



Aufheben pamphlet

STOP THE CLOCK!

critiques of the new
social workhouse



Wildcat
Mouvement Communiste
Aufheben
Precari-Nati

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What is the link between the struggle to mitigate alienation (for higher wages, shorter hours, more benefits, less work intensity etc.) and the struggle against alienation itself? The answer to this question distinguishes communist practice from merely leftist practice. In recent years, a number of ex-autonomist and leftist groups have been trying to build a broad European-wide movement around a common programme of radical demands concerning unemployment, working-time reduction and a guaranteed minimum income. In the UK, too, such demands as a 'basic income', seen as a strategy for undermining the relation between work and human needs embodied in the wage, have been taken up not only by (post-)autonomists but also by Greens and more traditional leftists. Such strategies need to be judged in terms both of whether they come out of a real movement (though this is still no guarantee of a communist content - *vide* social democracy) and their historical context. In times of working class strength, it is possible that achieving demands such as a reduction in working-time might serve as a basis from which we could push on towards 'the point of no return'. But when the working class is weak - as we are now - such demands merely contribute to the dynamic of capital. The articles in this pamphlet on reforms already taking place in Europe show very clearly how apparently radical demands, such as working-time reduction, have been gratefully co-opted as part of the post social democratic project.

We have put this collection of articles together because we feel that each of them serves as an important contribution to a confrontation with and critique of some of the prevailing currents in the political debate over how to take new working class struggles forward. However, this collection does not necessarily reflect a common project among the different groups; and nor do we necessarily endorse every argument expressed here. Nevertheless, you will find some common elements in the groups' perspectives - such as the refusal of work as a basic element of working class struggle, and the conviction that working class emancipation will come from working class self-activity not from mediators such as trade unions which seek accommodation with capital and the state.

The critiques in this pamphlet refer to specific demands, but they also have general applicability. The kind of radical-reformist strategies we are attacking here are likely to re-emerge in different guises again and again until the link between the struggle to mitigate alienation and the struggle against alienation itself is finally realized and transcended, and human history can at last begin.

Aufheben, Summer 2000

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Preface:

Putting the critique of capitalism back on the agenda

Wildcat (Germany)

We are fed up with working more and more for lower wages, being pushed around by the bosses and forced into workfare schemes by the state. We are also fed up with those who are helping to smooth the way for new methods of exploitation, with their 'radical' demands for working time reduction, for new social benefits - or worse still for more jobs.

Under threat of unemployment, previously radical types have abandoned the critique of capitalism in favour of an alliance with the state to defend the 'good old days' of social democracy and Keynesianism against 'neo-liberalism'. They no longer question the barbarism of the whole of society, grounded in the daily control of our minds and bodies by the compulsion to work. Instead of expressing the real anger of millions of people at the daily loss of our lives in the workplace (the fundamental basis of capitalist social relations), they tell us to regain the 'primacy of politics over economics' and to demand a 'humanitarian' administration of the capitalist economy. But politics and the economy are two sides of the same coin: **the global workhouse.**

The articles in this pamphlet deal with such political illusions, which have become influential in campaigns against unemployment, for working time reduction and for a guaranteed basic income. In examples from Britain, France, Italy and Germany, it is shown exactly how campaigns for such demands have provided a rationale for the state and employers to attack working conditions and social benefits, to intensify exploitation - and above all, to stifle any radical movement by the workers themselves.

After twenty years of losing ground for a fundamental critique of capitalism, it is necessary to sweep away a lot of the ideological garbage. For those fighting the deterioration of our living conditions, working time reduction or reformed social benefits seem at face value to provide ideal demands for uniting people in collective struggles. But working class history tells a different story. On the one hand, the slogan of 'working time reduction' has served as a pretext to make working time more flexible and to squeeze any free time out of working time; the reform of the welfare state - as well as its very introduction, for that matter - was never a genuine working class aim, but rather a concession to ease class tensions, to atomize people and to subordinate their daily lives. On the other hand, real struggles which confronted capital started, not from political parties or other representative groups drawing up demands, but from the daily resistance of the

working class to exploitation, their collective struggle and the reassertion of their ability to confront and to suppress capital.

Demanding employment, working-time reduction and a minimum guaranteed income - in order to prolong exploitation

This collection of articles analyzes recent developments in class relations, in order to expose some of the main myths about the situations in different countries, and to show how these myths (such as the reputation of the unemployed movement in France and of working-time reduction in Germany) are used in other countries to sell reformist campaigns as brand new politics.

Mouvement Communiste: Considerations of the agitations of the unemployed and casual workers. In the winter of 1997-8, new actions in France seemed to indicate the possible emergence of a new movement of the unemployed. In some other countries, including Germany, this appearance was used by leftists to try to stimulate a movement of the unemployed from above, looking for the best demands with which to mobilize the unemployed. The article questions whether there was a 'movement' at all, or merely a political campaign by some groups, and offers a critique of the different ideologies of those involved in this campaign.

Aufheben: Unemployed recalcitrance and welfare restructuring in the UK today. The background of new 'make-work' schemes by the state is the subject of the article from Britain, about the Labour government's New Deal programme. It points out that it is a clear attack on the culture of refusal and recalcitrance, which emerged during the 1980s and which Thatcher failed to smash.

Wildcat: Reforming the welfare state in order to save capitalism. One of the central demands of these campaigns all over Europe is the 'guaranteed minimum (or basic) income'. The article on this subject explains the role of such a guaranteed income in the restructuring of the welfare state in the face of changed class relations (e.g., the case of Germany). Without an understanding of this context, we risk affirming illusions about the supposed 'improvements' provided by such a minimum income and participating in the fixing of the social workhouse with our demands and campaigns.

Wildcat: The thirty-five hour week: Lower incomes and more work. For many people, including those on the radical left, working time reduction in Germany looks like an exemplary success of the working class - beginning with the first agreement in the direction of the 35-hour week in 1984, and up to the spectacular introduction of the 'four-day week' by Volkswagen in 1994. This article demonstrates how the 35-hour week served as a Trojan horse for flexibilization, and how Volkswagen - in co-operation with the trade union bureaucracy - used the 1994 crisis in car production to impose wage cuts and flexible working practices on the workforce from above. In retrospect, the

introduction of the so-called 'working time reduction' by many firms marked a historical shift towards the extension of the working day.

Precari Nati: The awkward question of times. The article on working time reduction in Italy explains how working time reduction, whether by local or national bargaining, is part of a strategy for capitalist restructuring anywhere. In the Italian case, this is exemplified by the discrepancy between the negotiated working times and the actual ones.

Mouvement Communiste: 'Thirty-five hours' against the proletariat. 'Working time reduction' was introduced in Germany with the help of the trade unions, which are thoroughly integrated within Germany's political system. In France, the same policy in the form of the Aubry Law was imposed by the state, under the auspices of the leftist government. The application of the law, with its provisions for the gradual introduction of the 35-hour week, has to be negotiated in each company. This has given employers the welcome opportunity to intensify exploitation and cut labour costs. Next on the agenda, is our observation of and support for the first stirrings of industrial unrest against these attacks, which are carried out in the name of 'working time reduction'.



Considerations of the agitations of the unemployed and casual workers *Mouvement Communiste (France)*

1. Objective wealth of the movement versus its lack of power

A provisional analysis of the agitations by unemployed and casual workers leads to this first observation: their quality lies more in their social foundation than in their striking power or their capacity to cut deeply at the heart of class relationships. Rank and file militants of these movements experienced a sort of irreducible dichotomy where feelings of impotence and illusions mingled themselves. A great anger, very justified and widely shared by the impoverished proletarians, was sufficient alone to sustain and to legitimize, in the eyes of their authors, short-lived actions. Groups of desperate proletarian, excited by not entirely innocent and disinterested media hype, irresistibly pushed by their destitution, threw themselves into blind struggles of weak intensity and strong symbolic aspect.

As a whole, the actions failed in their objective of widening the audience and the organization of the struggle to the immense mass of unemployed and casual persons and even less to proletarians in longer term employment. Occupations of the Assedics branches, of the ANPE head office, of EDF-GDF offices,¹ of the railway stations etc, generally saw the participation of very few militants (an average number of between 10 and 30 per initiative), in a situation of nearly complete isolation between workers and employees. Unionists and 'well-intentioned' association members, who served as a separating screen to all direct encounters, always interfered between them. It goes without saying that the 'associations of the unemployed' and unions never used their capacity of mobilization among proletarians with 'steady' jobs in order to bring them closer to their more impoverished friends. They did on the other hand multiply the number of Saturday afternoon demonstrations - the usual substitute for class unity, and a prominent place for union apparatchnicks on parade.

As for actions sponsored by the extreme wings of the associations appointed to the supervision of these struggles (occupations of the Ecole Normale, of the Universities of Nanterre and Jussieu, quest for alms consisting in three shopping trolleys of goods at the Leclerc stores of Pantin, gastronomic incursions at the Coupole and Fouquet's restaurants), they were even more ineffectual and confused, successful only in their cheap spectacular representation of the movement. Here, one repeats as farce the '68-ist gesture in order to channel the more undisciplined and nervous elements in the movement.

Unfortunately, due also to a cacophonous panoply of fundamentally innocuous demands, knowledge of the adversary's terrain and of the specific

¹ Assedics = the state body that manages the distribution of unemployment benefit; ANPE = the government organization that supervises the unemployed and tries to find them work; EDF-GDF = Electricity de France and Gas de France.

mechanisms of oppression targeted lacked badly. As the actions went by, the hoped for revelation through praxis - in struggle - of the particular chain of capitalist oppression that holds prisoner the weakest part of the proletariat didn't really progress. The experience gained by the participants in these actions risks proving ineffectual when the fight recovers its impetus and leaves its embryonic state and the democratic and consensual track that brought it into its present rut.

Thus, a parody of the class struggle went down the street without ever succeeding - and for a very good reason - in really becoming threatening: neither to the dominant social order, nor, less ambitiously, to the remaining welfare state institutions. Yet, the vultures of standardized information made no mistakes: the obsessive accent put on actions which implied directly only some thousands of people at their highest point reveals the fear that the caricature may change suddenly into tragedy for the dominant classes. Behind the expertly agitated scarecrow of a May '98 of the 'excluded' - very unlikely in these conditions - bosses exorcise concerns provoked by the fragmentation of a social body crossed by successive crises of growing gravity and generally weak economic upturns.



2. State exploitation of unemployed struggles

This is not all. On the dominant class side, the anger of the dispossessed, as long as it doesn't express itself on an independent footing and at the very height of its suffering, offers the opportunity to lay down again in the heat of events - the terms of oppression. That is precisely what happened during the recent agitations. By means of some crumbs distributed in the shape of exceptional Christmas bonuses at the height of the wave of occupations (a billion francs) - and of which the individualized increase (on presentation of a special help demand file) continues in moderate doses on the sly - the French government succeeded in placing in an appreciable and attentive social environment its laws about employment for the young and about exclusion and to focus attention of important parts of civil society on its project of a law for a 35 hour week. Leaving a detailed analysis of these proposals to another article (see '35 hours against the proletariat', in this collection), it would be useful to briefly summarize its expected aims and results.

These legislative devices have three main objectives:

1) *To decrease the impact of youth and long-term unemployment on the cohesion of civil society.* Existing at the two temporal extremities of working life (at the end of the school programme and from 50-55 years²), this kind of unemployment removes from the proletariat all hope of progress in his/her condition, measured on the complete arc of his/her 'active' period. The feeling takes root that one enters with increasing difficulties into the ranks of workers and that it ends by an impoverishment and a premature expulsion from these same ranks. This perception of things, henceforth extensively shared, greatly affects the level of trust of proletarians in the dominating mode of production and in its State. Thus, without fundamentally upsetting the imperious requirements of the job market, many West European governments are now obliged to face the very unpleasant political consequences of such a reality (abstentionism at the polls, distrust of institutions, revolts, strikes, etc.), and to work on cosmetic solutions to these problems. Whole batteries of measures are instituted: for the young, an increase in schooling years, (diplomas for all), and further education (training of all kinds), diffusion of 'atypical' deskilled jobs, (CDD,³ jobs partly or completely financed by public funds, part-time work, seasonal work, flexibilised hours, weekend work, paid work experience, etc.), and reductions of recruitment wages; for the long term unemployed, partial or total early retirement, long-term training, so-called jobs of collective benefit, and piloted, state financed access to 'atypical' jobs, until now, almost exclusively the privilege of the young. The desired result

² In France, in 1995, half of the young between 15 and 25 were inactive; amongst those in work, 20% had a job deemed 'typical' and 16% had part time jobs. In 1997, about 35% of people between 50 and 59 years old had no work at all, and exactly half of those between 55 and 59 found themselves in this situation.

³ Contrat à durée déterminée (short-term contract); normally bosses cannot re-hire people at the end of a short-term contract more than twice, but if the boss lets the worker off for a week she can go on being re-hired indefinitely.

consists in sowing the illusion that these people have been pulled from the hell of unemployment and, by this logic, that they 'recovered their dignity', as the now totally exploited.

2) *To increase the flexibility of the job market and to decrease the cost of deskilled labour.* As is well known, bosses complain incessantly of the excessively high cost of the workforce and ask for increasingly extravagant budgetary concessions (taxes on wages rather than on employers). For their part, governments bustle about these 'chantiers sociaux' to satisfy the bosses' requirements, meanwhile administering to proletarians - the object of their concentrated attentions - doses of ideology so that they swallow the poison without protesting. The left has always excelled in this project when it has taken office, and it is again the case today. With the youth employment legislation, the left invents work of fixed hours guaranteed for five years; young proletarians that accept these placements put back at best for five years their real entry into the workforce, are shoved into posts with very little or no prospects, and are paid at the SMIC (minimum wage) level. With the social exclusion legislation, the 'pluralist' government aims also to submit the unemployed to the mercy of the job market. This effectively means a set of constraining devices that results for the unemployed person in the obligation to accept any work with any conditions. With the law for a 35-hour week, in exchange for the conditional promise of the creation of 150,000 new jobs, the Left attacks 'dead time' (the introduction of the distinction between actual work time and contractual work time), imposes an overall decrease of the rates of overtime pay in their pure and simple absorption into negotiated work hours (extension of 'atypical' work), erases the hourly SMIC rate and splits it (SMIC 35 hours and SMIC 39 hours), destroys the barrier on the authorized length of the working day, (working-time becomes measured annually, general application of weekend shift work, of seasonal work and night work), following the example of the Robien law instituted by a government of the Right (less than 20,000 jobs created until now), encourages the decrease of overall wage rates 'in exchange for secured or created jobs' and in any case institutes an indefinite freeze on wages (see the article '35-hours against the proletariat' in this collection). If with these measures the savings made by companies on manpower costs have not yet been calculated by economic forecasters, we expect that, in all probability, the bosses will come out of it the winners! It is useful to recall at this point that ex-water-board boss Mr. Jean-Marie Messier, chief executive officer of Vivendi - which became, by the recent acquisition of Havas, the second biggest industrial/services group after Elf Aquitaine - is one of the most committed supporters of the 35 hour week legislation. And all this in the name of the struggle for work.

3) *To put the unemployed in the workplace.* This point is often underestimated, but it is of great importance. The stagnation of real wages (since the last economic crisis of the early 90s), the dizzy expansion of unemployment due

to economic crises and technological advances,⁴ the increase in job insecurity and black market work (about 10% of GDP, according to the European Commission), the temporal increase in the expected availability for work \endash daily, weekly and yearly, (weekend work, overtime, seasonal work, night shifts, etc.), are phenomena that have deeply affected the state of mind of proletarians and have rendered them markedly more docile and resigned. But to workers who kept a 'traditional' steady job the feeling persisted that despite everything the jungle stopped at the door of their workplace. This is going to change. With these new laws, these workers will be blessed with the opportunity to help in this process in their workshops and offices. After having witnessed it in the neighbourhood and on the way to work, after having recognized it in the eyes of friends that in increasingly great numbers sink into inactivity and shit work, and in the look of distress of the newly part-time unemployed, they will also have to bear it during their eight daily working hours. These hostages of dull toil are going to be rebranded into menacing crosses, by bosses acting as priests of doom, to constantly remind the general proletariat that worse is always possible - that any worker can at any time be crucified in her turn. If the intermittently unemployed person is capable of executing the same task as a worker in full time employment, the boss will let the latter know that his job costs too much and is not flexible enough. If this is not the case, the boss will accustom the worker to a situation in which wildly varied mixtures of regulations - not subject to the previous social democratic consensus - results in a greatly increased number of wage levels (with, as its ultimate aim, a complete deregulation of wage-level guarantees), and last but not least, a 'management of human resources' completely subject to the client. On top of this, for the bosses' professional doormats, the presence of the 'active' unemployed will provide opportunities to exercise their frustrated desire to rule and to strut about at very little cost.

The ambitious strategy of the Jospin government is to use the many weaknesses of this mini revolt of the unemployed to reduce even further the many

⁴ Behind this very fashionable concept we can note firstly that production has progressed well beyond the home market, following the example of their foreign counterpart, the big French conglomerates have reinforced their internationalisation and have set up new units of production where the market is growing faster than in Western Europe. On the other hand, because of the continuing sluggishness of the French market, less and less supported by state funding (from 1993 onwards, the amount of state funding as part of GDP has slowly decreased; in 1997, it was 54.7% against 55.2% in 1996), French investments have been targeted more on the rationalisation and modernisation of existing production methods than on their increase. Secondly, the mechanisation of a large part of intellectual work and the increased automation of manual work, obtained by the introduction of a lot of new electronic tools, (computers, telecommunication), have decisively eliminated many occupations (typists, book-keepers, etc). Today 40,000 secretarial and administrative jobs disappear every year. The result is that in France, between 1990 and 1997, according to DARE (the research department of the employment ministry), employment has remained effectively stable (+0.1%). Only service industries with the smallest technological component increased their workforce between 1990 and 1997 (+8.0%). And this when the workforces of industry and construction have decreased during the same period by 13.5% and 17.0% respectively. Unskilled workers of these two sectors have decreased even more than the figures indicated above. Indeed, at 23.6%, the rate of unemployed for the unskilled is almost double that of the whole working population.

segmental splits (between geographical regions, between manual and intellectual work, between professions, between levels of pay, between sexes, ages and ethnic origins, etc), which, from the point of view of capital, ossify the job market. But most of all, following the example of their British counter-parts, it is on course to accomplish the perilous feat of at least partly destroying the barrier between work and the dole. Henceforth, thanks to the '*nationaux-pluriel*', the unemployed will be employable *as unemployed*; all unemployed will be called up to contribute to the production of goods and to the reproduction of the dominant social relations (police assistants, school helpers, etc.), without diminishing their extreme economic vulnerability, and without the stigma of poverty disappearing. Concurrently, wage earners will increasingly measure the very short distance that today separates them from the unemployed.

3. Rank and file militants - prisoners of trade-unionism and of teaching by example

If an initial balance sheet was to be made of the recent struggles of the unemployed and casual workers, next to the small crumbs obtained here and there, (suspension of electricity cut-offs, food vouchers, a few hundred francs taken here and there for different reasons, more respect in the Assedics, free photocopying, etc.), would be the incorporation of the new organisations representing the unemployed (AC!, Apeis, MNCP and the CGT committee)⁵ into the official processes of negotiations between 'social partners' with the aim of participating in the management of dole funds.

Do the destitute dream and fight for a world without anguish and want? The concrete translation of their dreams is realised in the launching into the orbit of social democratic institutions of capital a new generation of trade unionists! The confusion and weakness of the current movement is for many due to the fact that it is determined by this disappointing dead-end, but this doesn't explain everything. There is also an almost complete lack of independent political expression of the movement.

Nevertheless, as we argued during the most important recent movements (in France and Belgium: the rail strikes of 1986, of the Peugeot-Sochaux workers in October 1989, of the Renault-Cleon workers at the end of 1991, the struggle of Belgian workers against the global plan of autumn 1993 and those of the Air France ground staff in October of the same year, the strike of Gec-Alsthom workers

⁵ AC! (Agir Ensemble Contre le Chomage: 'Action together against unemployment'); association campaigning against unemployment. Apeis (Association pour l'entraide, l'information et la solidarité: 'Association for employment, information and solidarity'); founded by the French Communist Party (CP). MNCP (Mouvement national des chomeurs et precaires: 'National movement of unemployed and insecure workers'). CGT (Confédération Générale du Travail); the French CP's union federation.

⁶ SNCF = state railway; RATP = Paris public transport authority (Metro).

⁷ In France, 1997 was marked by the lowest number of hours lost to strikes since 1935.

of Belfort and Bourgne of Nov/Dec '94, the industrial strikes of the spring of 1995 and those of the public sector in Nov/Dec of the same year, the long strife at Renault-Vilvoorde and at the ironworks at Clabecq in 1997), this does not mean an absence of political development amongst the most engaged proletarians. at Belin, at Flins, at Sochaux, at Belfort and Bourogne, at Cléon, on the runways of Roissy and Orly, in certain depots and workshops of the SNCF and the RATP⁶ or among certain local government employees of the Parisian suburb, at Vilvoorde and Clabecq, even in certain committees of unemployed and casual workers the political discussion is lively. The need for a political expression for the ideas generated and/or confirmed by the unrest is still much needed. Despite this, confidence is lacking, delegation remains the rule and political expression is slow in coming into being.

Trade unionism obscures with a net of falsely realist and reasonable opportunities (demands and negotiations) the aspirations of proletarians set on independence and on a political struggle covering the entirety of the conditions of exploitation. Many proletarians consider the new trade-unionism little more than a lesser evil compared with complete inaction, capitulation or a romantic struggle fought in vain. Therefore, the limitation of the political quality of these struggles, we are sure, is born of the pursuit of a 'transition period that lasts indefinitely'. A period⁷ which demands that communists intervene at the heart of these movements brandishing the weapon of the critique of trade unionism and of the emasculation by it of working class struggles. The workers need revolutionary political openings which are recognisable, clear and organized.

The critique of trade unionism must not however end up in obsessively repeating exhortations for the revolution (an empty and meaningless word in present conditions), or, worse, in the negation of all specific demands made by the working class. What we are seeking to target with our critique is not the search for improvement - always threatened - in the condition of the exploited, but the trade unionism which separates the defensive struggles of the communist political perspective in order to integrate them into the many devices of capitalist social democracy. Trade unionism makes of the inevitable economic struggles between buyers and sellers in the job market a choice, a horizon willed and determined unsurpassable, enough in itself. This is what needs to be challenged.

Independent working class organizations, when they exist, must be careful to avoid the trap of the representation of defensive struggles by structures predisposed or appointed to this end by the enemy. It has no where been proved that for the exploited class to win in its struggles it needs to arm itself with a whole panoply of hierarchical organisations, each corresponding to a specific field of the class war. If we look at the real history of the class struggle, all sorts of organisational combinations have been employed: working class parties with or without trade unions, more or less political trade unions with or without a party, councils and militias with or without parties and/or trade unions - none of these hopeful

combinations have proved capable of securing victory. However, even when struggles see the birth of a whole group of ad hoc organisations, the dynamic of the movement, if it is not interrupted, tends always to their unification, to their fusion at the service of the maximum concentration of available proletarian force. This is a necessary process when confrontations become decisive. As of today, we want to invite the working class vanguard to help us understand this concrete logic.

The workers' committees that arise out of class struggle must assume and lead the political revolutionary fight by re-connecting it to its material base: the daily struggle of the 'economic' interests of the workers.

It is only when a sufficiently strong, broad and representative system of such organizations have come into being that we will have access to the key to the practical problem of the independent political representation of the proletariat. For this, we must concentrate all our energies in constructing a network of political workers' committees. To postpone to better days (when the class struggle carries well-developed communist ideas) the development of the political self-constitution of the proletariat, means simply to give it up for ever. Regarding this, nothing would be more harmful than to think that we are at the stage of the economic struggle and that we can only take on the political struggle when we have completely solved the former. This would amount to defending the idea that the political revolutionary struggle is independent of the relationships of production and the tensions that cross it. Despite this, the proliferation of a relatively 'alternative' trade unionism would in no way constitute a stage in this process. It would mean, on the contrary, a major obstacle on the steep road ahead. Today, this understanding of things is unfortunately rarely shared by the more radical elements of the proletariat. At the moment, most prefer to reduce their actions to so called alternative trade unionism, to cut a small space at the heart of the trade unionist cage, and to throw all their energies into propagandist, minority actions, with the goal of 'raising the consciousness' of class comrades to 'train' them in the struggle. With the trade unionist short cut comes the fragile safety valve of an anger expressed in a harmless and ephemeral way through punchy actions carried out by a few in the name of those that they claim to represent. And in the hope that the media will notice them... The politically passive fall-back of trade unionism is enmeshed with vague, irresolute protest and vanguardism, and even worse, is reduced to a travesty, a caricature of the class struggle. All of it accompanied by a glaring lack of understanding of the terrain and of the real power relationships. The recent unrest by the destitute have provided a new, life-size illustration of this.

Unemployed recalcitrance and welfare restructuring in the UK today

Aufheben (UK)

1 Introduction

In recent years, unemployment and similar welfare benefits - the dole - have become a focus of struggle in the UK. The small group which produces *Aufheben* has been involved in this struggle. As proletarians who at times use the dole as a means of subsistence, fighting to defend it is an expression of our own needs. But such a fight has consequences beyond the particular needs of the unemployed. The main tack we took up in fighting on this issue was to assert the connection of the dole and wages. The dole tends to act as a floor to wages. Undermine that floor and wages are also undermined. Thus we argued that the current government attack on the dole needs to be seen as part of a broad restructuring programme designed to re-orient the class to accept more work, worse conditions and less money.

This article describes how the dole arose through the inclusion of working class needs in the social democratic state. With the retreat of social democracy, the British state has repeatedly sought to 'reform' welfare. The recent 'New Deal' for the unemployed is an example of this. While carried out by the Labour Party, traditionally associated with social democracy, it is a policy of 'welfare reform' which accepts many of the 'neo-liberal' premises of the previous (Conservative) government but which seeks to develop a new agenda. We suggest that, despite the peculiarities of the UK, what has been happening here is relevant to developments in the rest of Europe.

2 The triumph and retreat of social democracy in the UK

The Second World War was the turning point for UK capital and the working class this century, in that it cleared the way for the consolidation of Fordist mass production and mass consumption ("pile 'em high, sell 'em cheap"). Before the war, these production relations had been a source of intense class conflict, especially in the United States, where they were pioneered. War, and the US victory, cleared the way for introducing these relations throughout the Western bloc. However, this restructuring of capitalist relations of production and reproduction could not simply be imposed on the working class, particularly in the victorious countries. Unions and social democratic parties were needed to integrate the working class into these new relations.

The previous 'mode of accumulation'¹ was based on restricting the supply of commodities in order to obtain monopoly prices with which to accommodate the

¹ The capitalist *mode of production* is, of course, an essential category for grasping the present form of class society defined by generalized commodity production and wage-labour, where the ruling class extracts surplus-labour in the form of surplus-value (which is divided into profit, rent, interest etc.). But beyond this level of analysis it seems necessary to periodize the capitalist mode of production to grasp the changes that are occurring.

demands of skilled and organized sections of the working class. By contrast, Fordism entailed the unfettered expansion of production. Capital's real domination and 'scientific' development of the labour process allowed a continual rise in the productivity of labour. In return for conceding control over the labour process, the working class was virtually guaranteed continually rising real wages within the limits of the growth in productivity. These higher wages then provided the demand for the ever increasing production of commodities - cars, washing machines etc. - by Fordist industry. The new mode of accumulation was given stability through the UK, along with other Western economies, signing up to the Bretton Woods system of fixed exchange rates, according to which each national currency was committed to maintain a fixed parity to the dollar. All this was the basis of the Keynesian economic strategy of demand management and investment in the public sector adopted by successive British governments of both main political parties.

Socially, an essential precondition of Fordism was the establishment of a 'post-war settlement'. Pressure from the working class, and ruling class fear of revolution, led to the provision following the second world war of comprehensive and inclusive welfare, corporatism (tripartite organizations and trade union rights), full employment and wealth redistribution through taxation. In effect, the working class exchanged the desire for revolution or further social changes in return for the inclusion of its demands within the state and capital. The 'gains' for the working class - for example, free health care, universal welfare system, social housing - necessarily involved its demobilization. Working class communities were broken up as new housing estates were built. The old networks of mutual aid and solidarity were replaced by the bureaucratic administration of welfare etc. At the same time, rising real wages necessarily involved an intensification and monotonization of work.

With these 'gains', social democracy - that is, *the representation of the working class as labour within capital and the bourgeois state, politically through social democratic parties, and economically through trades unions* - had finally triumphed. The precondition for any revolutionary movement thus became an attack on this representation. The working class had to overcome the social-democratic containment of its struggle.

The post-war settlement could only be sustained through the economic conditions of the post-war boom; yet it also tended to undermine these very economic conditions. By the late 1960s, the terms of the post-war settlement were an increasing burden on UK capital and served to strengthen the hand of the

The concept of a 'mode of accumulation' is a means to do this. However, it must be remembered that this concept has been developed by the academic Regulation School in a structuralist and technological determinist framework. For us, when describing the features of such periods it is essential to recognize that the foundation is the balance of forces in the class struggle and not the objectified expressions of this. Thus, though finding the concept of 'Fordism' useful for grasping the nature of the post-war boom, we don't accept the concept of 'post-Fordism', which is often taken to mean post-capitalism. For an interesting discussion of this, see F. Gambino 'A critique of the Fordism of the Regulation School' in *Common Sense* 19.

working class. Workers' demands for more money and less work began to exceed the limits of the social democratic compromise. In 1974, a strike by the miners, the strongest section of the UK working class, toppled the Conservative government. The incoming Labour government tried to defuse class militancy within the terms of social democracy. In order to restrain rising wage demands, a 'social contract', mediated by the unions, attempted to impose equality of sacrifice on all sections of the working class. However, this collapsed in the winter of discontent (1978-9) when many of the key sectors of the working class struck, bringing the country almost to a standstill.

Subsequently, the Thatcher government abandoned the post-war consensus and asserted instead the right of capital to manage. Central to Thatcher's restructuring was both anti-strike legislation and an abandonment of any attempt to mitigate or curb mass unemployment. From the point of view of capital, the Thatcherite restructuring was highly successful. Britain moved from the country leading the industrialized world in terms of strikes and worker 'bloody-mindedness' to one having the lowest level of strikes and the most cowed workforce. Much of the leadership of the labour movement in effect accepted Thatcher's assertion that there was 'no alternative'; the idealistic illusions of progressive social democracy gave way to the 'new realism' of accommodation to the market. Politically, the development of 'New Labour' has been the result.

3 Mass unemployment and 'dole autonomy'

'New Labour' represents the recognition by the political leadership of British social democracy that the re-definition of the post-war settlement begun by Thatcher was irreversible but incomplete. One reason that the re-definition is incomplete is that many sections of the working class have yet to be fully re-integrated into the discipline of the market. To understand this, and hence the importance of work to the 'New Labour' project, we must look at some of the unforeseen consequences of Thatcher's strategic use of mass unemployment.

Mass unemployment certainly had the desired effect on many sectors of the labour market - eliminating at a stroke some of the most militant. The virtual eradication of the mining industry is the key example. Yet the other central aim of the strategy of mass unemployment - to rein in wage levels through creating a reserve army of labour - remained essentially unfulfilled. In effect, a dual labour market emerged. The problem for British capital was that large numbers of people simply got used to long-term unemployment. Those outside work were perceived by the bosses as being unemployable - lacking not just 'skills' but basic work-discipline. So rather than this reserve army of labour creating competition and pressure on wages, the 'recalcitrance' of the unemployed had the effect that, in many sectors, existing workers were simply poached across enterprises and were still able to command relatively high wages. Large sectors of British capital therefore remained uncompetitive.

Most unemployed people certainly sought work, if only because they needed the money. Others, albeit a minority, tried to turn the dearth of jobs to our advantage. Thus, in the 1980s, the dole was the basis of a number of creative projects and movements, some of which were overtly political. In effect, the dole became the trouble-maker's grant. This has continued into the 1990s. For example, many of the most committed anti-roads militants would not have been able to occupy trees etc. without the dole. One could say that the 'refusal of work', a militant tendency which had developed in the workplaces in the 1960s and 70s, now became displaced onto the dole. With such displacement came a certain degree of marginalization, however. While the earlier 'refusal of work' threatened to spread across workplaces and thus form links between different workers and to those outside the workplace, the new 'dole autonomy' too often entails forms of individualism and lifestyleism. This becomes clearer when we examine the fragmented responses of people to the current attacks on the dole.

Throughout the 1980s, there had been various attempts to tighten dole regulations. Most had little effect, largely through dole-workers' preferences for an easy life. In 1996, the Job Seeker's Allowance (JSA) was introduced as a more concerted attempt to deal with this problem of the recalcitrance of the unemployed sector of the labour market. The JSA entailed a harsher benefits regime, codifying and systematizing the pressure on unemployed claimants to seek work (any work) or get off the dole. The JSA was openly part of 'neo-liberal' ideology,² being designed to increase the effectiveness of the industrial reserve army and hence competition on the labour market, driving down wages at the bottom end.

The main organized opposition to the JSA took two forms. First, a small anti-JSA network of anarchist and similar groups from around the country was formed. These 'Groundswell' groups were often connected to claimants' unions or community action groups. Most participants were unemployed themselves, and had

² 'Neo-liberal' ideology is an expression of the freedom of global finance capital. In response to the class struggles of the 60s and 70s and the difficulties in maintaining accumulation, states took actions (e.g., by abandoning Bretton Woods) which in effect created the conditions for the development of the relative autonomy of global finance capital. Through taking this more autonomous form, capital could outflank areas of working class strength. A situation was created in which governments of nation states could claim that they had no freedom of manoeuvre but rather had to compete in terms of labour flexibility, social costs etc. to maintain competitiveness and attract investment. The 'neo-liberal' ideology and practices which Britain and the USA promoted were only the harshest examples of this move by states to present aggressive measures against their working classes as dictated by an external force. The 'Third Way' policies these states now champion are largely a continuation of the same attacks with a softened rhetoric but similar appeal to 'new global realities'. Opponents of 'neo-liberalism' and 'globalization' fall into the trap of opposing the state to capital and then appealing to the state to tame the economy. They are also wont to whine about the irresponsibility of capital and complain that democratic institutions are being undermined. It must be remembered that democratic states have participated in the creation of the structures of the global economy and the current relation between finance and industrial capital. The political and economic, rather than distinct spheres, are two sides of the same coin of capitalist domination. From the proletarian perspective it must always be remembered that finance capital even in its more autonomous global manifestation is not a separate entity but is simply a form that capital takes. It is ultimately dependent on always coming back to concrete labour - to exploitation and insubordination. The class struggle must be fought out with real workers in concrete situations.

in an important sense chosen to be so. Although the Groundswell network held a few marches, pickets and occupations, attempts to build local solidarity through leafleting and advice (e.g., on getting through Jobcentre interviews) were more prevalent.

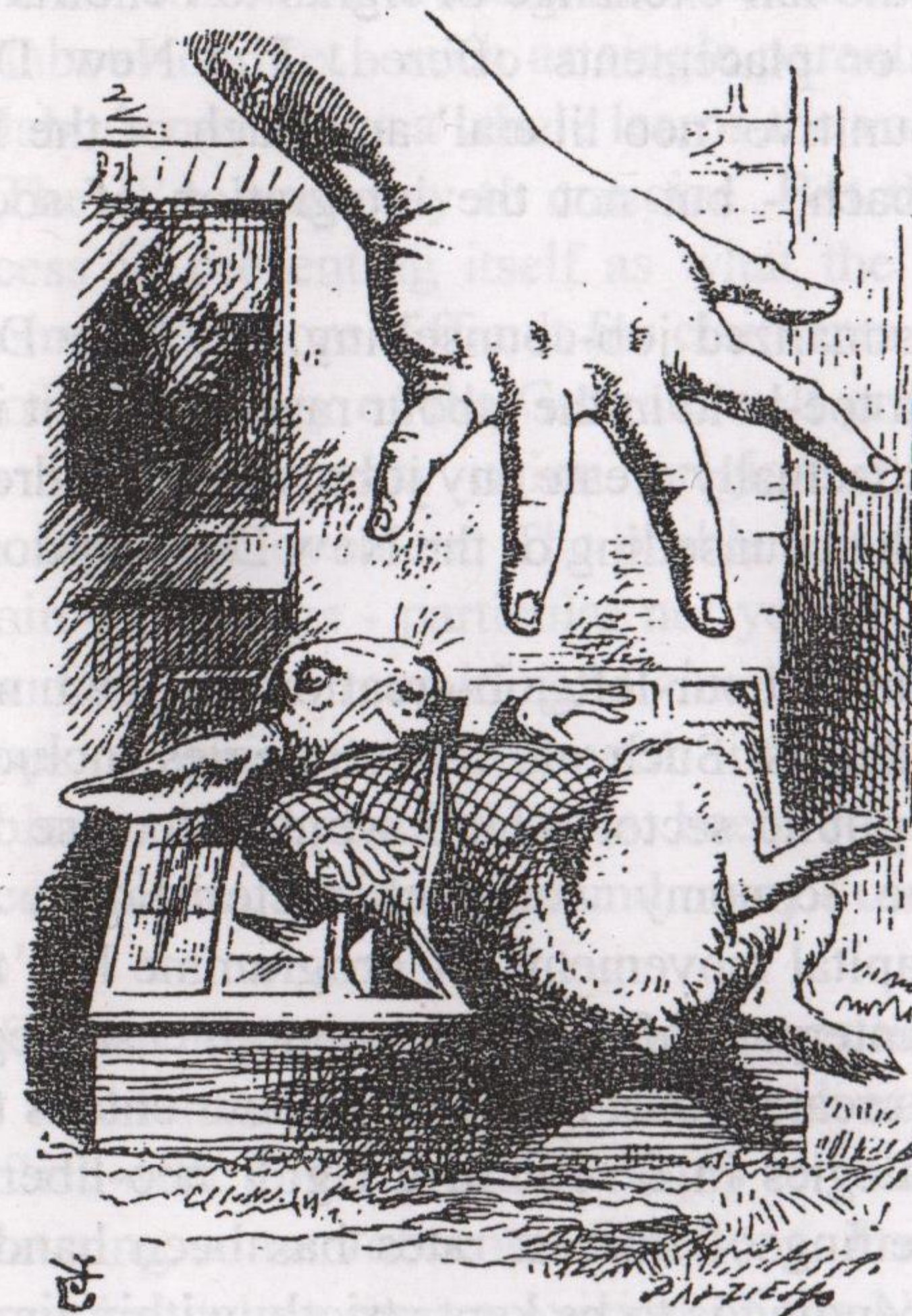
Second, many Jobcentre (dole) workers themselves were opposed to the JSA, since the new regime threatened to increase the policing aspect of their work and hence bring them into conflict with claimants. The Jobcentre workers' strike in the winter of 1995-6 was not over the JSA as such (due in part to the terms of the anti-strike legislation mentioned above), and certainly did not lead to a direct victory for the workers. But it served both to delay the implementation of the JSA by three months and to undermine its effectiveness, particularly the ability of management to impose performance-related pay, whereby dole-workers are rewarded according to the number of claimants that they pressurize off the dole.

The Jobcentres in Brighton came out on indefinite strike. Those of us involved in the anti-JSA campaign in Brighton argued that shared action with dole-workers was a practical necessity. Moreover, Jobcentres are a section of the civil service which has seen increasing proletarianization; many dole-workers are on low pay and short-term contracts, and are very similar to the claimants they process. Claimants in the anti-JSA campaign group therefore joined workers on the picket-line. We explained to other claimants that the strike was in their interests. A victory for the Jobcentre workers would strengthen their hand against management, and hence against the implementation of the JSA.

On the basis of the joint action during the Jobcentre strike, the Brighton claimants action group established links with militant dole-workers. Support from organized claimants encouraged dole-workers to resist management demands; and dole-workers passed on information and discussed tactics with organized claimants. On the day the JSA was finally introduced (October 1996) over 300 people laid siege to all the town's Jobcentres; dole-workers used the siege as an opportunity to down tools, bringing the new regime into chaos. Unfortunately, however, such scenes were not repeated elsewhere. Since then, although the JSA is now in force, Brighton Jobcentres are among the most lenient in the country; Jobcentre workers here have a reputation for discreet acts of solidarity at the counter when it comes to filling in JSA forms.

The demonstration against the JSA was perhaps the high point of the claimants' 'movement'. Since then, there have been a number of minor successes against a small-scale workfare scheme, 'Project Work', in which a number of claimants were forced to work for their dole for local charities. Militant pickets and occupations forced many of these charities into humiliating climb-downs. Yet this workfare scheme was poorly funded and lacking popular legitimacy; it was easy for small groups of militants to damage it.

Our problem is that the claimants 'movement' has simply failed to take off. It has been enormously difficult for those of us on the dole to compose ourselves



collectively. Most claimants feel that they can avoid the sanctions of the JSA through their own initiatives. Moreover, even most of those who treat the dole as the trouble-maker's grant likewise adopt almost exclusively individual solutions: bluffs, signing off, moving away, petty entrepreneurship, going to university etc. For all the vigour of recent dole-based movements (ecological, 'DiY'³ etc.), collectively they fail to defend the very conditions that make their lifestyles and movements of resistance possible. As a movement, they think they can simply ignore the threat to the dole.

The Government's problem, however, was that the JSA itself was not enough in the face of general unemployed recalcitrance. The lack of 'job readiness' among too many people, whether conscious or otherwise, represented a major obstacle to restructuring. A further push was needed to deliver more employable workers to the labour market. The 'New Deal' represents such a push.

4 A 'New Deal' for the unemployed

Most attempts by the Conservative government to attack benefits were met by cynicism and passive resistance. Labour, on the other hand, as the party that 'created the welfare state', claims to be the one that can be trusted to 'reform' it. The 'New Deal' for the young unemployed - a 'menu' of job-counselling, subsidized employment and work experience placements - is part of New Labour's 'Welfare to Work' strategy. Welfare to Work is described as the government's flagship policy, since it embodies New Labour's key 'values': 'partnership' in place

³ 'Do it Yourself'. See our articles 'Kill or chill? Analysis of the opposition to the Criminal Justice Bill' in *Aufheben* 4, Summer 1995, and 'The politics of anti-road struggle and the struggles of anti-road politics: The case of the No M11 Link Road Campaign' in *DiY Culture: Party & Protest in Nineties Britain* (ed. George McKay; Verso, 1998). (Text version available from *Aufheben*: see address on back page.)

of class conflict (because New Labour wants business to participate in the socialization of the unemployed);⁴ the social role of work and the importance of the work-ethic in providing self-respect; and the fair exchange of rights to benefits for the duty to seek and accept the work or placements offered. The New Deal represents a departure from the overtly punitive 'neo liberal' approach of the last government, to a more integrative approach - but not the integration of social democracy.

By offering people 'training' and personalized job-counselling, the New Deal claims to give claimants what they want - a toe-hold in the labour market. Yet it is a work-experience programme which doesn't actually create any jobs, and its bedrock is the harsh JSA sanctions regime: refuse the counselling or the New Deal 'options' and you lose all your benefits.

The origins of the New Deal lie in old Labour-left job-creation programmes, themselves part of broader economic strategies. Such old left strategies included Keynesian policies of investment in the public sector which would increase the demand for labour. This reflation of the economy would characteristically be combined with controls on imports and capital movements. A programme like the New Deal would be the supply-side counterpart of such an economic strategy, training the unemployed to take the newly created jobs. But New Labour entails the dumping of left Keynesian economic strategies in favour of a rigid 'neo-liberal' economic orthodoxy. For example, the setting of interest rates has been handed over to the Bank of England, and public spending is to be kept strictly within limits determined by inflation targets. However, the 'training scheme' part of the old strategy, in the form of the New Deal, is retained from the past.

Within a broad strategy of abandoning social democracy, what function is served by retaining the 'training' element of an old left programme? Ideologically, ripping this kind of policy out of its social democratic context fits with the New Labour values of 'rights and responsibilities'. Thus, the government offers claimants the ability to make themselves competitive on the labour market; in return, it expects us to compete harder for the existing jobs. This is what they mean by 'empowering job-seekers' and ending their 'social exclusion'. The New Deal is a social democratic policy in appearance which is turned to the service of labour market flexibility. Its principle aim, as with the JSA, is to enhance the effectiveness of the industrial reserve army and so increase competition in the labour market.

In practice, the 'skills' that the New Deal is supposedly equipping 'job-seekers' with are for the most part not what most claimants want. Like previous make-work and workfare schemes, for most claimants the New Deal won't provide anything more useful on the labour market than the ability to get out of bed in the morning. However, for the employers, of course, the inculcation of work-discipline is essential. True, there is a skills shortage in some sectors (Information Technology

and construction); but many of the jobs which cannot be filled or which have high turnover, particularly the lowest-paying ones, require reliability more than special skills. The New Deal is intended as an ideological offensive according to which the work-ethic is to be drummed into even those sectors previously considered outside the labour-market - such as single parents and those on sickness benefits - so that the labour market as a whole learns the value of hard work and flexibility.

The JSA was easy to criticize. But the fact that the New Deal has had some success in presenting itself as what the unemployed want has meant that it has become even more difficult for claimants to compose themselves as a movement of opposition. Many of the Groundswell groups either collapsed or degenerated back into their claimants union origins instead of discussing how to build an oppositional movement. The problem is that no new claimants are coming forward to join the groups - particular not young claimants, the group most affected by the New Deal. The remaining claimants action campaigns largely comprise small groups of ageing politicoes with little basis outside particular narrow scenes. Such problems of opposition have been compounded by the government's apparent success so far in winning round many dole workers with a 'new ethos' of 'customer care'.

Despite the weakness of the opposition, it seems that the New Deal might in fact fail for other reasons. The much-vaunted new ethos is likely to come into conflict with government attempts to increase cost-effectiveness, most notably by privatizing some Jobcentre functions. For example, the Reed private employment agency has taken over provision of the New Deal in parts of London. Reed's 'job-counsellors' are much more reliant than are Jobcentre dole-workers on bonuses for shoving people into jobs (any jobs). Where the Jobcentres have to compete in a 'job-counselling' market, the 'new ethos' and hence the credibility of the New Deal will not survive.

Second, and perhaps more serious for the prospects for the New Deal, is the state of the economy. Although employment is rising and unemployment falling, the picture varies according to region and sector. In areas of already high unemployment, where the manufacturing base is being eroded still further, the number of New Deal placements will start to dry up, just as more 'clients' need to be 'placed'. Only the least attractive and least credible 'options' will remain; and, in a much tighter labour market, the replacement of normal jobs with workfare placements will become more contentious.

5 Is the British situation peculiar?

In Europe there is much talk among leftists, both 'reformist', and 'revolutionary', about a guaranteed minimum income and reduced working time. The closest parallel in Britain is perhaps the demand to increase the level of Britain's (belatedly-introduced) minimum wage for those in employment. The minimum wage needs to be understood as part of the Government's attempt to shift welfare

⁴ Some businesses responded by donating alarm clocks and bars of soap!

payments from non-workers (e.g., unemployed, single parents, disabled) towards those in work. In the context of benefits becoming in effect wage-subsidies, a minimum wage is a safeguard against employers shifting the cost of reproducing labour-power onto the state. The leftists who try to mobilize around increasing the level of the minimum wage (currently £3.60 an hour for those over 21) try to maintain the illusion that its recent introduction is a social democratic reform which can be built upon, rather than an integral part of the New Labour project of re-imposing work.

The current attack on the dole, a key component of this project of re-imposing work, is part of the British state's particular response to the global autonomy of finance capital which emerged from the class struggles of the 1960s and 70s. Yet the imperatives imposed by this international power of capital are shared by the UK with all the other countries in Europe. All nation-states are experiencing broadly similar political-economic pressures due to the apparent externalization of the imperatives of capital accumulation. Cuts in benefits and the introduction of workfare-type schemes are reflections of the shared context. Although in different degrees and from different starting points, in the UK and other European nation-states, the old social democratic forms have been in retreat.

Yet, of course, the UK situation differs from the rest of Europe in certain crucial respects. In nowhere else in Europe was there an equivalent of the precipitous and class-confrontational Thatcherite restructuring. In the UK, with its historically important finance-capital sector, the backward manufacturing sector could be sacrificed, since surplus-value could still be creamed off from abroad through the money markets. By contrast, in Germany, for example, there were no Keynesian policies to abandon, and no alternative to continuing to base the economy on manufacturing. Hence Germany, unlike Britain, retained key social democratic strategies such as corporatism, even during the decades during which it was forced, like Britain, to pursue policies aimed at controlling the money supply.

The differences between Britain and the rest of Europe persist. Whereas the election of New Labour in the UK was taken as the consolidation of the 'neo-liberal' achievements of the Thatcher period, the re-emergence of the 'socialists' elsewhere in Europe was interpreted by many, including isolated social democrats in Britain, as a partial resurgence of social democracy. There is no 'new reformism' here in the UK, then, but rather the open drive towards labour market flexibility in the form of a new post-socialist 'consensus'.

However, the relation between the *form* of some of New Labour's policies and their ultimate *aims* points to a crucial parallel between the UK and its European counterparts. As we have shown, the 'new ethos' of personalized 'job-counselling' etc. which the unemployed supposedly demanded from the New Deal is part of an agenda in which the price is harder work, lower pay, casualization and a tougher benefits regime. While some might imagine that the calls in Germany and France for reduced working time might serve as a crucial advance for workers' rights, as

other articles in this collection point out, the reality is increased flexibility and more work in the guise of a progressive demand. The realities of 'time reductions' negotiated by German unions became apparent when they were imported from 'social Europe' into the British context. Here, BMW's introduction of more intensive working practices from Germany into the factories of their Rover subsidiary was rightly seen as a fundamental attack on existing working conditions, overtime payments etc. It was only imposed through the blackmail of threatening factory closure and complete withdrawal of BMW from Britain.

Similarly, we see the demand in Europe for a guaranteed minimum income as something which is likely to be utilized by capital to its own ends rather than serving as some kind of 'transitional demand'. What is actually guaranteed about such an income is that it would be set at a level which would maintain or increase the competitiveness and profitability of the economy in question. Also, even if political pressure could set such a guaranteed income at a reasonable level it is likely over time that the state could push it down below previous benefit levels. Any 'radical' intervention on this terrain would thus simply result in helping the state to restructure its welfare system.

In this sense, the social democratic *appearance* of the current demands is in fact being fetishized by those demanding a reduction in working time and a guaranteed minimum income; the actual *substance* of the proposed developments represents the reversal of the social democratic 'gains' of the past. In all cases, what we are witnessing is the use of apparently social democratic principles or policies as part of an overall strategy of acceding to the pressures imposed by the autonomy of global finance capital. The 'new consensus' that both New Labour and the apparently more social democratic European left governments are seeking to create is more work intensity and greater flexibility of the labour market - by any means necessary! While New Labour is honest about abandoning social democracy and imposing market imperatives, the policies of the European left governments represent the hollowing out of social democracy.

Whether in form or in substance, social democratic concessions are not inherently progressive but are forms of mediation and recuperation of working class demands. What is particularly effective about such concessions from the point of view of capital is that they function to make the working class demand and organize its own alienation.

Reforming the welfare state to save capitalism: The 'guaranteed income'¹ and new reformist illusions

Wildcat (Germany)



Since the onset of the global crisis of the early 1990s, political discussions about restructuring the welfare state, in which a broad range of leftists take part, have intensified. The capitalist state, bourgeois parties and left-wing tendencies agree that social benefits should not depend on life-long waged work any more but be more in accordance with new and more flexible forms of employment. While the capitalist state wants to motivate more people to do badly paid and casual work, some groups from the left claim to campaign against capitalism by demanding a 'guaranteed income' ('existence money' in Germany or 'salaire garanti' in France).

Indeed the traditional welfare state is no longer consistent with the restructured class relations. But do the friends of the 'guaranteed income' really grasp what's going on? We will start by looking at the *debate so far* (1) and then take a look at the *real changes in class relations* (2) which provide the material base for the consensus around the *restructuring of the welfare state* (3). This will be followed by a critique of the *illusions regarding the welfare state* (4), which inform the left's interpretation of events, and a critique of the *concept of politics* (5) which informs the left's new campaigns.

1. The state of the debate today

In (West) Germany the debate about a different welfare state and new class relations ('new poverty', 'the end of the work society') has been going on since the

¹ In English, the most appropriate equivalent term might be 'basic income'.

early 1980s. The first deep post-war crisis of 1974-5 had driven unemployment up to 1 million. At first however this looked like a cyclical phenomenon. In the 1980-2 crisis, official unemployment went up from 1 to 2 million. Apparently, full employment capitalism was over and talk of 'structural unemployment' began. Radical leftists saw so-called 'post-industrial mass poverty' as a starting point for new revolutionary concepts. The number of people who were still being exploited by capital seemed to be in free fall, and the work society looked like it was going to be 'out of work' very soon. Unfortunately this turned out not to be the case. At the same time people said 'farewell to the proletariat' (Andre Gorz, 1980) and tried to mould the 'unemployed', which had so far been a labour law category, into a new political actor. At the conferences for a West German unemployed movement in the early 1980s, leftists came up with the demand for a guaranteed income in order to break away from the 'work for everyone' slogan and to express their criticism of capitalist waged work. However the 'farewell to the proletariat' meant that they had lost the revolutionary social subject. This left them with little choice but to make a demand to the state on behalf of the 'unemployed'. The unemployed movement which many had hoped for never came.

From the mid-1980s, employment boomed. Most unemployed groups were saved from extinction only by professionalising and institutionalising with money from the state and job-creation jobs. Radical leftists and autonomists lost interest in questions of unemployment and exploitation while the state hoped to solve the crisis in a new economic boom. But the crisis of 1992-3 accelerated the changes in exploitation relations and in the composition of unemployment and casual forms of exploitation. It became more and more apparent that capitalism is a class society in which proletarians and capital owners confront each other. In 1993, Karl Heinz Roth's theses about a new worldwide proletarianization unifying the conditions of the working class across the planet sparked a debate about the new revolutionary opportunities which this situation offered. But the majority of the left bowed to capitalism's victorious smile, in their theoretical and practical efforts developing their own version of the 'end of history' and saying goodbye to the revolution in theories about 'post-fordism' and 'globalisation'.

Encouraged by movements in France and scared by neo-fascist mobilisations around the 'social question', the radical left rediscovered society's class character about one or two years ago. The return of West European social democracy to power is an indication that capital too is looking for new forms of mediation, turning away from 'neo-liberalism' and considering new forms of regulation (from the Tobin tax to new welfare state models). Sailing in their wake are some of those who originally wanted to criticise capitalism but, out of desperation or false realism, have begun to participate in the search for new regulations. But nothing is as important today as criticising this society radically enough to match existing

proletarian anger. Then it would turn out that this world already possesses a dream of human life beyond state and capital.

2. The new class relations as a political challenge

Debates about 'unemployment' and 'employment' often assume these categories to be two groups of society: One group has a regular income and one group is 'excluded' from the labour market and has to be supported by the state. This image has little to do with real people and their biographies. A lot of people do not work but are not 'unemployed' (school pupils, retired people etc.), others are 'unemployed' and work (off the books), others are not 'employed' but still work (housework, raising children etc.), still others are available to be exploited by capital but wait abroad and therefore do not count as 'unemployed'. The statistics do not tell us how capital exploits living labour-power. You should keep this in mind when you read the following sketch of class relations (in Germany). We will only understand the important changes if we get involved.

After World War II the unemployment rate went down to less than 1 per cent only from 1961. 1975, with its annual average of 1 million unemployed, marks the end of the short dream of full employment. Modern unemployment is not forever for individual proletarians, but means changing jobs with interruptions. Statistically, 4.6 million workers were unemployed once in 1975, but unemployment lasted only an average of 12 weeks.

For the first time in capitalist history the state was forced to pay unemployed workers an income which covered their reproduction, in order to maintain industrial peace. Unemployment no longer functioned as a wage-depressing industrial reserve army. The proletariat quickly discovered the pleasant sides of unemployment. Many used the dole or requalification schemes to get out of the factory which everyone hated. The revolutionary left talked of the 'happy unemployed'. After the defeat of the open struggles, unemployment became a reservoir especially for many of the conflictual workers. Real wages kept rising and the first experiments with reorganising production failed. The attempt to use immigrant workers from South Europe as a mobile reserve of labour power was a failure as well. There was a significant rise of the immigrant *resident* population after the official end to the employment of new immigrant workers in 1973.

During the next crisis, 1980-2, unemployment rose to over 2 million, accelerating turnover in the job market. Half of those who had found new jobs after being unemployed lost their new jobs again after a while. This indicated a rise of casual and insecure forms of exploitation. The 1985 Employment Promotion Act (*Beschäftigungsförderungsgesetz*) opened the door for an extended use of fixed-term contracts and temporary work agencies. The reduction of working-time by trade union agreements became a Trojan horse for the flexibilisation and

intensification of work. Benefit payments were subject to several policy changes. For instance, when, in the mid 1980s, benefit cuts led to a sinking rate of eligibility for unemployment insurance benefits, the state raised payments for the older unemployed again.

Between 1985 and 1992, three million new jobs were created. Because of the immigration from Eastern Europe, which rapidly grew after 1987, manufacturing jobs and poorly paying jobs could be filled with immigrants. Still there was new shopfloor conflict shortly before German 'reunification'. Employers in the metal industries tried to meet wage demands with one-off bonus payments; a workers' mobilisation in hospitals across West Germany led to improved working conditions and significant pay raises. In the euphoric political climate of 'reunification', the government was not able to uphold austerity and welfare cuts but resorted to giant public debts thereby further fuelling economic growth. The worldwide crisis which set in in 1990 was delayed by two years by this 'special boom' in Germany. The crisis came in 1992-3 and it was deeper than all the previous ones. Massive cuts in employment had already cut East German jobs from 10 to 6 million by 1992 - raising all-German unemployment to 3 million. In the crisis it rose to over 4 million, and the cyclical upswing since has marked a sharp break with former trends:

Jobs: In spite of the recovery, unemployment rose continually until 1997 while the number of 'regular' jobs² sank correspondingly. Statistically, only 'irregular' new jobs were created: self-employment, work off the books, social insurance-free jobs³ etc.

Wages: For the first time, real wages have sunk without rising again. They also sank in relation to productivity, i.e. wage per unit costs sank.

Benefits: Due to drastic benefit cuts, more and more unemployed have lost their unemployment insurance entitlements and have had to claim social assistance. The separation between insurance and means-tested benefits is beginning to break down.

Unions: There has been a breakthrough for capital in big companies: trade unions and factory councils pledged to assist in cost-cutting programmes; wage components were made dependent on the development of productivity and the sick-

² 'Regular jobs' in Germany refers to jobs in which workers hold a dependent employee status and for which workers as well as employers pay four basic social insurance contributions, i.e. unemployment insurance, health insurance, old age pension insurance and disability care insurance.

³ Part-time jobs with a working week of less than 15 hours and paying less than 630 DM per month have been contribution-free. Since last autumn, there has been intensive debate about a reform of these jobs.

rate; and factory councils⁴ signed company agreements below valid collective agreements signed by the same unions.

East Germany: East German production has been completely restructured, serving as a testing ground for new strategies of exploitation. Instead of raising wages to the West German level, as had been promised in 1990, collective agreements froze wages at a permanently lower level. At the same time, wages and conditions have been below existing collective agreements to an extent unknown in West Germany.

The crisis of 1992-3 marked a turning point in the discussion about the crisis and reform of the welfare state. More than 20 years of unemployment were finally acting as a pressure to radically intensify exploitation. At the same time, the working class too has left the ideal of life-long full-time employment behind. Workers are looking for individual ways out. Self-employment and work off the books are a result not only of unemployment but also of many proletarians' illusionary hopes to get away from the drudgery of work. When Kohl's government was re-elected in 1994 it was not able to take this mixture of fear and hope and turn it into the legitimisation for a radical restructuring of the welfare state. It was too obvious that the government was serving the interests of the employers, so the 'reforms' ran up against a brick wall. In contrast, the restructuring plans of the new red/green government, which were immediately announced in the name of the 'unemployed' and 'economic prosperity', are much more dramatic.

3. Restructuring the welfare state: shoring up the new class relations

Today the programmes of all political parties in Germany demand some kind of guaranteed minimum income (ranging from 'negative income tax' models to a 'civil right' for income). This is a response to the fact that more and more people in new forms of employment are no longer covered by the traditional safety nets of the welfare state. On the other hand, they all agree that the only way of increasing employment is the creation of more of these new jobs because they mean lower wage costs and more worker flexibility. The debate is not about the absolute costs of the welfare state but about its effectiveness in securing exploitation. In capital's logic, higher costs in some fields (like early retirement schemes or a guaranteed income) may be okay because they lead to a growth of the total mass of labour and surplus-value. Even long-term payments to a few troublemakers may result in higher productivity in society as a whole.

The chancellor's chief adviser Hombach says what the restructuring plans are all about: So far politicians have tried to adjust employment relations to the welfare

⁴ *Betriebsrat*: representative body elected by the workforce of a company; has some say in company affairs and is legally obliged to uphold productive peace.

system. Now the welfare system will have to adjust to the labour market's new realities: *'All attempts at productively using flexibilisation at the bottom end of the labour market will be in vain if we cannot disconnect the social security system from the assumption that normality means life-long full-time employment and the "normal family", with a working father, a housewife and children. (...) And we will only be able to use "irregular" employment to build bridges into the labour market if we do not punish social assistance claimants for working. Instead of taking away every penny they earn we should turn additional earnings into incentives.'*

Another, often underestimated, reason for the restructuring of the welfare state is the development of paid non-work by older people. The pension insurance budget is twice as high as the unemployment insurance and social assistance budgets added together. With life expectancy rising and contributions to social insurance sinking, it will mean either lower pensions or higher contributions. This is why more and more experts advocate a tax-funded minimum pension. In the framework of a guaranteed income this would be much easier to introduce.

But why should the red/green government be more successful than its predecessor in realizing such a far-reaching restructuring of the welfare state? While the Christian Democrats were always suspected of being 'neo-liberals', the new government can use the widespread criticism of 'neo-liberalism' to present its policies as a 'third way', avoiding USA conditions. While the modernisation of the economy is inevitable, proletarians should be protected by a minimum guarantee. Social peace, guaranteed by social security and trade union mediation, is a productive advantage of the German export-orientated economy, and the capitalists do not want to give it up. However the division of work between state social security and private precaution is to be rearranged.

This policy promises to create the basis for a new 'social contract' by saving us from the horrors of neo-liberalism. The 'Alliance for Jobs' is one way of bringing about this consensus (there are others like former critiques of work turned into new pro-work ideologies of 'subsistence economy' or 'self-managed enterprises'). The unions participate in this Alliance. While they said no to state subsidies for low-wage work under the previous government, they co-operate in such experiments now. In the same context, the boss of the metal workers' union IGM declared that young people should be forced to work: *'In the long run, there can be no freedom of choice between turning down an apprenticeship placement and collecting benefits if there are enough placements available. We (!) will have to cut benefits for kids who refuse this offer.'* If the 'social contract' is a contract, both sides will have to give something - after all it's for jobs.

At this moment nobody can make exact predictions which changes to the social security laws will lead to which behaviours by capitalists and by proletarians. Even the world's chief economists admit that they do not understand the current crisis of global capitalism any more. Then how should welfare state experts know what is to be done? This openness of the situation creates an opportunity for radical leftist groups to make their own 'realistic' demands of the welfare state.



4. Illusions regarding the welfare state and class society

The assumptions about the welfare state in the debate about the guaranteed income derive first of all from personal experience with using welfare benefits. The welfare state is not judged by its relation to the class relationship and class struggle - neither historically nor in daily political activities - but by personal opportunities to live with as little work as possible. After the failure of the proletarian struggles of the 1970s, the tendency of collective *struggles against work* was replaced by the individual behaviour and lifestyle of the *refusal of work*. Collecting welfare benefits gave the subjects of the 'new social movements' enough free time for their political activities. But connections to the struggle against work in the production process became severed. 'Autonomous' became an expression of the separation from conflicts in the workplace. Apart from the hassle in the benefits offices, the welfare state was seen as quite an agreeable institution.

This corresponds to two familiar ideas: welfare benefits are income without work, and this is possible because the welfare state is an 'achievement' of the workers' movement. These ideas reproduce the exact same illusions with which the welfare state veils the fundamental class relationship.

Historically, the welfare state was first of all a bulwark against the threat of revolution. Since the early 19th century, when the 'dangerous classes' threatened the social order, the bourgeoisie talked about the 'social question'. This term

theoretically defused class antagonism and assumed that it could in principle be solved by social reform. State-run social security was to guarantee that proletarians would permanently offer their labour-power to capital - without revolting and without starving to death.

On the other hand the workers' movement also established its own social security funds to help solidarity among workers. They criticised the introduction of social insurance schemes by the state as a kind of *expropriation* of their self-organised funds. While Bismarck in Germany established a purely statal social insurance system which was aimed openly against the workers' movement, in other countries the state subsidized the self-organised funds of the trade unions. That move also served to integrate the workers' movement into the bourgeois state; but the consciousness of the opposition between the working class and state-regulated reproduction was still alive, because the workers' movement maintained control over its own funds.

The introduction of any social benefit has always meant more **control** and surveillance of individual proletarians: People asking for social benefits must be registered nation-state citizens, disclose their employment and education history, etc.

The 'achievements' of the welfare state are meant to suppress awareness of our own strength and collective struggles. Our own self-activity is replaced by the state, we are atomised by bourgeois law and individual monetary payments. Capitalism is based on the fact that we are constantly being separated from the wealth we have produced by our own social co-operation. The welfare state makes sure we accept this fact and behave as individuals.

The welfare state has completed the project of the *nation*. At first, proletarians did not have a 'fatherland'; then the claim to social benefits from 'their' state turned them into national 'citizens'. German trade unions were finally fully recognised by the state in World War I when they were involved in the administration of the national economy and took on the responsibility of disciplining the workers. Where self-organised funds of the workers' movement still existed in other European countries they were handed over to the state under Nazi occupation. Anyone making appeals to the welfare state today cannot avoid an affirmative approach to the nation-state.

The claim that the guaranteed income has an anti-capitalist dimension because it is disconnected from waged work is based on the second illusion of the welfare state: that its benefits are income without work. For capitalist class relations, it is not so important that each and every individual is forced to work all their lives but that capital can mobilise enough work in society as a whole to meet its needs for valorisation. This societal coercion to work has always depended on the welfare state as a means of dividing the working class and establishing

hierarchical differences among workers. The guaranteed income does not contradict this logic because it does not stop the alienation of our wealth but only serves as an income bottom line: *'a factual minimum wage below which nobody has to work'* (as the Co-ordination of Unemployed Groups put it in January 1999). Anyone who is not satisfied with a mere subsistence guarantee has only one choice: *work!*

The development of the welfare state has been based on the opposition of two different principles: insurance and alms. This drew a clear line between 'workers' and 'paupers'. The first have been offered the illusion of living off their own personal savings in times of unemployment or old age while the latter have been dependent on (state funded) alms. This insurance fetishism is tied to the wage fetishism, and like the wage fetishism it veils the fact of exploitation. In the wage, the appropriation of other people's work by capital appears as a fair exchange of work and money.⁵

In the face of mass unemployment, high job turnover and continuing hatred of life-long work this dual model of state controlled insurance and state alms has gone into crisis. Those who have enough money join private insurance schemes, while at the same time more and more proletarians are no longer entitled to state social insurance and have to claim social assistance. German social insurance was designed for times of full employment with only cyclical peaks of unemployment. Social assistance was supposed to be extremely stigmatising and was not designed to pay for massive unemployment. Politicians see the crisis of the welfare state as a problem of weak 'incentives to work' and of a 'loss of legitimation'.

We have to put both into context: 1) In order to increase the 'incentive' to work, social benefits will have to be rearranged so that even badly paid work will notably increase one's income. Of course this carrot is combined with a stick: workfare programmes for youth and other people who refuse to work. 2) Claiming social assistance for a short while is to be less stigmatising so that people will be encouraged to risk self-employment or other insecure jobs. To that end, the minimum income is to be designed as a 'civil right'. In exchange for that, existing social insurance benefits like old age pensions could be cut because people are already using private insurance schemes anyway.

The leftist demand for a guaranteed income appears politically realistic because it is in line with the second argument ('civil right') - and simply ignores the first ('work incentives').

5. From the 'political wage' to the guaranteed income

⁵ The term 'exclusion' reinforces this illusion. While the 'excluded' are seen as being unable to reproduce themselves by waged work, a job where one is exploited is seen as an opportunity 'to participate in the wealth of society'. The conceptual pair exclusion/inclusion makes the class relationship disappear.

Some groups ignore the criticism of the guaranteed income, arguing that it only serves as a demand for mobilizations. According to them, the mere fact that a guaranteed income would be utopian in a capitalist society could bring people out into the streets for anti-capitalist politics. According to them, the guaranteed income should not actually be seen as a demand but as a strategy of direct appropriation - like the concept of the 'political wage' which was formulated in Italy in the 1970s. As the 'political wage' emerged around militant mass worker struggles and broad movements of direct appropriation it does look like the most radical concept. Then just as now the real question is how we understand politics: how do we see the role of political organization?

In the late 1960s, class struggles in Italy had broken free from the chains of trade union control. Struggles and wage demands had detached themselves from the business cycle. That was the material basis of workers' *autonomy*. The mass workers' struggles were the basis of proletarian power against the factory society, radiating out into the territory: refusal to pay rent or energy bills, squatting, free shopping in supermarkets etc. The 'political wage' was supposed to unite and homogenise all those struggles. *'A guaranteed wage outside of the factory means making the transition to taking the commodities, it means appropriating them.'*⁶

While *Potere Operaio's* theoreticians argued that this strategy meant the extension of the struggle from the factory to the entire society, in reality it already marked a reaction to the limits of the wage struggles as well as the retreat from the factory. With a clever theoretical move, Toni Negri reinterpreted the loss of proletarian power inside production into a new form of strength. In his *Crisis of the Planner-State* (1971) - published as a supplement to *Potere Operaio* - he proclaimed the end of the law of value and thus the end of all material foundations of capitalist domination.⁷ According to Negri, communism was imminent so that *'each intermediary step has to be shortcircuited'*. He said that the new movements in the territory (i.e., outside work) already expressed this: *'Appropriation is the particular qualification of class behaviour towards the state of the defunct law of value.'* Therefore he claimed that the revolutionary movement had to clear away the political power structure which had remained without a material base, meaning that *'insurrection is on the agenda'*.

Later, Negri was to call the new subject of this attack the 'social worker', as opposed to the 'mass worker's of factory production, addressing the subjects of the new youth movements that exploded in Italy in the 1977 revolt. The isolation of

⁶ *'Wir wollen alles'* 19.

⁷ English version in *Revolution Retrieved* (Red Notes, 1988).

⁸ For a critique of that term, see Roberto Battaglia: 'Operaio massa e operaio sociale: alcune considerazioni sulla nuova composizione di classe', in *Primo Maggio* 14, Winter 1980-1.

social revolt from class struggle, from the mass of producers of surplus-value, which Negri had expressed and legitimated in his theory, was the birth of 'organised autonomy'. It is the content of all currents that have called themselves 'autonomous' ever since. Today Negri's theory of the 'social worker' and the productivity of 'immaterial labour' already acting outside of capital is used by 'Autonomists' in France and Italy to support their campaigns for a guaranteed income.

Thus, the slogan of a 'political wage' was not a generalisation of the struggle of all the exploited, but a programme of separation from and stepping out of the conflict over exploitation. The only way the 'political wage' could be presented as a general strategy was in a vanguardist and leninist sense. In the above mentioned supplement to *Potere Operaio*, Ferruccio Gambino assigns the demand a central, homogenising role: *'Talking about the political wage means that all these offensive, defensive and also reactionary forces are withdrawn from the capitalist system and transformed into elements of political class organisation. The political wage must make it possible to transcend those forms of resistance.'* This shows a vanguardist understanding: the class may lead a multiplicity of struggles but it does not learn by itself. Homogenisation and political development can only be brought about by a political organisation. That is why it is so important to have a central demand: the 'political wage' is a substitute for processes of learning and homogenisation which do not happen.

Conclusion: Self-emancipation vs. politics

Today's proposal to organize around a central demand is informed by the same understanding of the relation between proletarian movement and political organization. *'But we know that new movements will hardly emerge on the (casual and flexibilised) shopfloor. The only place where they can still really constitute themselves is concrete political struggles where solidarity is experienced in the common project (and not on the shopfloor as in earlier days).'*⁹ It starts from the certainty that, in the face of 'post-fordism' and the 'diffuse factory', autonomous struggles can no longer exist. Instead of questioning the theories of post-fordism and criticising their affirmative stance towards capitalist development, they are used as a theoretical cliché in order to justify the necessity of mobilizing and uniting the atomised subjects from above. The demands do not start from real struggles but are deduced from an abstract consideration about state and income. Therefore they can only see themselves as representatives and politicians.

⁹ 'Der schwierige Weg zu einem europäischen Kampf gegen das Kapital' [The difficult road towards a European struggle against capital"] (invitation to the conference), in *Arranca* 14.

Interventions starting from the assumption that the proletariat can emancipate itself have always been met with the objection that the proletariat is so extremely fragmented that only a central political project from the outside could overcome that fragmentation. In 1973, the group 'Arbeitsache München' wrote about its political work with immigrant workers: *'Many comrades have objections to this approach because the foreign workers often change their jobs and do not remain steadily in one place. We say: this is not a disadvantage but an advantage. If we think that the workers will be able to develop patterns of struggle and behaviour then we also think that any spreading of these experiences through mobility will push ahead the class struggle. And we are convinced that all these contradictions will produce more and more struggles in which our task will be one of generalisation and synthesis. Thinking that the readiness to fight must be the result of doing subversive work in one department of a factory for ten years completely ignores the reality of today's large plants. Moreover it implies that the proletariat does not have a knowledge of forms of struggle but has to be taught these in a long process. This is not true - this knowledge exists but it is covered by many veils. And we are contributing to uncovering them.'*¹⁰

That is pretty much how we might describe our own tasks today. Ironically, the same 'autonomous' groups who were always critical of the unions reproduce traditional trade unionist conceptions about the evolutionary development of struggles (e.g. long education of workers in one factory department) as evidence that in 'post-fordist' structures of production proletarians can no longer struggle. Today's changes in the labour-market are usually called 'casualisation' as if this explained anything. Most talk about 'casualisation' only refers to a departure from 'normal' employment as defined by labour law regulations, but does not start from the role of living labour and its co-operation inside the process of production. Therefore this point of view misses completely how the process of casualisation has expanded social co-operation - a development which politically appears as the atomization of workers. However, workers' struggles and power are not based on legal regulations but on workers collectively appropriating their own co-operation by fighting against capital.

Communism as a real movement exists in proletarian struggles which today are based on a much greater societalisation of production on a global scale. Ironically, the debates about a guaranteed income quite rightly assume that communism, i.e. life without coercion to work, is possible today, but draw the worst conceivable conclusion from that assumption: instead of tearing down the crumbling walls of the global workhouse they propose to repair them!

¹⁰ Arbeitsache München, *Was wir brauchen, müssen wir uns nehmen* [We have to take what we need], Munich 1973, p. 35.

35-hour-week: Lower incomes and more work.

Working-time reduction in Germany

Wildcat (Germany)

Collective working-time reduction is being seen by many as an effective instrument to fight the madness of today's capitalism which produces millions of unemployed while forcing those employed to work overtime. The demand for a 'radical working-time reduction' complements that for a 'guaranteed income' where leftist unionists and welfare politicians begin to co-operate.

Shorter working hours seems a good idea to most, but the (union) slogan of working-time reduction meets with deep mistrust amongst workers.

Since the mid eighties it has been a crisis regulation mechanism in the hands of companies and unions, with workers experiencing double betrayal: working-time has not been reduced significantly, but the wages have gone down. The 35 hour week abolished the eight hour day and made possible a radical flexibilisation of working-time in industry. Unlike in France it was not introduced by law, but 'fought for' by the unions in 1984 in a seven and a half week strike.

The most radical reduction of regular working-time was created by the initiative of a company. In 1994, Volkswagen introducing the 28.8 hours week even undercut the 30 hours that unions at the time hardly dared to discuss. Up till now leftists have been discussing the VW model as 'promising'; and, mainly in other countries, workers and unionists view it as a goal to be achieved.

But while there is a lot of talk about reducing working hours, working-time has actually been re-extended.

1. Working-time and refusal of work

The conflict around wages and working-time lies at the heart of class struggle. It is not simply about the absolute length of the working day which is limited by laws and union agreements. It is also about controlling bodies and to what amount work is being extracted from workers in the set working-time. The capitalist buys labour power but he has to make sure during the labour-process that as much work as possible is really being squeezed out of the workers. In this daily struggle workers try to enlarge the pores in the working day, thus widening the gap between official and effective working-time - until the boss attacks. Workers' strength is expressed in these informal pores; unions, on the contrary, formalise the status quo in



Wildcat

35-hour-week: Lower incomes and more work

agreements on holidays, working hours etc. Until the early eighties there were relatively many pores. Workers often completed their piece-work in five or six hours and were hanging around. In big firms it was normal to take a shower after work during paid time. There were informal breaks only partly fixed by agreements - these were points of attack during the following conflicts around working-time. In the eighties, workers paid for every slight reduction of official working-time with cuts in these pores. Even when the 38.5 hour week was introduced most companies changed the paid night shift break into an unpaid one.

Sure it's better to leave late shift at nine fifteen rather than at 11 p.m. But you have to work every minute for this whereas before you used to have time for social activities in the last hour of late shift. For the old ones 'their' factory was also the place to define their role in society and to organise and exchange... Many of the younger ones are fed up with the collective workers' life; they see it as dullness and flee it whenever they can. They prefer to work shorter hours and have more *individual* spare time. They can stand the work only by looking forward to the next period of non-work, so they go from holidays to free shifts, and accept short-term contracts because they won't last for long in the same firm, anyway. And they try to negotiate shorter hours for themselves individually—even with less income.

2. The 35 hour week or dreams of a redistribution of work

For some fifteen years - since the unions have been propagating the idea of working-time reduction - working-time has been reduced slower than in the decades before. Between 1956 (48 hours) and 1975 (40 hours) weekly working hours were reduced by eight hours. This was mainly achieved by cancelling Saturday as a regular working day end of the sixties ('Saturdays Daddy belongs to us'). Until 1995 when 35 hours was introduced in West Germany's metal industry, another twenty years went by. Every cut in working hours was 'paid for' by wage freezes, and overtime work was spreading.

Yearly holidays in West Germany's metal industry stayed the same for sixteen years. The holiday period had been doubled step by step from three weeks to six from 1960 to 1982. Most important were the wildcat strikes at Ford in 1973 which were sparked off when workers from Turkey returned late from their three weeks holidays and were fired.

The collectively agreed yearly working-time per employed person in West Germany has dropped from the mid eighties to 1997 by an average of 160 hours or 9.6 per cent. But since 1995 this development has stagnated: the other industries haven't caught up with the metal industry. In the eighties, unions had first of all agreed to early retirements, thus radically making labour forces younger and shortening the working lives of the first worker generation after World War II. From then on, with the local 'investment securing contracts'

(Standortsicherungsverträge) - only temporary working-time reductions with simultaneous wage cuts - have been agreed.

The demand for the 35 hour week developed in the early seventies amongst union leftists. With the world-wide crisis of 1973-4, companies in West Germany started a rationalising offensive. In the steel industry alone, from 1975 to 1978 about 40 000 workers got the sack. Steel workers were attacked so massively because there were well organised labour forces that in 1969 had given the bosses a hard time by their wildcat strikes. In order to secure jobs, unionists inside the companies wanted to reduce the working week step by step and to introduce a fifth shift. The demand for 35 hours was taken up into the list of demands of the 1977 IG Metall [metal union] congress - against the union bosses who thought it too much and illusionary. One year later they themselves took the 35 hours to the negotiations to solve the steel crisis. The company bosses wanted to keep the 40 hours under any circumstance and offered longer holidays and higher wages. The union called a strike; that was the opportunity to bring the steel workers under control. In November 1978, the labour forces of selected steel works were sent on strike, which was answered by massive lock-outs. While for eleven weeks the rank and file stood in the cold picketing the gates with great commitment, the leadership sabotaged the strike. The January 1979 agreement that fixed the 40 hour week for another five years had been in the files for a while. The union had demonstrated that in the steel industry mass sackings couldn't be prevented. Thus they had laid down their policies for the following steel crises.

3. The unions as pioneers for modernisation

Looking back on the policy of working-time reduction, it is obvious that the unions took the viewpoint of Germany's 'ideal general capitalist' when this was not yet possible for the capitalist side itself. In 1980-2, in what was up to then the deepest recession, most unions had taken up the demand for working-time reduction. By means of this, they wanted to make West Germany the world's most productive economy without creating deep social divisions like in the USA. They saw and are seeing the real possibility of this strategy being pushed through in the form of a flexibilisation of working-time as demanded by the big companies in order to enable them to use their plants more intensively. Right from the start, the demand for 35 hours contained the idea of flexibilisation to be introduced as a negotiable item. It was never about a seven hour day.

With such ideas of modernisation, the unions were far ahead of the bosses of medium size firms. Whilst BMW in Regensburg, for instance, had shifted to a four day week in 1984 even before the contract had been signed, other firms that were dominated by one shift plus overtime could not transform their way of organising work so quickly. Even in 1995, only 20 per cent of the small and medium size

industrial firms worked in more shifts than one. But their own rank and file, too, who after the lean years of crisis preferred a full wage rise, had to be won over first. In this very passionate campaign, the unions' main argument was mass unemployment: they used pictures of starving unemployed workers in Detroit or of poverty revolts. The 35 hour week was argued to prevent such a rise in unemployment and would be functional for a modern capitalist solution: shorter working hours, longer running hours for the machinery, lower unit labour costs (i.e. higher productivity), new jobs.

To push through this policy of anticipated compromise against resistance from both sides, a long struggle was necessary. The bargaining process was hyped up as the 'conflict of the century', at the end of which many were unsure who had really won. The 35 hour week was to be achieved in the core region of West Germany's metal industry, Nord-Württemberg/Nord-Baden, which at the time had the 'most advanced' agreements. Since the bosses officially rejected working-time reduction as an issue of bargaining, IG Metall started pin-prick strikes¹ in selected car and supplier factories ('minimax strategy'). The bosses immediately locked out workers all over West Germany and the state refused to pay short-time allowances to those locked out because of lack of work. Since the union now mainly mobilised 'against the lock-outs' and went to court against the cancelling of short-time allowances, as time went by the strike developed an ever more defensive character. It was ended by ex-Minister of Labour Leber as arbitrator. The metal union celebrated the agreement for a step by step reduction of the working week to 38.5 hours as an 'entry into the 35 hours week' - even though precisely its step by step introduction would scarcely create new jobs.

The real break-through was the flexibilisation of working-time: according to the 'Leber compromise', only the average working-time in the company had to be 38.5 hours. Up to 18 per cent of the labour force might work 40 hours, others only 37. The hours of operation of machinery can be extended according to the plant's needs because, from this time, the concrete application of working-time reduction is negotiated between works council and employer.

Slowly, this form of working-time reduction was taken up by other unions. In the late eighties, the unions already had massive problems mobilising their rank and file for the issue. Few took notice of the 'historic' 1st October 1995 when finally the metal workers' working week was reduced to 35 hours; meanwhile, the deadline for compensation for overtime hours had been extended to two years...

The machinery running time in the metal industry has expanded from 60.6 hours a week in 1984 to 71.8 hours in 1996. Productivity has gone up faster than working-time was reduced - in contrast to the 'model countries' - the USA or the

¹ "Schwerpunktstreiks": strikes in which, while the trade union is responsible for a whole region, it only calls for strikes in certain large or important firms.

Netherlands - where wages went down but productivity hardly rose. In Germany's multiple-shift plants, machinery has a longer running time than the European average - despite the shorter official working hours of the employed. Since possible wage rises had been sacrificed to the goal of working-time reduction, labour unit costs, too, are at a spectacularly low level. In the nineties, with wage agreements below the inflation rate and measured against the development of productivity, wage restraint in Germany was greater than in the USA.

The notion of the 'time sovereignty' of the workers, a concept which served to justify flexibility and which was shared by social scientists, employers and leftists alike, is out of the question in the productive centres: here, all it is about is to flexibly apply a labour force as lean as possible according to demand without extra overtime pay. Meanwhile, unions have lost bargaining ground: more and more firms are flexibilising working-time without reduction.

Almost contemporaneous with the introduction of the 38.5 hours working week in the metal industry, in 1985 the Employment Promotion Act (*Beschäftigungsförderungsgesetz*), which overturned restrictions in the use of temporary work agencies, came into force. It also allows for short-term contracts in industry of up to 18 months (from 1996 up to 24 months) that before had only been possible for a concrete reason like replacing a pregnant woman or a conscripted man. Meanwhile, short-term contracts have become normal for newly hired workers; a so-called permanent job is only to be had after a longer period of short-term contracts.

The union left's project of redistributing jobs by means of working-time reduction has led to its historical defeat. Neither by wage restraint nor through flexibilisation has a 'redistribution of work' to the unemployed been achieved. Another shock-wave occurred when hardly anyone talked about further working-time reduction. Volkswagen announced that they were cutting working hours down to 28.8 hours per week. Amidst the crisis in the car industry when the bosses only talked about longer working hours and wage-cuts, the agreement at VW seemed to lead in another direction.

4. The Volkswagen model: modern Rhenian capitalism

By means of the 28.8 hours week, Volkswagen has restructured production. With the help of the union, VW succeeded in making up its backlog in rationalisation which stemmed from the beginning of the nineties. Workers in the metal union's model plant had the highest wages, the highest extra pay, the longest breaks, the best holiday regulations - and the cars took the longest time to assemble. In the eighties they had experimented with highly automated production ('deserted factories') and failed because of the high amount of capital necessary and the dependence on few experts. A new push in productivity was only to be achieved by

restructuring the working process. This included abolishing the old piece-work system, absorbing the workers' knowledge by continuous improvement processes, wiping out the old master and foreman hierarchies as well as the transfer of responsibility to teams.

In October 1993, shortly after this process had started, the trust bosses calculated that there was an 'excess' of 31,000 out of 108,000 in the number of employees and announced sackings, especially in the 'dinosaur plant' Wolfsburg with its labour force of 53,000. A mass sacking with lump-sum allowances etc. to buy the workers out of their jobs on this scale would have been expensive as well as dangerous; it would clearly lead to a confrontation with the workers and to their refusal to co-operate.

Instead, VW proposed a radical change in working-time. Within four weeks, IG Metall negotiated a reduced working week of 28.8 hours from 1994 on and sacrificed their principle of 'full wage compensation'. In exchange, the company was not allowed to fire workers for economic reasons for a period of two years. Confronted with the alternatives of 40,000 sackings or 28.8 hours a week in all VW plants, the labour force accepted flexibilisation.

The renunciation of sackings created the climate for restructuring. VW kept a qualified labour force reserve and solved the problem of low profitability due to high wages in times of a decreasing demand. The reduction of the labour force through early retirement, voluntary termination of contracts coupled with redundancy payments and the running out of short-term contracts was still continuing: the workforce dropped from 108,000 employed in 1993 to 94,000 in 1995. 'Job guarantees' only prevent the sack for economic reasons, without guaranteeing the preservation of all jobs.

For periods of higher demand, GIZ (Gründungs und Innovationszentrum Wolfsburg GmbH) [Enterprise Promotion and Innovation Centre] has been founded, a temporary work agency owned by VW, the Bundesland Niedersachsen and the union IG Metall. They employ students and temp workers inside the VW plant during holidays or otherwise temporarily, who get 21 DM per hour gross instead of an average of 30 DM per hour for regular VW workers.

In the 'breathing factory', working-time gets adapted to the necessities of production. The company's appropriation of workers' spare time has grown. There are no common breaks between different teams, which reduces communication. Workers can be sent to work at other plants. They tried out more than 150 different working-time schedules and shift models, from short shifts in a four shift schedule around the clock to relatively 'normal' eight hour days with spare time blocks. In this way, running time for certain car models could be extended from 3,700 to 4,600 hours per year. The assembling time per car has dropped from 30 hours in 1993 to 20 in 1998.

Meanwhile, after some reservation at the beginning, the 28.8 hour working week meets with relatively broad approval in the labour force. Especially the younger workers, who are not family bound, enjoy working less hours, even with the recuperation effect being cancelled out by the intensification of work and unfavourable working-times. Regular monthly wages stayed more or less the same. They had cuts in the yearly bonus payments so the gross yearly wages dropped by 16 per cent (10 per cent after taxes). Before the new contract, wages according to the VW company agreement used to be 1.6 times the Niedersachsen rate which means that the model cannot be applied to other companies that easily.

Contrary to propaganda, the 28.8 hours week at seven hours per day was only a reality for a minority of the employees of VW, e.g. office workers where management suspect that a lot of pores still exist as well as at under-utilised plants like Emden. In other words, the reduction to the 28.8 hour week took place only where it could function as pressure to squeeze the periods of non-work from the working day. But in the Hannover truck factory, for example, they worked 37.5 hours per week practically all the time. Thirty-five hours are paid for, 1.2 hours are a donation to the company ('job guarantee!'), 1.3 hours will be compensated in spare time. In the case of sick leave or holidays, only 28.8 hours are paid for. Because the 28.8 hours brought only disadvantages, Hannover saw heavy protests as the contract was extended and supplemented with further aggravations like shorter breaks, twelve Saturday shifts with lower weekend extra pay and over-time extra pay only after 38.8 hours per week.

In 1998, production was raised in other plants, too, and because of a labour shortage management preferred to pay out over-time. At the same time there were new short-term jobs. In February 1999, the Wolfsburg plant cancelled the different time schedules and shifted to a strict three shift model with an option of working four, five or six days per week according to the demand for cars, and keeping the 28.8 hours week as the calculatory basis. 'With the progress in implementing the segmentation of production structures, synchronisation of working-time schedules continues to be pursued', as has been stated in supervisors' instructions. With the new regulation, night shift for everyone in the three shift departments is also being implemented, and a further rise in productivity is on the agenda.

5. The 1992-3 crisis and the local 'investment securing contracts'

The 1992-3 crisis represented a decisive point. Whilst the car industry utilised the decreasing demand principally to restructure production and threatened to relocate production (including sackings), the unions for the first time since WW II were confronted with great losses of membership. So they tried to preserve their influence where the basis of their power had always been: in their acknowledgement by capital and the state. Union research institutes concentrated

their forces on planning investment strategies for German industry - taking the issue more seriously than the capitalists. Works councils and entrepreneurs agreed on 'investment securing contracts' - tearing down dams which had been believed safe forever.

The five year term shop-floor agreements in the Daimler-Benz works at Gaggenau and Würth in spring 1993 marked the break-through for the capitalists. Positions struggled for in the seventies (e.g. over so many minutes of break per hour for assembly line piece-work) were being deserted and working-time extensions pushed through. Furthermore, the works council in the Würth truck plant bound itself to actively co-operate in lowering costs by 30 per cent and assembling time by 20 per cent - in return for guarantees that the production of a light truck would not be shifted to the Czech Republic. By 1994, the labour force had been reduced from 15,000 to 10,000.

Also in 1994, the old 1938 law regulating minimum conditions like working-time and holidays in cases where there was no collective agreement got adapted to the necessities of flexible working-time schedules. In principle, the eight hour day is still valid, but now it may be extended to ten hours a day six days a week, if the over-time hours are compensated in the following six months. Saturday is a regular working day. Over-time pay of 25 per cent had to be paid, but now this regulation has been cancelled.

Regional collective agreements have now been opened up to allow for regulations on shop-floor level in times of crisis, e.g. allowing for temporary working-time reductions down to 30 hours or working-time extensions including wage cuts. A variety of these possibilities have been put into practice in about a quarter of those plants that have works or staff councils, all in exchange for pretty vague guarantees not to shift production somewhere else. Partly extra work has to be done without any payment at all.

Amongst the companies that are using these opportunities are car factories like Opel at Bochum, Ford at Cologne, Mercedes at Kassel, VW at Hannover, corporations gaining billions of profits, far from experiencing a crisis. Most of the tyre factories in Germany have extended working-time. At Pirelli for instance, since January 1999 they have had an agreement to return from 37.5 hours to 40 hours a week without the monthly wages rising. In exchange, the company promised no jobs cut until 2001 - productivity until then has to be driven up by 20 per cent!

6. Working-time gets re-extended

In contrast to France or Britain, in Germany real working-time for the full time employed went down about by four per cent between 1983 and 1993, with big differences between East and West Germany. There was an even bigger decrease in the yearly average working hours of all employed persons, because parallel to the

increase in women's wage-labouring since the sixties part-time work has spread considerably. For a long time, the unions' bargaining policies systematically ignored this fact and stuck to the demand to cut general working-time to 35 hours with full wage compensation. Today, by means of a campaign, unions are into convincing male workers to work part-time.

This kind of working-time reduction has broadened a lot since the seventies. Whoever wanted more 'time autonomy' for themselves and had sufficient wages didn't wait for the 35 hour week to be introduced but individually tried to gain a different working-time schedule.

Today, there are many indicators that this century's trend towards working-time reduction has been reversed. In Germany, absenteeism rates have reached an historic low of about four per cent. In all of the bigger plants there are anti-absenteeism campaigns agreed upon by the works councils as part of the effort to achieve working-time reduction and 'investment securing contracts'.

While collectively agreed working-time is being reduced, an increasing number of workers need a second job to compensate for the losses in real wages of recent years. In 1998, about three million of the regularly employed had a second job or additionally worked as self-employed an average of ten hours a week. At the same time, companies had workers work 1.8 billion hours overtime—calculated to be equivalent to one million jobs. This is an indicator that the core labour forces had been reduced such that there is no longer a reserve of labour-power to replace sick workers or deal with unexpected production problems etc. and that new hiring has been avoided (don't forget - these figures leave out the fact that many overtime hours today are not being calculated as such!).

The most important tendency today is the increase in unpaid surplus work within the framework of 'confidence working-times' which no statistics show. This mostly affects office workers in distribution, network administration and programming with intense pressure for efficiency and keeping deadlines, often with a working-time of up to fifty or sixty hours a week. As one union paper put it: *'Increasingly, companies tend to either not fix any working-time any more by contract - especially concerning higher qualified work - and only pay for a total of performance or stop registering real working-time at all. Yet, unregistered and unpaid work is not subject to re-distribution anyway.'* IBM are heading for a general working-time frame of 19 up to 60 hours, within which employees have to do their work without extra registration of working hours. This is supposed to create such pressure that they work more than they originally intended.

7. And the workers? What are they doing?

Years of propaganda trying to play unemployed against 'job owners' seem to have had some effect. But not all labour forces have accepted local 'investment securing

contracts' unquestioningly: small wildcat strikes at the assembly lines, as in summer 1993 at Opel (Bochum) against the management's initiative to secure local investments, or at Daimler-Benz (Wörth) when work pressure got unbearable, are an expression of this. So also is the sudden increase of sick-leave rates in single departments. One result of the trend to reduce conflicts to a shop-floor level instead of, for example, a regional or industrial one, is that only a few of these collective protests find their way into public consciousness.

Works councils in single 'strong' plants were actually able to turn the reduction of working-time into some kind of improvement for the core labour force. But contrary to former times, they weren't able to play any kind of vanguard role but instead have got more and more isolated from other workers. These same works councils just sit and watch as whole departments are being out-sourced to other firms with lower wages, as production peaks are being compensated through the hiring of temp workers, as short-term contracts become regular for newly hired workers. The unions first of all are representatives of the core labour forces; the marginal labour forces are bargaining chips used in order to achieve better agreements for the core staff.

In the collective bargaining conflicts of 1999, ever larger surplus amounts of working-time and ever longer compensation periods for these are being agreed upon: in the public sector for example, 600 surplus and 40 minus hours. Hospital staff are to lose those extra payments for working shifts and at night that they had fought for ten years ago.

But the critical situation in production may also create a new kind of struggle. This has been shown at the Opel factory at Bochum where in October 1998 about 1,800 workers stopped work and ultimately demanded the immediate full integration of 300 short-term workers whose contracts were about to expire. The labour force had been cut so drastically that workers couldn't even take their breaks. Management reacted at once: assembly line speed was reduced by 2.5 per cent and 50 short-term workers got hired with unlimited contracts. There were stoppages of assembly lines again in March 1999, because the company refused to hire more workers on a permanent basis.

The unions' policy of working-time reduction was capitalist crisis management. It didn't stop the intensification of exploitation but on the contrary made it possible. With their co-operation, shop-floor and union leftists got exhausted or integrated by the apparatus. From a revolutionary stand-point, we cannot radicalise these models - we have to reject them principally and criticise them as what they have been in the eyes of the workers for quite some time: strategies capital uses ever more furiously to make sure they control all of our time to enable them to isolate and exploit us ever more.

The awkward question of times

Precari-Nati (Italy)



'Time is an invention by men who cannot love'
(Invariance)

1. A brief outline of the notion of working time reduction

The pressure to reduce working time has been central in the class struggle for more than a century. The first collective action of the proletariat at a national level was the English workers' struggle against the capitalists' attempt to extend working time beyond the workers' physical possibilities and to make children work in factories.

Precari-Nati

The awkward question of times

On this terrain the workers' initiatives and the restructuring of capital have been inextricably entangled in a fierce struggle.

In the advanced capitalist countries, the introduction of the 8-hour working day, i.e. the reduction of legal working time, as well as the introduction of collective agreements and the first forms of welfare assistance, are intexticably linked to the corporative integration of union organizations, which happened in the period between the two world wars, and which was functional to the development of the various national economies.

The development of 'flexible' production and related organizational techniques (just-in-time production, zero-stock etc.), with the consequent labour mobility linked to a relative extension of the distribution and correlated with legal changes allowing for more flexible work contracts, makes the 35 hour week an objective which, managed by the bosses and the unions, can easily serve 'flexibility' - a real 'social myth' of this dying century. We are living in an historical moment where the development of the productive forces imposes an osmosis of working and living time (the continuous search for work dictated by the boom and bust of the market). The same working time is characterized by the alternation of activities offered in terms of hope (waiting lists, re-training, etc.) and proper work activity where it becomes impossible to calculate the costs, time and energy of the worker.

On the other hand, we must recognize the workers' aspirations for further working time reductions. Our view is that workers never struggle for a demand 'because it is right', but because they have the strength to obtain it, even if only by imposing it on reformist structures (at the moment there are various struggles aimed at reducing work pace - currently in some factories in the industrial region of Emilia there are struggles over work pace, in which the unions have been obliged to follow the spontaneous response of the workers, even to extent of supporting the strikes. See the 'vertenza' of the Terim in Modena, where more than 250 workers went on strike for several weeks). Similarly, there is no such thing as 'anti-reformist objectives in themselves' since their realization is always within the capitalist productive structure - a workers' struggle becomes anti-reformist only when it breaks away effectively from union and party control. As a consequence, we believe, rather than focusing on general political campaigns for working time reduction, it is more important to work on a smaller scale, linking the phenomenon of work refusal to local struggles for a redistribution of work pace, working time and shifts inside the production process. Thus, rather than focus on strikes and big battles (when there are any), we concentrate on the incessant manifestations of

micro-conflict, which, even if they contain many contradictions, nevertheless are presently the only visible terrain for the working class struggle against capital and the main terrain in which we are actively involved. (Obviously, we do not see our concern with this micro-conflict as opposed to an interest in strikes and mass struggles....) At the present time, the point at which a natural refusal of work by the individual becomes an articulate direct class organization which breaks from the capitalist organization of work is difficult to identify. However, we will trace some meaningful connections among some of the current conflicts: union negotiations on work pace, the resistance to the new forms of working time and the continuous shift, which led to the '6 x 6' (i.e., people working six hours a day for six days; in the Bologna district, there is the example of Ducati, the metal and mechanical factory), workers phoning sick on Saturdays and Sundays, and the bloody-mindedness of the new workers provided by temping agencies.

2. A comparison between negotiated working times and actual ones in industry (end of the 60s to the 90s)

In Italy there has been a systematic divergence between negotiated times and actual ones. The aim of this section is to explain the reasons for such a divergence and the role of the different components of actual working time in determining it.¹ Actual working time equals negotiated time, plus overtime, minus absence from work, minus the Cassa integrazione Guadagni (CIG).² The addition of these components, calculated per capita, gives the average actual working time.

Our research excluded part-time employment, because it is very small in the big companies.

Beginning of the 70s

At the beginning of the 70s, actual working hours coincided with the negotiated ones, or were even shorter (e.g. 40 weekly hours instead of 44). This can

¹ For this comparison we used data taken from official statistics and from documents of the metal and mechanical workers unions. We will limit ourselves to the big companies, both because we had a large quantity of data, and because this sector is traditionally seen as the 'vanguard' of the social movement.

² The CIG is a typical instrument of the Italian Welfare State. In cases considered by the law, e.g. forza maggiore, market crisis and company restructuring, the bosses can agree with the unions on a partial or total period of suspension from work 'on zero working time'. During this period, the worker gets 80% of his previous salary, paid by the CIG and national insurance. This allows the bosses to face temporary reductions in production thanks to an immediate financial recovery. If the suspension is followed by a 'collective redundancy', the CIG becomes an actual 'unemployment benefit', with all the consequences of social quiescence connected with this kind of social policies.

be explained by two factors: the increase in absenteeism (which, before 1969, the year of the 'Hot Autumn', was at the same level as in the mid 80s). The other factor was a decrease in overtime, which at the end of the 60s and beginning of the 70s was again at the same levels as in the second half of the 80s. Both absenteeism and the decrease in overtime were symptoms of a high level of social unrest at that time, which was formalized in a network of 'autonomous class behaviour', that is the capacity of acting independently of parties and unions. We have to stress, however, that these struggles were a response to the restructuring. Often, they were also unable to link great moments of direct class organization between large productive districts and to connect themselves with the multiform network of struggles in the small and medium companies.

The lowest that actual working time reached was in 1975. This coincided with the minimum level of overtime, the maximum level of absenteeism and the first relative maximum of CIG - and of course with a large reduction in negotiated working time.

In order to illustrate that period better, we can briefly analyse the case of Petrolchimico in Maghera, well-known in the whole of Italy for its fierce social battles and autonomous forms of struggle and organizations. By a real reversal of the balance of power, Maghera workers gained a reduction in working time which was conceded informally by the bosses and not legally recognized. In practice, workers were allowed to go home after cleaning the machines. The time for cleaning the machines was agreed to be one hour, while it was actually ten minutes. The local bosses knew perfectly well that they would lose part of the time, but the balance of power was such that they had to concede an actual working time reduction in this form. This situation contained elements of both strength and weakness for the workers. It contained an element of strength: because it manifested the workers' capacity to overcome the legal union constraints and to impose their own pace on the bosses, by a pure class confrontation. But it also contained an element of weakness considering that the bosses could not make their 'concession' legal without beginning an overt war with Confindustria (the bosses' union). As we have already stressed above, there was a great difference between the social conflict in the large and small companies (the relative enlargement of the latter, or outsourcing in the case the former).

Another factor worth noting in this period is the increase of phenomena such as the double job - which, understood without any illusions, makes this period more contradictory. It is clear that there were particular layers of very militant workers, distanced from others with conservative attitudes and interests - and the

autonomous organizations thrived in those layers. But the conditions were not favourable for any unitary self-organization of the most militant layers of the working class. The hypervoluntaristic attempts to centralise these autonomous manifestations were in vane, and sometimes reactionary, denying the presuppositions of workers' autonomy, in order to return to a simpler and avant-gardistic leninist scheme: 'the party orders, the class executes'.

Coming back to this section's subject, between 1972 and 1975 there was a reduction of negotiated working time of about 100 hours, while the overtime, which in the two years 1972 and 1973 was around 70 hours per year, was less than 45 hours during the whole second half of the 70s.

From 1975 to the 80s

From 1976 to 1984, negotiated working hours remained substantially unchanged, while there were some limited oscillations in actual working hours. There was an oscillation in absenteeism: its relative minimum in 1978 corresponded to the relative maximum in actual working time. On the other hand, a new peak of absenteeism in 1979 corresponded with a new minimum of actual working time. The oscillations of actual working time were also influenced by inversely corresponding but limited fluctuations of the CIG. This also happened between 1979 and 1984, coinciding with the economic cycle and massive processes of rationalization.

Coming to specific cases, we see that between 1979 and 1983 absences from work per capita changed from an average of about 290 hours per year to 150. However, actual working hours stayed at the same medium or low levels as in the previous period, between 1500 and 1550 hours per year. This can be explained, as we saw above, by the introduction of the CIG, which in this period nearly tripled from about 40 hours to almost 140 per year. The highest contribution from the CIG in the whole period under consideration, however, was in 1984, when it reached a level that it was never to repeat, even during the recession of the beginning of the 90s, at least for industry as a whole.

From 1983 to 1990, actual working hours grew massively, reaching a maximum in the period 1986-89. Actual working hours decreased during the following years, despite the fact that in the same period contractual time had gradually decreased due to the achievement of further time reductions in terms of hours of paid days off allowed per year, which we know would not mean an *actual* time reduction.

The rise of actual working times corresponded to a decrease of the CIG per capita, from a maximum level in 1984 to the lowest in 1989. It also corresponded to the parallel rise in overtime, which reached a maximum that same year. Both these phenomena were due to the recovery from the consequences of restructuring and of the 'intensive' rationalization that was carried out at the beginning of the 80s; and also to a new upturn in the economy in the period 1985-1990.

Absenteeism diminished drastically and the related contractual reductions of working time per year did not have any practical effect after 1985. These reduction had been conquered in the form of paid permitted days off of about 70 hours per year per capita.

During the 80s, in Italy there was a sharp fall in absenteeism and strikes, along with a change of mood inside the factories (paralleled by police repression and by redundancies for the most militant elements). The fading of social conflict and the relative pressure on employment due to that first great restructuring and recession has to be linked to the end of the *scala mobile* and also to the huge phase of industrial restructuring of this period, due to a new international cycle of microelectronic innovations. Outsourcing, as well as the expulsion from the great companies had created a nebula of subjects which, in such a climate of atomization and growing social insecurity made it harder to perceive a 'proletarian experience'. Workers found themselves in conflictual competition with each other. This dissolved the old links of solidarity such that the universe of relations that had been inherent to the 'collective struggle' of the industrial labour force was rendered into a desert. The loss of a workers' perspective connected to the dismembering of the industrial cathedrals led to a 'midnight of the theoretical-practical century'.

In this same period, there was also a reduction in the numbers employed caused by a cycle of investments and innovations together with an economic recession³ This happened in connection with a strong rise in interest rates and a rapid increase in obsolescence due to the new pace of technical progress. This situation created a trend towards a fuller utilization of the machines, with a consequent prolonging of working time, which was obtained by increasing overtime, and clamping down on absenteeism backed by new agreements. The confederative unions maintained their strength, while it was more and more difficult to find a basis for durable autonomous organizations. In fact autonomous

³ 'Redundancies, the origin of the industrial reserve army, are not caused by the technical factor of the introduction of machines, but are due to insufficient valorisation. Workers are made redundant not because they are replaced by machines, but because at a certain level in capital accumulation profits become too small and so they get too few returns.' (H. Grossman, *La legge dell'accumulazione e del crollo del sistema capitalistico*.)



behaviour was mostly undefined and it was impossible to give a form to the rare manifestations of conflict.

The 90s

The recession at the beginning of the 90s (industrial production in 1993 with respect to 1990 was down by 5.5%) coincided with a reduction in actual working hours, due to the rise of the CIG and the decrease in overtime. In this period, the central factor was not absenteeism but the CIG. In 1993, in the bigger companies, the CIG reached its historical maximum (143 hours per year per capita). This was not true for industry as a whole, where the CIG was less important than other long-term alternatives, such as the *mobilità lunga* or early

retirement. However, there was an extension of the pace of production rather than of productive times (the 'just-in-time' methods were introduced at this time).

In 1994, for the first time in Italy, the unemployed population ceased to consist mainly of young people seeking work for the first time. This characteristic, which up until then had been considered structural in Italy, had allowed the state to unload the cost of unemployment onto the family.

One of the reasons for adult unemployment was surely that, while during the previous crisis unemployment was partly hidden in the long term CIG (in which the worker still retained an often fictitious status of an employee), after the introduction of the new institution called *indennità di mobilità* the same number of people were now formally unemployed. Some of them were included in the *mobilità lunga* which is used as a bridge to the early retirement. Another reason was the rise of the actual number of unemployed, as a result of the crisis that had hit the small and medium sized companies. The continual introduction of new norms favouring

short-term contracts for new employees and a reduction in permanent jobs (which meant early retirement for many) also contributed to this situation. Hours now vary according to the ultra-flexible needs of the new models of production planning.

It is interesting to notice that, in the big companies, the historical maximum in the CIG does not correspond to a minimum of overtime at all. This latter stayed, in 1993, at rather high levels (the same as in 1987, a very different year from the point of view of the economic cycle). The productive system then seemed to work with more overtime and more CIG, which is the ideal situation for 'just-in-time' production. The relative initiatives of unions and bosses on working time will favour this model.

A few conclusions

As we saw above, the CIG has an important influence on the dynamics of actual working hours, according to the data obtained by research on the big companies carried out by ISTAT.

In the 70s, when the CIG was still at medium-low levels (under 50 hours per year per capita on average), actual working time was changing in accordance with the (net) CIG; that is, when the CIG rose, actual working hours decreased.

Since 1979 there has been a divergence: while the CIG grew until 1988, between 1979 and 1984 there was a fall in absenteeism, due to fears of redundancy, and in the period 1984-88 overtime increased - thus the increase of CIG did not change actual hours worked.

In the period 1990-93, during a period of serious crisis, there was a rise in actual working hours (net CIG), despite a decline in overtime worked. This shows that in a period of crisis the fear of job losses determines the amount of absenteeism, which also happened in the period 1980-84.

The divergence between actual working hours and contractual working hours is the best example of the legal weakness of any proposal on working hours. The 35 hour week, besides being a tool to favour flexibility, is anyway completely 'metaphysical' from a radical point of view, if it is imposed by law. A decrease in working time can only be achieved by a slow and articulate class response. But the possibilities of intervention and action are spread by the present manifestation of social conflict and not by a virtual manifestation of political-union consensus.

People even prefer perhaps to work longer and get higher pay rather than accepting a decrease in working time connected with the flexibility of production. However, an awareness of the problem of the rhythms of life is somewhat present

in many underground struggles in which the untamed nature of the working class reveals itself.

Even if for workers pay is still obviously the principal objective, we must notice that there is a new 'response' to the pace of work. For example, there are sabotage techniques on the clocks in the machines which count the pieces produced, planned sickness, work to the rule; these latter mean disadvantages for the firm, because of the bureaucratic nature of work organization.

3. Who demands the 35 hours?

In Italy, the principal promoters of the 35 hour week can be categorized into four groups.

(i) *The alternative unions (cobas)* The alternative unions, which mainly developed at the beginning of the 90s, were the first to raise the banner for 35 hours. The whole area of grassroots unionism retains a Keynesian objective - they are nostalgic for the welfare state or seek to reclaim a fairer redistribution of social wealth, and follow a reformist political strategy which aims to defend some guarantees for the workers - but even this scandalizes the leaders of the CGIL. In this area there are comrades who recognize that reducing working hours will be used by the bosses, and that the alternative unions' proposal about working hours is relatively weak, but they think that it is possible to fight a battle against the bosses with this political campaign in that it may serve to stir the workers up. They do not appreciate the evident 'culturalism' of this proposal. Attempts to develop discussion on an issue such as this, in times of social peace, inevitably turn into a pure and sterile propaganda campaign.

(ii) *Communist Refoundation and the Government* The PRC, born from sections of the former PCI and from minor groups of the extreme left, introduced the issue of the 35 hour week in order to unify the Party and as a compromise solution offered in exchange for its collaboration with the centre-left government. A 'right-wing' faction recently split from the PRC - the *Partito dei Comunisti Italiani* (PcCI) (led by the Breznevian Armando Cossutta); this faction is in favour of the Government and participates in it. This split accelerated that process of compromise. In fact, the PRC can vaunt its deal with the government which 'gave the 35 hour week to the Italian workers'; while the new Party can legitimately claim they are implementing the 35 hour project and accuse the PRC of childishness and an inability to govern.

(iii) *The official unions* The official unions were initially bypassed by Communist Refoundation which played a union role. The Italian official unions,

GCIL, CISL, UIL (which, although huge, have more pensioners than active workers in their memberships) have forced the government to redefine an agreement on 'working-time reduction' so that they would appear as centrally involved. Their position coincided with the worries of Confindustria and that they have given the same answers: a halt to the law on 35 hours, redefinition of working times, and negotiations at the level of individual companies, to ensure that the unions together with the bosses to determine decisions concerning productivity levels.

(iv) *The bosses* At the beginning, Confindustria fought against any suggestion for working time reductions and denied the usefulness of legislation to enforce it, but it looked more favourably at the possibility of negotiations in individual companies. We must stress that the large and medium-large companies changed their minds dramatically when the government and the unions approved a regulation for the reduction of working hours, but the bosses of the smallest enterprises were more skeptical about the new working hours legislation, because it would raise the competitiveness of the largest companies in relation to the smallest. Also the introduction of new forms of work under short-term contracts together with the new norms that regulate the average working hours favour both the large and the small companies - the latter because they could legalize their illegal workers. Better and more efficient production will be revealed as an attack against the workers, under the false cover of profit figures and of 'time freedom' for the employees.

4. The metal and mechanical industry agreement - the testing field

We now discuss the agreement with the metal and mechanical workers because we think this is the traditional testing field for the bosses to attack workers' conditions and because this agreement is evaluated and negotiated with the two 'strongest' sections of the workers' movement: the chemical and metal and mechanical workers.

The proposal presented by the confederative unions (CGL, CISL, UIL) for the renewal of the metal and mechanical workers' agreement, and for the 'reduction of working hours' (in the form proposed by them) is a pretext for a wage reduction and a re-organization of work which would lead to an increase of productivity for the companies through a more intense and rational use of machines and work. Under the pretext of controlling unemployment, they try to apply the paradigm, propagated as an indisputable truth, that unemployment is created by the increase of labour productivity due to technological development; a reduction of working

time is then necessary in order to control the 'present' capitalist system's tendency to create unemployment. The weekly hours 'reduction', introduced through laws on overtime, laws on the 35 hours and the various company agreements, (particularly the metal and mechanical workers' agreement), amounts only to the possibility for the bosses to extend and shrink at will the weekly working hours.

In Italy the combination of overtime and of *Cassa Integrazione Guadagni* (CIG) has been the 'main instrument for planning production'. In fact a combination of the CIG and overtime has been used by the bosses in order to make someone work 'too much' and some others work 'too little'. With the chemical workers' contract and with the new metal and mechanical workers' contract, this principle remains intact. Rather, new weapons are offered to the bosses while leaving the 150-200 individual hours of maximum overtime unchanged from the previous agreements. On the top of this, the *Banca Ore* is introduced.

The regulation introduced by the law on overtime (law no. 409-98 *conversione del DL 335-1998*) is even more to the advantage of the bosses. It allows them to impose 250 hours of overtime per year. This corresponds to 5.2 hours per week, which becomes 6.6 hours per week if we consider that the law imposes a limit of 80 hours every three months. Obviously, the weekly hours above are only considered on average - in practice there are no weekly limits. This means that bosses could even ask workers to work longer than 45 hours a week, just by giving notice of it to the inspectorate services of the *Ministero del Lavoro* within 24 hours before the overtime is due to start.

One novelty is the *Banca Ore* (Hour Bank), which allows companies to organize timetables according to the needs of the boss and of the market, and it is included in the metal and mechanical workers' agreement. The *Banca Ore* is a system that calculates the weekly overtime. According to the agreement brokered by the CGIL, CISL, UIL on behalf of the metal and mechanical workers, 'the workers will have to choose, within the next three-month term, whether they want to be paid for the overtime in terms of money or rest'. This allows the companies to reduce their staff, because they will use overtime extensively when the market requires it (imposing faster pace and higher exploitation), and they will be able to ask their workers to stay at home when production needs are less. On this point, we have to note that overtime has been one of the main ways of getting pay rises. Without overtime, pay is normally insufficient and this explains why an increase in overtime is usually accepted without any resistance by the workers, or is even welcomed. If they accept a payment *in terms of rest*, the workers will have an actual pay decrease, because they will not be paid for the overtime. Overtime is

today paid at 25%-50% on top of the normal hourly pay. Thus the *Banca Ore*, disguised as a first step towards working time reduction, means that the workers work overtime without being paid for overtime rates.

Agreement by agreement, wages have been reduced more and more. The pay rise allowed for in the unions' proposal is very low - only 80 thousand lire for the 4th level. The proposal also weakens the link between wages and pensions, because now pensions will be evaluated independently from basic pay. Thus, pay rises will no longer determine eventual pensions entitlements.

Among the company agreements already approved, those which introduce some form of working time reduction are also those which impose the longest shifts and Saturday working, connected with restructuring implemented by the unions together with the bosses. In the province of Bologna, some examples of company agreements which reduce the hours per week and introduce shifts are: the GIRMAC, the COM, the GS and the BEGHELLI, whose timetable is distributed across three shifts with average week time of 31 hours. Instead, in Bonfiglioli, Arco, Elettromeccanica Appennino and Sorvigno there are four shifts each of less than 30 hours weekly working time.

The same law on the 35 hours will only impose higher taxes for those companies with more than 15 employees that have not adopted the 35 hours by the year 2001, and provides incentives to companies that will implement it (government and bosses may later decide to prolong the deadline beyond 2001, or not apply this system of incentives-and-taxations to some sectors, or invalidate it altogether.) This is coherent with the trend towards decreasing taxation for businesses and increasing taxation for everybody else.

5. Final remarks

In the present period we identify three key moments for redefining a class behaviour related to the changes in production and agreements.

(i) The shifts, the labour mobility, the emergence of *distretti di lavoro*, spread around all Italy in a complex network and the introduction of a massive legislative body aimed at a systematic reduction of the number of permanent jobs in favour of short term forms of employment, all this makes unionized forms of struggle based on frontal attacks ineffective. The recent mobilization of the metal and mechanical sector around their contract is an example of this. In fact the 'large' minority of workers with short-term contracts has been left outside, completely 'ignored' by the unions, which are unable to understand the problems of this new component.

The forms of action and struggle will become for itself 'invisible' and 'quick'. The challenge today is to create militant workers participation (which should not be a racket or spectacular) that could find effective tools even within their extreme mobility and consistence.

The dynamics of autonomous action are connected, for us, to a complex dialectic of objective causes and subjective will. The expression of a critical point of view - the ability of relating any analysis to the creation of a 'community of intent' which can then be socialized, and, in parallel, the ability to give 'form' and practical 'force' to it, for every worker - faces a lack of structures, even if they are only formally representative. The need for struggle becomes, in this sense, more and more directly a need of self-organization and self-activity.

(ii) Workers, particularly the younger ones who enter production, are hired with short-term contracts, where the guarantees of a career and a presence in the productive area are feeble. There is a change in age profile in workplaces, early retirements are favoured for workers with permanent positions in order to increase the relative number of workers with short-term contracts (the old *working class* is sent to the breaker's yard). This leads to two consequences. One is the extreme disaffection with the job and, considering the lack of guarantees about the future, a greater 'arrogance' among workers. The second consequence is inevitably negative, and it is the Damocles' sword that hangs over short-term workers, in relation to the extension of their contract. (In the case of workers in temping agencies, workers' behaviour is put on file and the most elementary rights that are normally 'guaranteed' to more permanent workers are pulverized.⁴)

(iii) At this moment, especially with the new norms on working time, there is going to be a greater 'perception' of productive peaks, and thus the moments when bosses can be most damaged on the productive level. This can allow workers more opportunities to blackmail their bosses. However, the government and the unions are more interested in regulating conflicts and strikes, and they will make these forms of struggle illegal (outside the unions). If this, from an autonomist point of view, makes workers' actions freer, because they will find themselves, clearly and directly, against the government and union structure, on the other hand it will increase bosses' and government repression against the workers in struggle.

⁴ We understand the process of casualization of the work force as a constant fact, specific to the present social phase. However, we are aware of the variants of capitalistic planning with respect to the modification of the productive network achieved by decentralizing or concentrating production.

'35 hours' against the proletariat Mouvement Communiste (France)

1. Introduction

The 35-hour week (Aubry) Bill, passed through the National Assembly by the so-called 'plural' Left, has been hailed as a great social reform worthy of standing in the Pantheon of the achievements of the French workers' movement, alongside the 40 hour week and 2 weeks paid holidays conceded by the Popular Front in 1936.¹ 'An outstanding social advance' and 'cultural improvement' were among the proliferation of superlatives: the CGT chief bureaucrat Louis Viannet particularly excelled himself in this.²

According to its advocates, the Aubry Bill would exist within a long-term historical process, in which a marked drop in the length of the working year would lead us to the promised land of the 'heteronomous' liberation of work.³ For us (communists), this law is part of a tendency, which began to emerge noticeably in 1982 with the 39-hour law: encouraging re-organization of the immediate production process, planning of working time (flexibility, annualization) and *in fine* the lowering of wages, in order to increase the rate of exploitation of the working class. Behind appearances, the reality is thus considerably less idyllic.

The Aubry Law can be seen as part of the succession of anti-working class laws over the last twenty years, thanks to the large-scale defeats of the proletariat following the restructuring of capital in sectors (metallurgy, car plants, shipyards) where the

¹ The Popular Front is the great moment of the 'myth of the Left in power' (see the book *The Myth of the Left in Power* by Phillippe Rivale, Jean Barrot and Albert Borcuk, Tete de Feuilles edition, 1973). We mustn't forget that the 40 hour week and the fifth week of paid holidays wasn't part of its election platform, intended first of all to reassure the middle classes in the name of 'anti-fascist unity of the French people' (Thorez). These few gains of the working class were to be briskly swept aside, leading to the decree-laws which introduced so many loop-holes in the application of the 40 hours law that it was virtually repealed, despite the fierce resistance of the workers before the fiasco of the 1938 strike. With the end of the strike wave and the pacification of the workers, mass lay-offs and price increases to cope with higher production costs wiped out the wage increases agreed in June 1936. During the Second World War, the average duration of work fluctuated between 55 and 60 hours.

² ...before roughly tempering his ardour in the face of the meagre amount of enthusiasm aroused in the companies by the Aubry law. In *Le Monde*, February 1st 1998, Louis Viannet stated: 'in such condition, the bill has big deficiencies. (...) If a legal duration of 35 hours leaves a margin to employers, which allows them to have 48 hour weeks, this cannot work.' M. Viannet makes as if to discover annualization of working time years after this has been at the heart of different left and right-wing schemes of working time, and whose application the CGT (Communist Partly aligned union) is negotiating within companies. Besides, in its official publication, *L'Hebdo de l'Actualite Sociale* (no. 2786), the CGT is much less vindictive with regard to the Aubry law: 'working time reduction provides an opportunity to reflect and consider a better organization of work, backing the involvement and skills of the men. The possibilities offered by new technologies are overtaking the demands of work to ensure quality products and services, while so bringing a new response to the challenges of competitiveness.'

³ A concept coined by the ideologue Andre Gorz to designate forced labour, alienated in relation to labour said to be autonomous, creative, not subject to the law of capital. Here Gorz is cheerfully plundering Marx, who at the end of *Capital* Vol. III, refers to that sphere of necessity that the communist mode of production will allow to be minimized. With one small difference nonetheless: in his ideal society, Gorz holds onto commodity production, wage labour and the state.

working class used to be strong, on both the objective and subjective levels. The role played by the PS/PC (Socialist/Communist) government in power at the beginning of the 1980s was at the cutting edge of this offensive, by virtue of its institutional function as political representative of the working class, transmitted into the very heart of the class by its trades union regulatory mechanisms. Thus the Left was the more able to push through the necessary reforms at state level at the same time as playing the role of social experimenter, in order to meet the needs generated by the accumulation of capital.

French capital has been confronted over the last twenty-five years by devaluation crises of ever-increasing magnitude and seriousness (which still show no signs of letting up, as we can see from the '91-'92 crises), by an historic slowing down in its rate of accumulation and by a decline in its standing on the world imperialist scene; and so has taken to attacking the proletariat with a violence unprecedented since the end of the Second World War. Flexibility, insecurity, atomization: these were the slogans writ large on the banners of the French bourgeoisie, slogans realized in the labour-market which has been turned upside down over the last twenty years.

2. The turning point of 1982

The Aubry Law is the rightful heir to the ruling of January 16th 1982 relating to the decrease in working time. Today, it is only the transition from 40 to 39 hours without loss of salary and the fifth week of paid holiday that the Left would like to retain from this law. As for the working class, it hasn't forgotten that in this period the same ruling only provided full compensation to workers paid the SMIC (the French index-linked, guaranteed minimum wage), at the time of the transition from the 40th hour to the 39th hour. Already, then, sharing of jobs and incomes was on the agenda. Moreover, a reorganization of work was recommended alongside ultimately restraint over the progress in workers' purchasing power. These tendencies provoked a wave of strikes and struggles in early '82, whose key demand was full maintenance of the wage alongside a refusal of the reorganization of work (which meant Saturday working and the abandonment of additional holidays according to seniority and service in some branches of industry, on the pretext of introducing the fifth week of paid holidays), depending on local conditions. The government of the day only dropped its plans in the face of the scale of the workers' mobilization.

Government schemes

(i) *The lowering of wages.* The lowering of wages was at the source of many disputes. But it is noticeable from the example of the Lavenaet textile factory that the retreat by management on this question hasn't been adequate to the application of a law, which was first of all about company 'modernization', which is nothing other

than an increase in productivity. It was necessary to exchange the shortening of working time by an hour for a reorganization of work which permitted the lengthening of the time that machines were in use, both daily and weekly.

(ii) *The increase in machine-time.* According to the Left, the working time reduction laws were aimed at reducing unemployment. Studying their internal logic shows the contrary: increasing productivity, i.e., fewer workers producing the same commodities.

(iii) *The increase in working-time in the public sector.* A third thing that is at stake with the laws on working-time reduction, has passed by even more imperceptibly: the legal work duration of 39 hours has been used in order to increase working-time in sectors where the working week was less than 39 hours. This was especially true in the case of public employees. Thus there were echoes in the press of struggles where the press sneered about the 'privileges' of civil servants, overlooking the fact that the specific conditions of their working hours were being used retrospectively to justify the pitiful level of their wages.

(iv) *Suppression of breaks and formal and informal dead time.* However, what was even less understood about the 39 hour law, was that in reality it allowed an increase in working time by virtue of the reorganization of the immediate process of production. Because given that formal work-time is 40 hours, the real work-time is in practice more scanty. The resistance to the domination of capital takes place on a day to day level, not just in periods of open struggle. It's a struggle which may be collective and/or individual, and which aims to eke out break-times by any means possible.⁴ In particular, there are the collective breaks, tied to meals and so on, which increase gradually, unless the relation of forces allows the framework to reduce them. The renegotiation of work-schedules is always the time chosen by management to call these breaks into question. This is the explanation for sectional disputes for example, generally every two years, at the time of 'technical' reorganization of schedules. This was perhaps one of the least acknowledged reasons for the movements against the 'working time reduction' Act in 1982 and the years following.

A wave of struggles.

In 1983, an article in the *French Review of Social Affairs* drew up a balance-sheet of labour disputes in France between 1950 and 1982. This article gives a detailed account of four 'multi-sectoral national strikes', 'simultaneous strikes in a large number of nationalized and private industries over common demands, chiefly to do with wages, and capable of lasting several weeks'. The dates of these were: 1950,

⁴ It is therefore quite possible that the driving force behind the wave of anti-smoking bans from the USA, clearly not its rulers' interest in public health, or even the costs incurred from health expenditure, might have been a study estimating that 65 hours of work time is lost through what the French call 's'en rouler une' (rolling one up).

1953, 1968, 1982. The article points out that these movements were not initiated by trade union slogans.

Except for a few specialists in such matters, no one noticed the existence of a 'multi-sectoral national strike'. Indeed the number of days lost in 1982 was not anything like the same magnitude as in 1950, 1953 and 1968. But according to an official account, the period 1969-77 saw half as many days lost as in 1982; and the period 1978-81 saw six times less.

'Local site, partial struggle': thousands of struggles, all directed against the setting up of the 'working-time reduction' law at the level of individual firms, were thus realistic. The local papers gave an account of this. The national papers just spoke of a handshake between them. The unions negotiated the administration of the law case by case, avoiding informing the workers in each firm that their the problems weren't local, specific, particular, for the simple reason that they were broadly sympathetic to the law, in the general context of the Left allowing them to participate more closely in the management of the firms.

The ruling squeezed by struggles

All that remained of the ruling of January 16th 1982 was as follows:

- the generalization of variable (individualized) working hours, with week-by-week adjustment of working-time, without overtime payments where the weekly duration was exceeded;
- some departures from the prevailing weekend break regulation, allowing the establishment of weekend shifts;
- the possibility in industry of making women work until midnight, previously limited to 10pm.

What the Giscard-Barre government had vainly attempted to establish at the end of the 1970s due to trade union intransigence was thus realized in a few weeks by the Left and the unions, who had suddenly become more 'inclusive'. Though the introduction of increased flexibility had passed, the government still had to deal with the matter of wages, which the workers had refused to see lowered in return for the reduction of working time. That was achieved at the time of the famous 'change to toughness', in the course of which the prices and incomes freeze was established by June 22nd 1982 law, passed by the Stalinists and social democrats

The unleashing of flexibility

So then the 1982 law opened the Pandora's box of flexibility, annualization and individualization of work. For Jacques Rigaudat, Michel Rocard's old 'social' advisor, the principal merit of the law, beyond dazzling us with free time and the reduction of unemployment, was that it 'had introduced a new notion into the Work

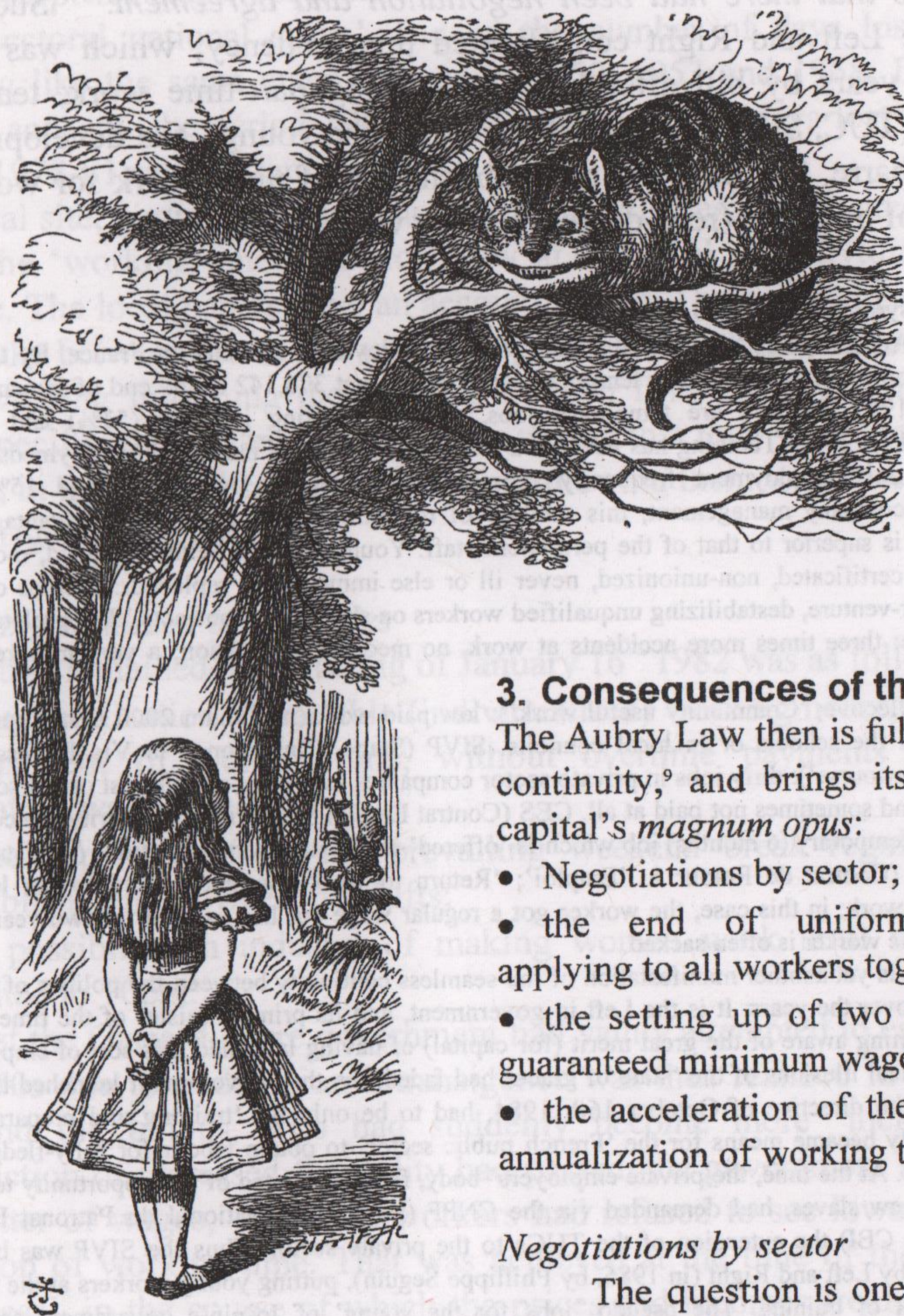
Code, that of work-time adjustment. (...) Indeed for the first time since its establishment, the Work Code provided for the possibility of departing from the usual rules, from the time that there had been negotiation and agreement.'⁵ Successive governments of the Left and Right consolidated this tendency, which was further increased over the years by bill after bill encouraging part-time work, temporary work,⁶ 'grey' work (TUC, SIVP, CES, CRE⁷, jobs for the young), the development of annualization (Delebarre, Seguin)⁸, the re-establishment of night work for women in industry, reduction of overtime (read decrease in the wage differential).

⁵ *Reducing Working Time*, Syros Edition, 1996.

⁶ In 1997, Manpower and Adecco (temp.) became the first private employment agencies in France. By the end of February 1998, 409,573 people were employed in temporary work as against 376,142 at the end of January. Out of 189,600 jobs created in 1997, 120,000 are temporary jobs, mainly affecting industry (53%) and the BTP (construction of public works) (20%). Temping has become a major component of industrial employment. Thus, in car sub-contracting, temporary employment frequently represents 50% of the manpower and 15% among construction workers. For company management, this method of recruitment has nothing but advantages: 'The intensity of work of temps is superior to that of the permanent staff. Younger, often better educated, more multi-purpose, paid the SMIC if certificated, non-unionized, never ill or else immediately replaced..., temps only have "qualifications", for the user-venture, destabilizing unqualified workers on short-term contracts.' For proletarians the advantages are less obvious: three times more accidents at work, no medical supervision; a very meagre average working year.

⁷ TUC (Travaux d'utilité collective; 'Community useful work'): low paid work (maximum 2000 francs per month), for young people mainly in the schools or in local councils. SIVP (Stage d'Insertion à la Vie Professionnelle; 'Insertion in professional life course'): dirty jobs in private sector companies for young people just out of school and on the dole; very low paid and sometimes not paid at all. CES (Contrat Emploi Solidarité; 'Solidarity job contract'): this defines a very low paid temporary (6 months) job which is 'offered' in the state administrations (ministries, state railways, buses etc.). CRE (Contrat de Retour à l'Emploi; 'Return to work contract'): used to put long-term unemployed people back to work; in this case, the worker got a regular wage but half is paid for two years by the state; after those two years the worker is often sacked.

⁸ The question of 'grey' jobs is yet another manifestation of the seamless continuity between the politics of Left and Right which has developed over the years. It is the Left in government, and its prime minister of the time Laurent Fabius, which is again becoming aware of the great merit (for capital) of having launched this sort of employment. Indeed in 1984, once the lyrical illusions of the 'state of grace' had faded, the then government launched the TUC. Those TUCs, which under the directive of October 16th 1984, had to be only for 'training and preparation for professional life' very quickly became means for the 'French public sector' to obtain labour for fully-fledged jobs virtually free, bereft of status. At the time, the private employers' body, feeling cheated of the opportunity to benefit from the services of these new slaves, had demanded via the CNPF (Le Conseil National du Patronat Français: bosses' union, similar to the CBI) the extension of the TUCs to the private sector. Thus the SIVP was born and carried to the baptismal font by Left and Right (in 1986, by Phillippe Seguin), putting young workers at the disposal of companies on the pretext of training. The pseudo 'jobs for the young' of Jospin's government are just a metamorphosis of this state-controlled policy of devalorization of the price of the commodity labour-power. There again, the Left has broken new ground in creating the five year CDD (short-term contract), renewable each year. History is repeating itself, since the CNPF is claiming the feasibility of applying this sort of employment contract to wage-earners in the private sector. As with the 35-hour week, the goal of these successive employment policies is not to 'find work for the young', but to supply public and private bosses with labour at prices which beat all the competition. It's a way of breaking up the wage scales (get someone with a vocational training certificate and two years higher education, for 2000F instead of paying at the rate provided for by the branch union agreements), to crack the minimum wage, to increase competition between proletarians on the labour-market. This is also a factor, for now, in industrial peace: workers on 'normal' contracts, paid at the agreed rates, are enduring terrible pressure because of the existence of this lower-paid mass at their sides. How can they make demands and go on strike when there are



3. Consequences of the Aubry Law.

The Aubry Law then is fully situated within this continuity,⁹ and brings its own novel touch to capital's *magnum opus*:

- Negotiations by sector;
- the end of uniform social legislation applying to all workers together;
- the setting up of two SMICs (index-linked guaranteed minimum wage);
- the acceleration of the development of the annualization of working time.

Negotiations by sector

The question is one of a turning point in the relationship between the state, businesses and the working class, which marks the end of

fellow-workers even worse off in their office or factory? Workers pay very dearly for forgetting that the basic principles of class struggle are equal work, pay, status and conditions.

⁹ Mme. Aubry blithely assumes this continuity moreover. To the Right-wing deputies anxious to see annualization of working time written into every letter of this Bill, she replied that this was not necessary: the five-yearly law of M. Giraud (former employment minister in Chirac's RPR party) has provided all the measures to that end without any need to return to it.

the era of the planner-state, which imposed the rules of social relationships from above, as much for the bosses as for the workers. Thus, contrary to the laws of 1936 and 1982, which provided for enforcement directives, the enactment of working time reduction is left at the mercy of negotiations in branches and companies. The law is satisfied with fixing a single buffer date, the terms of which are to be negotiated branch by branch, and especially company by company, according to specific particular situations. As the Minister of Labour Martine Aubry stated to the National Assembly, *'the bill recommends the most decentralized use of collective bargaining possible and great flexibility in the terms of working time reduction so as to improve companies' competitiveness'*. This will mean an increasing disparity in the conditions of exploitation of the proletariat leading to a deepening of divisions in its ranks: here annualization, there the employment of part-time workers; here wage-cuts, there atomization by bonuses, etc.

The end of uniform social legislation

Beyond the particular terms of enforcement, the law deepens two major divisions: between public and private sector workers, since working-time reduction only affects private companies; and that between workers in firms with more than 20 employees, in which the transition to the 35 hour week takes place on January 1st 2000, and the others which will have to wait until 2002. The government even provides special arrangements for small businesses. This then is the end of uniform legislation for all the workers.

The setting-up of a dual SMIC

An hourly SMIC has been kept for those working 39 hours (to avoid an 11.4% hourly rise in costs) and a monthly SMIC for the 'lucky devils' whose employers have moved over to a 35 hour week. However, at 5240 francs a month, these latter will pay dearly for their new-found leisure. Their wage will be almost frozen, and their monthly minimal payment - or whatever they call it - will not increase as fast as the hourly SMIC: *'(...) a modest reappraisal of the new "monthly SMIC" agreed by the state would give an additional indication of strictness to those employers whom the 35 hour week is in danger of provoking into appearing stricter still over payments.'*¹⁰

The development of working time annualization

The annualization of working time is at the heart of the government's bill, inheriting the tradition of the Seguin and Giraud laws, which allowed companies to depart from legal arrangements on matters of working-time and established annualized

¹⁰ *Le Monde*, January 29th 1998.

part-time work. Replying to the questions of a small businessman in the building trade, the Minister of Labour stated: *'why do you say that you are unable to go over to a 35 hour week? No one's telling you how to run your business. You can work more when you have a job to finish, and the workers will make it up afterwards, when business is slack. It will be an average: weekly, monthly, yearly, depending on your needs. No one is going to impose a seven hour day on you'*.

At the National Assembly on January 29th, Martine Aubry confirmed: *'annual adjustment can be stabilized if it is negotiated and if it doesn't go back on major guarantees. This adjustment we are in favour of'*. The annualization of working time allows bosses to pay no more for overtime. Indeed, if the working time is calculated by the year, on certain weeks, when the vagaries of production demand 42, 44 or 48 hours per week, overtime (paid at up to 25%, or even 50% more than the normal rate for night work) won't be paid at all, on the pretext that during slack weeks, the working week will be able to drop below 35 hours.¹¹

However, it is well known that in the absence of wage struggles, overtime is the only way that many proletarians can hang onto their purchasing power.¹² Annualization then means the lowering of wages. This is the objective of the Aubry law even though this is obviously not trumpeted by the high-priests of working-time reduction, only in the more muted atmosphere of the National Assembly. Jean Le Garrec, reporting to the Assembly for the PS, openly stated it after doffing his cap to UDF deputy Gilles de Robien¹³: *'Everything may be put on the table, notably concerning organizational flexibility. There's nothing hampering a cyclical or annual perspective: in many agreements, we can see the idea of annualization. One of the aims of the agreements is wage control'*.

The full logic of job sharing is that workers must accept that wage austerity is the price of working-time reduction and, according to the experts in the pay of the

¹¹ Let us note in passing that the weekly number of working hours beyond which overtime gives rise to a 50% compensatory break (in companies with a workforce of more than ten) will become 41 hours in 1999 as against 42 hours at present. Logically this threshold should have been at 38 hours, but for the plural Left, it's no small gift for the bosses.

¹² The real duration of the working week for wage-earners averages 41.05 hours.

¹³ UDF = Union pour le Démocratie Française: centrist party, pro-European and associated with the RPR when in government (1986-8, 1993-7) and now in the opposition. The Robien law was presented both to the Left and to the Right as the miracle means of saving, indeed creating, jobs by the reduction of working time in return for the drastic reduction of employers' contributions (up to 50%). In many companies, agreements were signed which maintained the illusion among proletarians that henceforward they would be immune from lay-offs. The first disillusiones are coming to light. Thus, at Nîmes, in the Well tights-manufacturing company, a year to the day after the unions signed an agreement protecting the company's 776 jobs, the boss has just announced that one third of the jobs in the factory are to go. Motive: the market isn't absorbing the product as expected. A cruel occasion to recall that it is the rate of accumulation and the concomitant capacity of the market to expand which determines the creation of jobs, and that all the skillful arrangements (lightening of charges, RTT [réduction du temps de travail: 'working-time reduction']) are of no use at all in time of crisis, except to allow the bosses to pocket millions of Francs from the state.

government, is the only guarantee of its proclaimed but mystified objective, to solve unemployment:¹⁴ *'it remains for employers and workers' representatives to determine the correct progress for wages that is consistent with the economic perspectives of business'*, insists Martine Aubry. *'In the future, the evolution of wages will have to take into account the lowering in the length of working time (...). I am sure that workers will play their part in creating more jobs in their firms'*.

The freezing of wages alongside working-time reduction, together with job creation:¹⁵ such is the lesson drawn by the government from the failure of the 39 hours law (70,000 additional jobs, either created or preserved, in the non-agricultural commercial branches during the first week of 1982), whose magnificent apparatus was scuppered from the start by the 1982 strikes led by selfish workers.

4. Within companies

A long story

The bosses didn't wait for the Aubry Law in order to reduce working-time within their businesses, from the moment that working-time reduction took the form of a Trojan Horse concealing a reorganization of the labour process incorporating the lowering or freezing of wages. All the elaborate legal structures over the last twenty years have given businesses permission to agree working-time reduction locally.

Let us remind its fanatical exponents, that working-time reduction is not an end in itself for the proletariat. Its application and its effects on 'the labouring classes' are going to depend on the balance of forces between classes. Now, it is well known that for the last fifteen years, this balance of forces has been largely unfavourable to the working class, notably due to the existence of a massive industrial reserve army. Indeed, what good is a reduction in working-time if proletarians pay in full for this with wage reduction (nominal and real), labour flexibility, speed-ups (intensification of work) and the development of shift-work (lengthening of the time that equipment is in use).

¹⁴ Once again, the blackmail of jobs in return for wage cuts is on the agenda with the Aubry law. Thus, according to an OFCE study, under the direction of Jean-Paul Fitoussi, the transition from a legal duration of 39 to one of 35 hours in the year 2000 could lead to the creation of half a million jobs in companies of more than twenty employees. On the condition however that the employees 'pull their weight' and sacrifice the equivalent of 5% of their wages... On the other hand, Rexecode, the bosses' organ of expertise, is less optimistic and predicts the destruction of thousands of jobs, as the high cost of labour-power in companies remaining at 39 hours accelerates the substitution of dead labour for living labour. Unless, that is, that the employees, in exchange for a lowering of the working time, accept annualization and a drop in wages... From OFCE to Rexecode, it's the same old refrain.

¹⁵ We cannot stress too much how the creation of jobs and lowering of unemployment are nothing but pretexts, and that the proclamations of the Left about the hundreds of millions of jobs to come into being thanks to the Aubry law are nothing but eye-wash. Dominique Strauss Kahn (affectionately known as DSK by the lapdogs of *Le Monde*), whom the atmosphere of the Davos forum seemed to lend a certain sincerity, acknowledged it (*Canard Enchaîné*, February 4th 1998): 'It is certain that the 35 week will involve pay restraint. (...) In these conditions, no one can say whether more jobs will be lost than gained.' One thing is certain then: wages will fall!

The observation of previous agreements between unions and bosses in recent years perfectly illustrates this mug's game. Most of the time, under the threat and blackmail of lay-offs, bosses have been able to impose nominal wage cuts of up to 10% against a reduction in working-time. This situation is symbolized by the agreement between the CGT, the CFDT and FO (the three main French unions), and the Montalembert public works company in the Rhone, where working-time was reduced from 38 to 34 hours at the price of a 10% drop in wages. Likewise at the Potain crane-building factory in Lyon, one year the unions accepted a cut and freeze in wages. This kind of agreement flourished during the 1990s, always in the name of the fight against unemployment and lay-offs, which of course didn't stop unemployment exceeding all-time records.

Some examples

In industry, working time was also at the cutting edge of the development of shift work. Thus, at Flins, the biggest production centre of the Renault group (workforce of 8400 at the moment), the management created a third shift for the production of Twingos on April 5th 1993. This shift, whose working week was 32 hours long (from 8.18pm to 2.03am four days a week, from 8.18pm to 5.18 am on Thursdays), has allowed a 40% increase in the time that the Twingo assembly line is in use. Only the normal overtime agreed for night shifts allowed the wage-level to be maintained, a drop in wages contrary to the victorious proclamations of the local left-wing CFDT branch.

In Caen, the German firm Bosch has succeeded, thanks to the unions, in organizing work so as to keep the wheels turning 24 hours a day, 6 days a week, 144 hours a week. Four shifts operate to ensure the continuity of production, one day-shift working 39 hours and three alternate shifts working 32 hours each. The latter are paid for 39 hours, due to the integration of bonuses for night work.

Management in the micro-computer division of Hewlett-Packard in Grenoble went ahead with a radical reorganization of labour. The agreement signed by the CGT and the CFDT on December 22nd 1992 permitted the creation of six shifts allowing equipment to run 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The weekly hours fluctuate between 26.5 hours for the two evening shifts and 34.5 hours for the two morning shifts, with 33.5 hours for the two afternoon shifts. The wages have dropped because they are calculated on the basis of 37.5 hours not 39.

The BSN Gervais Danone company, under the direction of the socialist boss Antoine Riboud, had been the first to resort to the 'offensive reduction of working-time', in the jargon of the labour sociologists. The 1982 agreement, signed by the five CGT unions in BSN (the CGT controls 80% of the votes in the workers' electoral body) provided for an average working week of 33.36 hours for the 2400 shift workers, conditional on a reorganization involving the creation of a fifth shift.

Complete compensation for lost wages was only considered in so far as productivity gains would reach 6-7%. This objective will be achieved while the decrease in working nights, Sundays and public holidays will reduce workers' wages by 1.6%, because of the loss of overtime bonuses.¹⁶

This kind of working-time reduction, compensated for by a reorganization of the labour process and *a fortiori* by a lowering of workers' wages, fully and forcefully meets the needs of capital. Indeed, to free itself from its fixed component, it is vital for capital to speed up its turnover, allowing the value congealed in the machines to be transmitted ever more rapidly. This acceleration of turnover allows a decrease in the value of the commodities produced, sharing out the value of the fixed capital among a greater mass of commodities. The company which is the first to introduce this reorganization is then in a position to make super-profits by reducing the individual value of the commodities it is producing below their average value.

Thus, without new investment in fixed capital, the reorganization of the labour process has allowed Hewlett-Packard to triple production and double productivity, and Renault-Flins to produce 300 extra cars. The unions are proclaiming victory, because in order to cope with the expansion of production and the reduction of hours, management have been forced to recruit (200 at Flins, 40 at H-P), but this expansion of the workforce (badly paid young workers, one of the causes of the 1995 dispute at Flins¹⁷) is more than compensated for by the productivity gains achieved by the new organization of the labour-process and the continual termination of jobs in other sectors of production.

Company agreements put in place

The first company agreements anticipating the transition to a 35-hour week in the year 2000 are being put into place, and they clearly demonstrate that, for the workers, working time reduction means lower wages. So on April 1st the unions FO and CFDT in the Eurocopter (manufacturing Franco-German helicopters) signed an agreement providing for the transition to 36 hours on January 1st 1998 and to 35 hours on January 1st 1999, in return for annualization (alternating four and five day weeks) and incomplete compensation for the lost hours¹⁸ (60% for workers on more than 10,000F and 90% for the rest).

¹⁶ *La Temps de Travail en Miettes*, Jacques Freyssinet, les éditions de l'Atelier, 1997.

¹⁷ On the strikes of Spring 1995 at Renault, see *Le Bulletin Ouvrier*, no. 1.

¹⁸ After a small calculation on the basis of 35 hours plus four hours paid at 60% for a worker earning 10,000F, we end up with about 1000F lost in wages a month. For a worker on SMIC, the loss would be about 350F. For FO, whose chief bigwig never stops affirming his opposition in the media to every form of annualization, flexibility and lowering of wages, this agreement is 'noticeable'.

In the commercial, financial and insurance sector, the one where joint agreements strictly regulate working hours,¹⁹ the bosses quickly realized the benefits they could draw from the Aubry law. Thus Michel Freyche, president of the Association Française de Banques (AFB, French banking association), stated in an interview dated February 13th 1998 with the daily paper *Les Echos*:

'When it is negotiated reasonably, working-time reduction can be useful. (...) We don't want anything to do with negotiations for the 35-hour week by sector. On the other hand, we are ready to encourage and facilitate discussions at the company level, that is to say to examine what in the union agreement would constitute obstacles to the bringing in to play of working-time reduction.'

The financial and commercial sector employers' body then was eager to terminate collective bargaining agreements, especially the 1937 directive which guaranteed employees in these sectors two consecutive days off, including inevitably Sunday. The proposed 'deal' with workers in these sectors was to be as follows: in exchange for the 35-hour week, you will accept annualization of working time (46-48 hours during the legal holiday period); Saturday working (6 x 6 hours), the development of shift work (widening the range of hours previously limited to eleven hours under the 1937 decree); and last but not least, 'wage moderation'. Jacques Perillat, the president of the UCV (the association of inner city big retailers)²⁰ summed perfectly what was at stake:

'Currently, 40% of full-time employees are off on Saturdays, the day when we achieve our biggest takings. It would be preferable if this figure was no more than 20%.'

In addition, the Aubry Law seems to offer the opportunity to introduce annualization of working time, which 'would allow employees to work 48 hours during the holidays; in return they would work four day weeks in June'.²¹ 48 hour, not to say 52 hour weeks are frequent in the commercial sector, but overtime is paid, which will not be the case with the introduction of annualization.

¹⁹ The National Federation of French sugar manufacturers, a bosses' union, has also just announced its decision to call into question the union agreement covering the sector's 12,000 employees. In the newspaper *Liberation*, March 6th 1999, one chief executive explained the reason: 'This termination was forced upon us. We are one of the few sectors to possess a union agreement which fixes working hours'. The journalist's comments deserve reporting: 'Farewell paid holidays, rules of seniority, making up overtime and other advantages gained in what is after all a healthy sector, formed into cartels, with no more than two big groups: Eridhania-Beghin Say, on whose board of trustees sits a certain Ernest-Antoine Seillière, and Saint-Louis general sugar-refinery. In exchange for a 35-hour week, the employers wish to inaugurate annualization, which would allow 46 hour weeks during busy periods, and 32 hours the rest of the year. The conventional system in France would go from "ready-made" over to "made to measure".'

²⁰ This sector includes the popular stores (Monoprix, Prisunic) and some big stores (Le Printemps, Galeries Lafayette, BHV, etc.). The two collective bargaining agreements governing working conditions date from 1995 and cover almost 40,000 employees.

²¹ *Le Monde*, Wednesday 25th March 1998.

In the current wave of terminations of collective bargaining agreements, what is also at stake for the bosses is the definition of working-time. In a great many union agreements, dressing, snacking and showering are included in the actual working-time. On-call time (when the employee is at the disposal of the employer without being in the workplace), which is not included in the actual working time, is paid. The introduction of the 35-hour week will allow the cancellation of these departures from the labour code (article L.212-4), which clearly specifies that the aforementioned times must not be accounted as actual work and therefore paid.²²

5. Conclusion

The analysis of the apparatus being put in place via the Aubry law demonstrates well that working-time reduction, contrary to the tale told by the various decaying remnants of the 'plural' left, isn't aimed at resolving unemployment, even less at freeing workers from the curse of wage labour in order to bestow more 'free' time upon them. As we have fully demonstrated, this law will in practice mean lower real and nominal wages, an increased submission to the imperatives of capital's valorization and thus a rise in the rate of exploitation. In return, to achieve social peace, the capitalist state is refining, even sophisticating the process of integrating the unions into the maintenance of capitalist order.

Indeed, this integration is nothing new, but it remains noteworthy that, from year to year, the union apparatus appears ever more closely associated with all the new measures which adjust the capital-labour relation. Encouraging negotiations at company level, the Aubry law officially secures for the union company section an unprecedented role.²³ Thus, the wheel has turned full circle: from the Economic and Social Council to the smallest sections of the capitalist enterprise, from the general interest of the state to the micro-economy of the company, the union is more than ever the institution likely to transmit the requirements of capital's valorization through to all levels of civil society.

²² Parliamentary debates (National Assembly, Senate) have given rise to some tragi-comical gesticulations between Left and Right over the notion of actual work. The Greens had got an amendment passed, adding an article to the Labour Code, defining actual working time as 'the time during which the employee is at the disposal of the employer'. This had been overturned on the second reading by senators who offered a more restrictive definition: 'the actual duration of work is the time during which the employee is at work, at the disposal of the employer and carrying out his activity or his functions'. Lionel Jospin, such a Solomon, has finally settled for introducing the notion of permanence: the actual working time becomes 'the time during which the employee is at the continuous disposal of the employer'. This new definition is sufficiently ambiguous to allow free flow to a multitude of interpretations. In view of the state of the balance of class forces, we can be in no doubt that the bosses, satisfied in other respects with Jospin's intervention, will know how to make profits out of this ambiguity.

²³ This is no small gift to the unions. Thus the Law provides for the payment of worker-representatives to negotiate the transition to 35 hours with management or to undertake the smooth application of the agreement in *ad hoc* committees.

More than ever, the capitalist state needs intermediaries. The apathy, the indifference of the exploited classes to public matters arouses the unease of a ruling class which is well aware of the weakness, not say non-existence of its intermediaries. The state treats this 'French sickness' by distancing itself from the unions whose representation is derisory, and indeed creating so-called representatives *ex nihilo*, as it did with the supposed unemployed organizations.

The fact remains that the struggle for the expansion of wages and the reduction of the working day are still on the agenda, and will be so as long as capitalist relations of production are in place:

'When the workers strive to restore the working day to its former rational limits, they are just carrying out a duty to themselves and to their kind. They are just setting boundaries against capital's despotic usurpation. A man who has no spare time, whose entire life is appropriated as work for the capitalist, outside of merely physical interruptions for sleeping, eating, etc., is less than a beast of burden... And yet the history of industry shows that capital works without consideration or mercy to lower the whole working class to this extreme level of degradation, if no obstacles are placed in its way.' (Marx, *Wage-Labour and Capital*)

Mass unemployment, the development of various forms of job insecurity, have undoubtedly relegated the demand for a lowering of working-time to second place in workers' preoccupations.²⁴ Today's problems are the erosion and splitting up of the working day, annualized part-time working, insanely fluctuating working hours,²⁵ with the development of shift-work in industry as well as in offices.²⁶ It wouldn't even be surprising if there were to be an upsurge in movements for a genuine eight-hour day, without annualization or flexibility of hours.²⁷ Besides, struggles are beginning to emerge against Aubry's version of 35 hours and in defence of collective agreements.²⁸

²⁴ Above all the explosion of part-time work which affects about 17% of the active population today as compared with 7% in 1982. Out of this 17%, more than 40% would like to work more, not for the love of working but to earn a wage which would enable them to survive. We are a long way from the idyllic representations, dear to the CFDT left, of part-time work chosen so as to have a wonderful world of free time at our disposal. The creation of this sort of job correlates with some poorly-qualified jobs.

²⁵ Notably the case of cashiers in big volume distribution whose working day, most often part-time, is completely split up, breaking off for three hours at a time (10am-1pm, interruption, 4pm-8pm). Unable to go home, they are condemned to spend these interruptions waiting around for the resumption of work. Taking into account an average of two hours a day minimum traveling in big built-up areas, we have established that in the big distribution sector, capital has devised the part-time working day of 12 hours. For more on the disastrous working conditions of commercial 'proletarians' in big volume distribution, read Gregoire Philonenko's work *Aux Carrefours de l'Exploitation*, ed. Desclee de Brouwer, 1998.

²⁶ 22% of wage earners are on shift-work, as compared with 17% in 1982.

²⁷ See the 1995 strike by the TGV cleaners, who were refusing the introduction of part-time with loss of wages and discontinuous hours.

²⁸ The struggle of the Nobel chemical company workers, who refused the transition to a 35-hour week at the price of annualization of working time.

Undoubtedly, we are a long way from the 32 or 30 hours proposed by leftists, at pains to be radical,²⁹ always desperately seeking the supposed miracle demand, in this case, the abolition of unemployment.

In the 1980s and '90s moreover, the leftists became great specialists in demands - alternative strategies capable of reconciling the interests of the workers, the bosses and national economic competitiveness at the same time. So recently (in *Le Monde*, on January 21st 1998) we have seen Pierre Khalfa, a bureaucrat of the SUD union, making his little contribution to the Aubry law, by proposing a precise plan to alleviate the burden on small businesses. Christophe Aguiton, a paid official and media figure in the same union at France Telecom,³⁰ for his part seems more nostalgic. Debating in *Le Nouvel Observateur* with a small businessman (these people seem decidedly anxious worried about the fate of the PME),³¹ he expressed a longing for a return to the good old days at the beginning of the 1980s, the golden age of social protection according to him!

Nostalgia isn't what it was any more in the ranks of the Left: Marx being far too old-fashioned, they are falling back on Keynes and snivelling bitterly as they pick through the debris of the 1960s welfare state. Here we have a new version of reactionary socialism, what could be called the socialism of the 'glorious thirty', described by Marx as feudal in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, the socialism of those who are nostalgic for feudalism, for its guilds and artisans.

We must remind them once again that it is the class itself that decides its demands, out of its own needs, and that a contemporary factory struggle against annualization and increased flexibility can be a more meaningful example to the whole proletariat than bawling for 32 hours on Saturday demonstrations in Paris.³² Let us also remember that in the scenario of a generalized revival of class struggle, a slogan such as 35/32 hours could appear timid and paltry, if the real movement goes much further than this.³³ Finally, remember also that, in the revolutionary tradition of the workers' movement, the diminution of the working day has never been accompanied by the illusion that it could create jobs. The same goes for rising wages

²⁹ Surpassed on their Left by Klaus Kahn, president of the German unemployed association, who is calling for 28 hours.

³⁰ Aguiton is perhaps best known as the spokesperson for AC!, the unemployed campaign.

³¹ Petites et moyennes entreprises.

³² In these times of mind-numbing commemorations of May '68, let us remember that the leading factory which launched the movement, Sud-Aviation near Nantes, was on strike against a reduction of working time (from 48 hours to 45) with loss of wages.

³³ In 1920, a period when the revolutionary upsurge of the German proletariat was in full swing, the miners in the Ruhr were struggling for a 30-hour week. In Italy, during the 1970s, there were massive struggles over the inclusion of travelling time in actual working-time.

demanding by leftists and Stalinists to boost consumption and get out of the crisis,³⁴ reducing the workers' struggle to a means of kick-starting capital accumulation. The task of past, present and future revolutionaries is to contribute to the defence of working class material interests, independently of any consideration of the interests of business or the defence of national economic competitiveness.



³⁴ If the leftists of the LCR have specialized in calling for a 32 hour week, the Lambertists of the Workers' Party for their part are putting forward the necessity for a rise in wages to kick-start the economy and get out of the crisis. It is true that, in contrast with their fraternal enemies, the 'pablists', they at least have the decency not to call for revolution openly any more. These days, their concern is to defend local democracy, secular education, the Republic and other institutions of the capitalist order.

Further reading

The unemployed movement: A struggle under the influence (Olga Morena, *Oiseau-Tempete* 3, summer 1998; c/o AB Irato, BP 328, 75525 Paris Cedex 11, France). This article argues that the main winners of the French 'unemployed movement' were the leftist organizations and their leaders.

We don't want full employment, we want full lives! (*Bureau of Public Secrets*, 1998; PO Box 1044, Berkeley, CA 94701, USA.) Excerpts from some of the more interesting leaflets issued by claimant occupiers of the Jussieu University.

Dole Autonomy versus the re-imposition of Work: Analysis of the current tendency to workfare in the UK (*Aufheben*, 1999) While the post-war triumph of social democracy served to create a split between mundane needs and utopian desires within the proletariat, the decline of social democracy has yet to see the end of this fragmentation of our struggles. In particular, recent unemployed struggles remain weak and individualized.

Social democracy: No future? (*Aufheben* 7, Autumn 1998) This article conceptualizes and situates social democracy historically, and raises the question of what its retreat, or possible resurgence, might mean for revolutionaries.

The retreat of social democracy... Re-imposition of work in Britain and the 'social Europe' (*Aufheben* 8, autumn 1999) This article, which complements the present pamphlet, shows how the left-of-centre governments now dominating Europe are attempting to re-impose work through similar neo-reformist policies.

Oiseau-Tempete and *BPS* texts free from *Aufheben* with SAE.

Dole Autonomy pamphlet: from *Aufheben*: £1.50 UK & Europe, £2 rest of world (including postage). *Aufheben* back issues: £3.00 UK and Europe, £4.00 rest of world (including postage). Sterling cheques only, please; payable to *Aufheben*.

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