longer a question of life and death for a management as it was for a capitalist. When necessary, managements resort to strikes, lockouts, work suspensions, suspension of operations by creating big factory-wide, area-wide issues with the help of representatives. With strikes becoming the weapon of managements, those attempting to genuinely represent wage-workers' interests are crushed. Furthermore, individuals have

become so insignificant vis-a-vis institutional structures that commitments or personalities hardly make any difference.

For all of us self-activity of wage-workers is of paramount importance. It is this area that we want to open out for discussion and debate.

As wage-workers we know that all of us, everyday and at everyplace, have to contend with oppressive and exploitative conditions around us. Individually and in small groups we take steps on our own. In small groups, we interact with each other 'not as unequals' ensuring the self-expression and self-activity of each one of us.

Confining ourselves to workplace experiences we can say that each one of us has an affinity group of half a dozen or so amongst whom all participate 'not as unequals'. In these affinity groups a lot of premeditation and co-ordination takes place. The activities of affinity groups span from mutual help to routine resistances against productivity and discipline, along with refusals and steps of change that question and challenge hierarchy, competition, money relations and wage slavery.

The problems as we see are:

- I. The importance of self-activity as reflected in these steps taken by affinity groups is denied. The steps by themselves are small and thus belittled. When they are talked about, they are derisively characterized as

insignificant workplace skirmishes, or merely survival calisthenics.

- II. Constant attempts are made by managements to suppress these self-activities through representation.
- III. Wage-workers often do not give much importance to their self activity because of the invisibility of the social effects of the small steps engendered by their self-activities.
- IV. There is a tremendous lack of linkages between affinity groups (which can only be horizontal and multi-nodal). This lack makes wage-workers vulnerable to getting coagulated into a mass whenever wider level issues are forced or arise. This coagulation if not created by representatives (which is often the case), then in itself engenders representation.
- V. More importantly, co-ordination between affinity groups is hampered by a lack of discussion on experiences of affinity groups.

Lest we be misunderstood, we would like to make it clear that we are not for small steps per se but our concern, rather, is for self-activity. Self-activity in terms of routine resistances, refusals and steps of change by wage-workers at large on a sustained, extended and expansive scale, encompassing a multifaceted global reality.

SELF-ACTIVITY OF WAGE-WORKERS AGAINST POLITICS OF CLOSURE

DEFINING CLOSURE

A viable enterprise means that enough surplus is being extracted and realised in order to be appropriated as taxes, interest payments, cuts & commissions, managerial life-style and dividends.

For financial institutions, management & state apparatus, a company becomes non-viable & sick when the extracted and realised surplus is not sufficient to meet the **existing levels** of taxes, interest rates, cuts & commissions, managerial life-style and dividends.

It is not uncommon to find that state apparatuses, financial institutions and management are sometimes forced to reduce their amounts of surplus appropriation to keep an enterprise running. But the overriding tendency, of course, remains one of perpetually increasing the amounts that are appropriated, resulting in increasing "sickness" and "unviability". The dominant propaganda and media, however, all the while speaks of "sickness" and "closure" in terms of either mismanagement or lack of profitability (i.e. inability to pay dividends). This screens the fact

that the major portion of extraction from wage-workers is appropriated as taxes, interest payments, cuts & commissions and managerial lifestyle.

POLITICS OF CLOSURE

The common interests of management, financial institutions and state apparatus dictate the survival, running and growth of an enterprise. In their common interest, they collaborate to increase intensity of work & workload, decrease wages, retrench workers and create techniques to counter wage-workers' self-activity.¹

Despite all the cunning and guile, force and deception used to keep an enterprise viable, when an enterprise "becomes unviable", then it is in the management's interest to swindle as much as it possibly can of the company's assets. When a

¹ There is of course a difference of opinion as to the relative shares of management, financial institutions and state apparatus. This clash of interest is the basis of passionate lobbying for increase or decrease in taxation, lowering or raising of interest rates, more checks to reduce corruption or less checks to reduce corruption, calls for free or monitored enterprise, etc. ad infinitum, ad nauseum. And it is these clash of interests that constitute media headlines.

goose no longer lays golden eggs, wisdom advises – ‘Cut and Eat the Goose’.

There is a well-tried out management method to grab as much as is possible of wage-workers’ legal dues before the closure of a factory. Along with the months of outstanding wages, years of provident funds/ pension funds, gratuity/ retirement benefits, years of bonus and leave travel allowances, etc. are also not paid. Company properties are then sold off with the management taking large cuts & commissions.

This has been a routine exercise in a large number of factories which have been closed in Faridabad and other places. The dominant schema is :

When a factory “becomes sick”, and closure has been decided, management – through union leaders – instigates strikes, and/or violent incidents to create conditions for lockouts. This facilitates the dispersal of workers. In these situations, management stops coming to the factory and wage workers are channelised into long drawn out civil and criminal court cases – fifteen years is very common. During all this, closure is very actively camouflaged. In the rare cases where the court cases are finally decided in favour of the workers, and the workers are at hand to take their legal dues, there is no property in the company’s name to pay. Banks’ and state apparatuses’ dues (taxes and other bills) gulp most of the little that remains.

A BREACH IN THE POLITICS OF CLOSURE

This is the scenario that is being tried out in Jhalani Tools Limited, Faridabad. But the wage-workers in Jhalani Tools are actively countering this management-leaders-state administration schema to gobble-up workers dues through various modes of self-activity. These steps of self-activity, in our opinion, have wider ramifications for wage-workers.

Management of Jhalani Tools stopped paying wages to workers from Mar’96.

The past experiences of wage-workers in Faridabad and specifically in Jhalani Tools, have thoroughly discredited leaders amongst wage-workers. Through silence and passivity, the 2,000 workers countered leaders’ and management’s methods of instigation around tangential issues. No heed was paid to grand agreements, identity politics, change of union affiliation, change of leaders, provocation by transfers, instigation to violence etc. Four groups of leaders have come (have been brought) and gone, banging their heads against this wall of ‘dull and dumb’ silence.

With mounting legal dues and increasing hardships, workers had hesitatingly started looking for alternative courses of action. Initially a small group of workers in Sept.’96 had on their own demanded back wages from the state labour department officers. Slowly, in affinity groups of 5-8, workers complaints to the state officials increased. And very soon the working of the labour department and district administration was almost jammed when 300 small groups of workers

separately started approaching the officers. Legal obligations of separate dates and hearings were done away with, but then talking to hundreds of workers at the same time was another impossibility. Like the management, the district officials desperately tried to foist leaders on workers, but failed. Faced by this stubborn refusal to accept anyone as leaders, district officials then tried their best to instigate workers to violence. They failed again.

Another facet of this incident is that collecting a crowd by giving a single date to 300 affinity groups facilitates the spread and legitimization of the ageless rhetoric of unity and delegation (for negotiation with management and administration). This was attempted by the district administration. But an interesting metaphor to counter this arose from within the crowd outside the administration office. A worker responded to the call for "unity and delegation" by calling out that - "Bees united in a hive can easily be smoked off and their honey taken away. But if affinity groups of bees swarm about, no one dares to touch their honey"

Then the management tried to create leaders and instigate strikes through summary dismissals of workers. But even when the number of dismissals reached a hundred, the workers neither made leaders nor took to violence.

With this stepping up of pressure by management, leaders and state officials, the workers of Jhalani Tools in August'97 started taking very simple steps to take their predicament to more than 300,000 co-workers in Faridabad

& Delhi. Overcoming hesitation, fear & shame, some workers in small groups of 8-10 started standing along various roads during morning and evening shift hours with hand written placards. This was done to engage in discussions with workers of other factories without any intermediaries. They have been doing this daily since Aug'97. On the placards is written:

"We are from the 2000 workers who have not been paid their wages for (so many) months";

"What is to be done when management does not pay wages?";

"We have changed leaders four times and union flags three times, but each time it has been from the frying pan into the fire";

"We have made many complaints to govt. officials and ministers but conditions have gone from bad to worse";

"Metal Box, Delta Tools, Electronics Ltd. and now Jhalani Tools workers. Whose turn tomorrow?"; etc.

Everyday they space themselves along a different road. Along each route that they stand on, workers from hundreds of factories pass by. The response of workers at large has been tremendous. Dispersed, multi-nodal conversations without intermediaries are emerging about the urgent need for new modes of self-activity of workers. Over this period of eleven months, more than 200,000 workers have read these placards and thousands of workers have stopped to have extensive conversations with them. In almost all factories of Faridabad (and large number of factories & offices in Delhi) questions posed by these workers are being debated. What is being discussed by an ever-increasing number of wage-workers is how to act on their own strength against the triumvirate of

state, management and representatives. It is a constant process of conversation, argument and counter-argument as to the 'Whats' and 'Hows' of steps of self-activity. There is awareness that the charted out paths and networks of representatives, leaders and their organisations are all geared to subvert this process.

Management, leaders and state officials are finding it difficult to instill fear in workers at large as they can find no appropriate targets for their terror tactics. More difficult than the small numbers of workers on the roads, is the problem that the straight and silent faces of workers are posing for the bosses. An additional difficulty for the bosses is the workers' refusal to go to court despite all the advice that the specialists have been doling out wholesale.

More and deeper discussions have been taking place amongst Jhalani Tool factory workers. These have found visible expression in forms like wall letters and graffiti, but a truly significant fallout has been that workers have innumerable and extended conversations within and outside the factory premises and with co-workers as well as workers from all other factories. From being a problem of one factory, it has now become a problem of all workers.

To counter the increasing self-activity of wage-workers, the provincial government organised elections, in Oct' 97 in order to establish a new leadership in the factory. From Dec' 97 the management started paying wages. However, these steps failed to put a brake on the workers' self-activity. Neither the issue of back wages & other dues could be side

tracked, nor could the management sell the IIIrd plant of the factory, nor could it make leadership credible amongst workers.

In this situation, in Apr' 98, the management resorted to massive wage-cuts in order to instigate workers. Failing again, the management then created an atmosphere of fear & violence and threw out the elected leaders – replacing them with its hand picked works committee in the first week of June'98. This hand picked committee has resorted to direct physical attack and identity politics. But the continuous rise in workers' self-activity has put a hold on this.

Small groups of workers with placards standing on the roads have increased and are increasing in number and so are the workers in conversations with them. Thereby not only creating problems for Jhalani Tools management, which has not been able to close the factory, but also for managements of thousands of factories.²

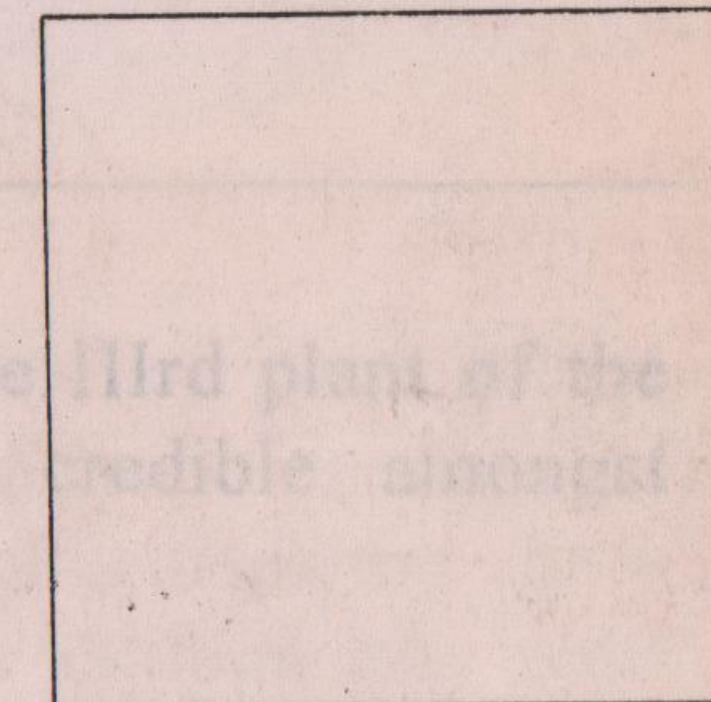
KK / Collectivities, June, 1998.

² This write up is not only to inform people about Jhalani Tools. It is also an attempt to extend the conversations taking place amongst wage-workers in Faridabad, as to the whats and hows of self-activity to counter management strategies.

SELF ACTIVITY OF WAGE WORKERS

Towards a Critique of Representation & Delegation

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